

OVS - Season 3
Episode 1: Where There Is Shadow, There Is Light



Act I

Remy quickly called for the paramedics to send up a kit to him and a backboard. Shaking his hands from the cold, he grabbed the bag and dropped it near his side. As he was opening the bag, he turned to the paramedic who had stuck his head up through the hatch. "Call down and get them to bring the fire trucks as close to the lighthouse as they can. They're going to need a large ladder to bring her down." Somehow on the narrow platform they were going to have to load the injured woman on the board to get her down safely. Quickly, he grabbed a blanket from the kit and wrapped it around Natalia's lower body and then turned to look back to Natalia with an apologetic look.

Olivia could feel the shivers from her partner as the younger woman lay in her arms. Keeping pressure on the wound with one hand, she felt around her with one hand and located the blanket Natalia had been using earlier. She wrapped it around her partner's shoulders, then returned to apply pressure, and noted the wince on the younger woman's face. Continuing to gently brush her fingers along Natalia's face, Olivia wished that somehow she could do more. "Hold on, sweetheart. You're going to be okay. See. Remy's here taking good care of you."

Checking the injured woman's pulse again, Remy noted that it was racing. He slid the blood pressure cuff onto the woman's upper arm and pumped it up. Quickly placing the stethoscope into place, he checked the younger woman's vitals. Her blood pressure was up but that was to be expected, but what worried him more were the wheezes and wet sounds coming from Natalia's lungs. Grabbing a pair of gloves and donning them, he turned and

spoke to her, "Natalia, I need to cut your shirt to see where the bullet entered." He looked up and saw her nod. He picked up the scissors and cut a fast line up the front of the shirt, parting it to get a look at the wound. It took actually ordering Olivia to remove her hand before he could check as the older woman's focus had been so intent on her partner.

With the blood coating the younger woman's upper chest, it was difficult at first to see the bullet entry in the poor light. He grabbed a gauze sponge from the kit with one hand and quickly wiped away as much of the blood as he could, while taking over holding pressure. Swiftly, he lifted the gauze and dropped it to the side, grabbing another from the kit. The blood flow was sluggish but still steady. He directed Olivia to return to maintaining pressure on the wound as he turned and grabbed intravenous tubing and a bag of saline. Needing an extra hand, he looked over at Frank and Anna trying to get their attention.

"I need help," Remy called over to them.

Angrily, Anna ripped the mask covering the kidnapper's face, wanting to see who was responsible for causing her friends so much pain. "Oh, God." She reeled back on her haunches. She looked over at Frank, who was still staring over as Remy and Olivia took care of Natalia. She noted that he seemed in a state of shock, but she needed to get through to him. "Frank." No response. In a louder tone, she repeated, "Frank!"

"What?" he asked, still dazed as he turned toward the detective. He looked at her in confusion and then down at the fallen body between them. Then he really looked at the form, glancing up the torso to the revealed face. He started shaking his head, refusing to believe that the body lying on the promenade deck was his daughter. "No! No...this can't be real." Quickly, he went to see if he could find a pulse. Not finding one, he looked over at Anna in disbelief and then back to Marina. He felt sick to his stomach. *NO! It can't be. She's dead.* Oh God, what have I done?! Quickly, he turned and threw up over the side of the deck. Wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his coat, he turned and sat on the deck and stared at the body of his daughter. He didn't understand. She wasn't supposed to be here. *What was she doing here? Why was she here?*

Anna was becoming seriously worried about her boss; his skin color had turned ashen, as the snow coated his hair. Even though the cause was different, he was as just as much at risk right now of shock as Natalia. She heard Remy's call for help and looked over at him

before quickly checking back at Frank, assessing his state of mind. There was nothing she could do for Marina. She thought for a moment. She needed to get Frank down off the promenade and into the care of the paramedics below before she could help with Remy.

"Remy, I'll be there in just a minute," Anna said as she made her way over to Frank.

Looking over at the detective, Remy asked, "Why?"

A glance down at the body, then at Frank and back at Remy, Anna mouthed, "It's Marina." She looked toward the ladder opening. "I need to get Frank downstairs now." She noted his surprised look then nod of acknowledgement before he turned his attention back to Natalia. As she looked back at her boss, she noted he still had his weapon in his hand with a near death-like grip on the hilt. Taking a plastic bag out of her jacket pocket, she moved over to him. "Frank, I need your gun."

Nothing.

She crouched down in front of him, waiting for him to acknowledge her. "Frank, I need to take your weapon."

He nodded absently and handed the gun to her.

Anna checked that the safety was engaged and then placed it in the bag, sealing it and placing it into her pocket. Standing, she held out her hand for Frank to take. When he took hold, she pulled him to his feet and then led him around the other side of the deck, and around the narrow edging of the hatch. "Watch your step," Anna said. She knew he was in the beginning stages of shock and not fully aware of his surroundings. Once he was through the hatch and down the stairs, she followed behind.

Catching the attention of the nearest paramedic, she sent the man up the stairs with the backboard and more supplies. Turning around, she spotted another paramedic. "I need you to take Chief Cooper outside and to an ambulance. He's going into shock."

"Yes, Ma'am," the paramedic responded.

"Has Lt. Andros arrived yet?" Anna asked.

"I don't think so. She wasn't out there when I came in."

"Okay. Thank you." Anna turned once she saw them leave the room and head upstairs. She sighed, and swallowed, though her throat felt like it was constricting. She took a couple deep breaths to center herself, and picked up her two-way radio. "Detective Li for Agent Mallet." She waited a moment for the man to respond.

"Agent Mallet. Go ahead," the man's voice came over the radio.

"I need you at the lighthouse now," Anna responded.

"On my way."

Anna turned back toward the hatch entrance; the drifting snow was falling through. She wanted to head back up and see if she could help Olivia but she knew the other woman wouldn't come back in until Natalia was safely secured in the backboard carriage and on her way down to the ambulance. Once she spoke with Mallet, she'd go back up and stay with Olivia. The heavy footsteps on the stairs alerted her to the agent's presence.

"What's going on? What happened?" Mallet asked.

"When Olivia got up to the deck, the kidnapper was trying to throw Natalia over the side rail. Olivia managed to stop it, but when the kidnapper made a further move against the two women, Frank shot her."

Mallet jerked his head back in surprise. "Her? Who was it?"

"Marina," Anna responded with anger still framing her tone.

"What?" Mallet reeled back slightly. He knew his ex-wife had been spiralling, but he didn't know she'd go this far. *Why had I not seen this?* He let out a ragged breath as he ran a gloved hand through his hair. He had just started reconnecting with his ex-wife since he had returned from overseas. He had loved her and been happy with her once. Now he wondered where things went all wrong for Marina. What could make her that desperate to kidnap someone and hold them hostage? As much as it pained him to put Marina's actions and subsequent death aside, a matter he'd have to deal with later, he knew that there was someone alive who needed their help. "What about Natalia?"

"Natalia was shot as well. The bullet went through Marina and hit Natalia. Remy and another paramedic are up there trying to stabilize her for transport."

"Olivia?" Mallet asked, concerned for the other woman.

"Holding on by a thread." Seeing Mallet's face grow more concerned, Anna continued, "No, she wasn't hit, but she finally got Natalia back and now..."

Mallet nodded. He knew all too well what that felt like; Dinah had been shot years ago after stepping in front of a bullet that a loan shark had meant for Mallet. He'd been beside himself.

"Look, I need you to try to keep Lt. Andros out of the lighthouse until we can remove Marina's body." Anna started to pace as she was working through her thoughts. "Once Natalia's securely down, I'll need another paramedic unit to come up with a body bag and take Marina down." She stopped and stood in front of Mallet. "I do not want it being leaked that Marina was the kidnapper, until we can notify all her family."

"Understood," Mallet responded. He blew out a long, low breath and then shook his head. He knew this would be difficult on Buzz and the rest of the Cooper and Lewis clans. "The fire trucks were just outside the lighthouse extending the ladder when I came in here."

"Good. Go on. I'm going to head upstairs and try to get Olivia to come on down," Anna said. She waited for the agent to leave before she headed back to the ladder and ascended through the hatch.

Doris stormed up the path heading toward the lighthouse, but was blocked by the police officer at the edge of the barricade. She debated the merits of just going around the officer but just as she was going to make an attempt she spotted Mallet heading out the door. "What's going on and why the hell does Frank look like someone shot his dog?"

"Short version: kidnapper shot and killed, Natalia also shot. Paramedics are with her," Mallet said. He carefully sidestepped the question regarding Frank, figuring the news about her friends would distract her attention.

Doris gasped. "Is she okay? Where's Olivia?"

"I don't know the details. Paramedics are stabilizing Natalia. Anna's up with Olivia," Mallet said as he held up his hand, trying to halt the mayor's barrage of questions. "Look, Anna's in charge of the case. When she's able, she will let you know what's going on, okay?"

"Look, just keep me in the loop. I have to eventually make statements to the press. I'll hold off as long as I can."

"Should you be doing that, given how close you are to the Spencer family?" Mallet half-heartedly challenged.

Doris glared at him. "Seriously, Mallet? I don't know too many in this town who aren't at least somehow attached to the Coopers or Spencers. This town is entirely too incestuous."

Mallet nodded, acknowledging the statement. "Come on, I need to go see if Eleni has arrived yet. We're not going to be doing any good out here." He directed Doris back out to the Search and Rescue tent. On second thought, he stopped a moment. "Natalia's going to be transferred to the hospital soon. Olivia's going to need a friend there."

"All right," Doris sighed, but realized that he was right. Pivoting, she turned and walked past the tent toward her car. She winced as she arrived at Olivia's car. Feeling inside her coat pocket, she ran her fingers over both sets of keys - her own and Olivia's. Looking back toward the lighthouse, she reasoned that Olivia would be going over in the ambulance. She fished her phone out of her pocket and sent a quick text to her friend: *Have your car. Meet at hospital.*

When the EMTs arrived at Cedars with Frank Cooper strapped to the stretcher and an oxygen mask affixed to his face, he was still conscious but barely responsive; he had an oxygen mask affixed to his face. The EMTs transferred Frank to an ER stretcher and then removed portable cardiac machine leads from his chest, connecting him instead to the department's machine. His rapid pulse was nearing an alarming rate.

Rick shone a light into each of Frank's eyes, noting the dilation of the pupils, then continued his initial assessment. He looked up at one of the first responders. "What happened?"

"From what we were told, he shot the kidnapper as she was trying to kill the victim, Ms. Rivera. He didn't know who it was at first because the person was masked."

"She?" Rick asked, startled. "Who?"

"Marina Cooper," the responder said.

"Oh, hell." Rick turned his attention back to the unresponsive form on the stretcher. He said a quick prayer for his friend before turning back to the responder. "Was there anyone else injured?"

The responder signed off on his report, handing it over to Dr. Bauer. "36 year old female, Natalia Rivera in route now. She was also hit, by accident."

"Marina?" Rick inquired, fearing the answer for his friend's sake.

"She was pronounced dead at the scene, Doc," the young man responded.

"Damn." Rick sighed heavily as he understood the cause of Frank's present predicament. He knew that an emotional shock like this was sometimes more difficult to treat. They could make sure he was stable, but the aftereffects would take a considerable while longer, and could easily affect his ability to heal, or lead to PTSD. Looking back at the responder, he gave his thanks before turning back to Frank.

After ordering blood work and vitals, Rick looked down at the chart then over at his friend and began a more thorough assessment.

Aware of where Olivia's attention was focused, Anna turned to the position of Marina's body. Taking one of the discarded blankets, she moved over and placed it over the body, shielding it.

Once the fire truck's ladder had been extended and secured against the side of the lighthouse to prevent it from shifting in the heavy winds, Anna turned to Olivia and placed an arm around the other woman's shoulder. "Olivia, come on," Anna urged her friend to move. "Natalia's going to be all right."

"But I -," Olivia started.

"They're going to get her down and into an ambulance." She turned the other woman until Olivia was facing her. Waiting until she had Olivia's attention she continued, "If you want to go with her, we need to go down now."

"I want...I need to be with her," Olivia responded as she looked over at Remy and the other paramedic. They'd covered Natalia's wound with layers of gauze dressings, then applied a band around her torso, keeping the dressing in place. They'd also started an IV of fluids running into her partner. She'd had to move back when they rolled her onto the backboard and strapped her in, and only then did she take a look around and saw the covered form. Not seeing the Chief, she turned back to Anna. "Where's Frank?"

"He's already gone down," Anna said, keeping her replies brief.

Nodding her head toward the body, Olivia asked, "Who?"

"Not now, Olivia." She tried to redirect Olivia's focus. "We need to get you downstairs and at the ambulance, ready for Natalia, so you can head to the hospital."

In no mood for deterrence, Olivia rounded on her. "Spit it out, Anna. I deserve to know who nearly killed my wife!"

Anna sighed and lowered her head for a moment. "Marina."

"What?!" Olivia said, seething and looking for an outlet. "Where is the bitch?"

"She's dead, Olivia," Anna said calmly. Again, she waited for her friend's attention to return to her. "Frank shot her when she lunged for you and Natalia."

It took a moment for Olivia to register what the detective had said. Then it sunk in. Frank had unknowingly shot and killed his own daughter. As much as the older man frequently annoyed her when it came to dealings with her family, he had been a friend, and she couldn't wish the kind of hell he was going to go through on anyone. Even though she was still angry with Marina for putting Natalia in danger, for nearly killing her, there was nothing she could do about that, so instead she returned her focus to Natalia.

The younger woman's pallor frightened her. *Oh, God.* Olivia sighed and swiped at the tears that started to streak down her cheek. *I know I don't talk to you much, or pray, really; that's more Natalia's thing. But please, can you help her now? I never thought I deserved someone*

that special in my life, but she's turned my life inside out, for the better. Natalia is my heart and soul. She makes life worth living. Olivia glanced fondly at her partner. *She makes me smile.* Leaning over the younger woman, she gently brushed a few wayward hairs from her forehead before pressing a kiss there. "I love you. Never forget that."

Remy and the paramedic placed Natalia into the transport stretcher and ropes were connected to the stretcher to allow for a controlled transfer. Gently, the casing was lowered over the railing. Ropes were dropped to the ground. Rescue crews, as the ladder crew levered the stretcher down. As soon as it was all the way down, the Rescue crew unlatched the stretcher, and quickly transferred Natalia into a waiting ambulance.

Anna guided Olivia down the stairs and out to the ambulance where Olivia climbed in taking a seat on the bench inside. She noticed her friend reaching out and placing a hand on Natalia's arm, trying to maintain some contact with her partner and she whispered a prayer as the vehicle's doors were closed. She watched as the lights and sirens of the ambulance started. A pat to the back of the ambulance and Anna turned back to the lighthouse to await the next paramedic crew to follow her up the stairs to the deceased form of Marina Cooper.

The movements would be done as quickly as they were able and the body transferred to the hospital morgue via ambulance. This one, however, would have no lights or sirens.

"Agent Mallet, I was told to talk to you when I got here," Eleni said as she entered the tent, a portable forensics kit in one hand and a coffee in the other.

"Please tell me that coffee is for me?" Mallet almost whimpered as he caught the scent of the drink.

"Um, no. Sorry. The coffee at the precinct was cold and probably there since last night," Eleni said apologetically. "I needed a caffeine fix."

"Tell me about it." Mallet moved to transfer the kit to the ground, aware that there was no way Eleni was letting him hold her coffee. He relayed the information to her about what had happened at the top of the lighthouse, carefully editing out references to Marina being the kidnapper, at least until Anna had a chance to speak with her. "The ambulance is just taking Natalia to the hospital now."

"What happened to the kidnapper?" Eleni asked, but when she noticed Mallet, hedging. "Mallet?"

"The kidnapper is being transferred to the hospital morgue for examination," the agent responded as he looked around the tent, avoiding looking at the medical examiner's eyes. "Look, why don't I bring you out to the site where Jonathan found the abandoned vehicle? You can get started on collecting evidence."

"Mallet, what's going on that you're not telling me?" Eleni asked. The man's evasiveness was starting to grate on her nerves. She had moved into his line of sight just as Detective Li entered the tent. Eleni sighed, hoping that her friend would let her know exactly what happened.

"Hi, Eleni," Anna said, addressing the other woman. "I need to talk to you privately. Can we talk in your car?"

"Yeah, sure. What's this about?" Eleni asked.

"Not here," Anna responded before turning to Mallet. "Can you go oversee the transfer of the kidnapper, please?" At Mallet's nod, Anna led Eleni out to the other woman's car.

Settling the other woman into the front passenger seat, she closed the door and went around to the driver's side, then turned to face her friend. Looking down at her hands then up at Eleni, she spoke softly, "Eleni, I'm sorry, but there's no good way to tell you this. Marina was the kidnapper responsible for holding Natalia."

"What?" Shaking her head in denial, Eleni looked at Anna beseechingly. "No, you have to be wrong." She looked down seeing the tremors in her hand. Quietly, she continued, "Please tell me you're wrong."

Anna reached over and covered Eleni's hand. "I'm so sorry. When she lunged at Natalia and Olivia up on the deck, trying to throw them over the railing, she was shot in the back. It went through her and hit Natalia. With Remy and Olivia helping Natalia, Frank and I checked the kidnapper."

"Frank? Where is he?" Eleni worriedly looked out through the windscreen, scanning across the groups of police and fire rescue crews, not seeing her ex-husband.

"I sent him to the hospital about twenty minutes or so ago," Anna replied.

Turning a confused glance at her friend, Eleni said, "I don't understand. Was he hurt?"

"No," Anna started. "He was starting to go into shock." Taking a deep breath, Anna continued. "Eleni, Frank was the one to shoot the kidnapper. With the mask on, he had no way of knowing it was Marina until I removed it."

"Oh, God, no," Eleni choked out. Recoiling back into her seat, Eleni turned facing the front of the car, looking out the window but not really seeing anything. She brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

Anna turned to look out at the scene playing out before her as various police and rescue crews exited and entered the lighthouse. Needing to make a decision, she looked back at Eleni and then out the window where Mallet stood at the entrance to the tent. Seeming to figure out a course of direction she turned to the other woman, "Eleni, if you can give me about ten minutes, I'll drive you over to the hospital."

For a long moment, there was no response and Anna wondered if the other woman had actually heard her.

"Evidence," Eleni spoke quietly and flatly. "I was supposed to get the evidence..." Her voice trailed off.

"Don't worry about that right now," Anna said reassuringly as she put her hand on Eleni's arm. "I'll make sure that everything is collected and sent to your office."

It wasn't until Eleni had felt the other woman's hand on her arm that she had even registered what Anna had said. "I need to get everything secured."

Turning so that she was fully focused on her friend, Anna brought her hand up to touch Eleni's face, bringing it to face her. "Stop. I will look after this, I promise." She watched her friend's face; it was as if the heart and head were having an internal argument. After a moment, she saw the woman's shoulders drop. "I'll speak with Mallet to get him and the officers to finish collecting the evidence gathered from the lighthouse, the supply house, and the van. Then I will drive you to the hospital."

Absently, Eleni tilted her head. "What about your car?"

Anna shook her head, not expecting the question, figuring that Eleni had much more to worry about than transportation. "I came with Frank and Mallet. Mallet and Remy can take the police truck back to the department when they're finished." Turning and placing her hand on the door release, she noticed Mallet walking toward the car. Quickly, she turned back to face Eleni. "You'll be okay for a few minutes?" When she received a nod of assurance, she opened the car door and strode to Mallet and redirected him back to the tent.

Act II

The ambulance had barely finished pulling up to Cedars Emergency Department when the rear door was pushed open and the paramedics pushed the gurney out, the collapsible legs stretching out and locking into place. The paramedics had radioed through en-route, so they were bypassed Emergency, heading directly to the Operating Room theaters. Olivia quickly jumped down to the ground and followed them through the hospital doors, trying to keep the pace as the gurney was pushed through the corridors toward the OR, but was blocked from entering.

"Please, let me have a minute with her," Olivia pleaded.

"Just a minute while the surgical team is prepping. She's lost too much blood," one of the OR nurses responded, sympathetic, as she glanced at the chart, giving the women a modicum of privacy.

Pressing a kiss to her partner's forehead, Olivia spoke gently, "I love you, Natalia. Please fight to live. You have so much to live for...our children, me. I need you in my life." The tears that rolled over Olivia's lids this time were not brushed away as she felt the nurse's soft touch on her arm.

"I'm sorry. We need to go in now. Someone will be out to update you when we can. There's a family room just down the hall," the young nurse spoke.

"Thanks. I know where it is," Olivia said, her voice barely above a whisper as she watched the love of her life pass through the familiar corridors of the operating rooms. Try as she might, she didn't move much beyond the entrance. As time passed without any word from inside, she began to pace the hallway, getting more anxious.

"You're going to wear a path down this corridor at this rate," Doris said with some amusement, hoping that the incongruous statement would get her friend to stop her pacing. She knew her friend was hurting but she was also aware that the stress Olivia had been under for weeks now was not good for her health.

It worked.

"Doris?" Olivia spoke, bewildered, as she stopped pacing and looked over at the other woman. After a brief moment, she continued, "That's really not that funny."

"I had to do something. I called your name three times and you didn't respond." Doris was concerned.

"Sorry," Olivia replied, running her hands over her face. "They've been in there forever and I don't know what's going on."

"Speaking of what's going on, what the hell happened up there up at the lighthouse?"

Olivia sighed and glanced over at her friend. "It all seemed to go so fast, but yet so slow at the same time. When I got up there, Marina was trying to force Natalia over the side of the railing."

"What?!" Doris responded, astounded. "Marina Cooper was behind all this? How?"

"Yes," Olivia seethed as she ran her fingers through her hair. Rolling her shoulders in an attempt to relieve the tension settling in her muscles, she looked over at Doris. "In a nutshell, Marina was trying to push Natalia over. She nearly did go over, but Anna and I managed to pull her to safety as Frank tried to apprehend the kidnapper. When she tried to make a run for us, Frank fired his weapon. He didn't know it was Marina until Anna took off the hooded mask. I didn't know either until Anna told me when we were back on the ground." She looked over to Doris who was trying to take it all in. "With everything going on up there, my only focus was on Natalia." Olivia's voice tapered off as she finished her story when the exhaustion of the day's events threatened to overwhelm her and she felt her knees give way.

"Shit." Doris quickly moved to put her arm around Olivia to guide her to the chairs against the wall. Looking up the hall toward the nursing desk, Doris called out for some help.

"I'm fine, Doris," Olivia said weakly, as she sat up in the chair.

"I'll be the judge of that," Rick said as he headed in their direction.

Doris looked between them and decided it was her cue to go find out about Natalia...or at least to get them to inform Olivia. Rolling her shoulders, she gave the other woman a mischievous grin and responded, "Okay, let me just go scare up some information."

"Doris," Olivia started, "Be nice."

"Where's the fun in that?" Doris quickly retorted. Upon seeing Olivia's raised eyebrow, she relented. "Okay, I won't scare the nurses, but I will remind them of a few facts."

"Doris?" Olivia questioned.

"Nice. I promise," Doris quipped as she headed down the corridor to the nurse's desk. Hazarding a glance over at Rick, she sighed. "Really, I'll be okay, once I know how Natalia is doing. Look, could you go check on Natalia before Doris gets herself into trouble?"

Rick smirked.

"Okay, so more trouble than usual."

"Stay here," Rick responded, "I'll send your cohort back over."

"Thanks, Rick." Olivia reclined in the chair, resting her head against the wall. She knew she'd have to call Ava to let her know what was going on, but until she knew more about Natalia's condition, there was no point in worrying her daughters unnecessarily.

When Doris returned down the hall, sufficiently chastened on the policy of confidentiality, she found Olivia lightly snoring. She smiled; the other woman certainly needed the rest. Digging out her phone, she texted Blake. *Need to talk with you. I'm at Cedars.*

'*What? Are you hurt?*' came the quick response.

'*No. Here with Olivia. Natalia's in surgery. Olivia's resting at the moment,*' Doris texted back and then waited a moment before adding another message. '*Who's there with you?*'

'Buzz, Dinah, Shayne, Henry, Josh, Beth, Vanessa, Reva & Colin. Why?'

Knowing that this wasn't news she could give via text message, she just sent a note, *'Will call you when I know more.'* It was a cryptic answer, but she wanted to wait until she was face to face.

"No!" Olivia woke with a jerk, startled out of the nightmare she'd been having. She could feel her heart racing and looked at her surroundings, not settling on any one thing but she recognized that puke green color of Cedar's walls all too easily. *Hospital...why?* She put her hand on her chest and while she knew her heart was beating fast, it wasn't with the piercing pain she'd felt when her heart stopped a couple years ago. Slowing down her breathing, she took a closer look at her surroundings, and it all came back to her with violent clarity. "Natalia?" she said, her voice sounding hoarse.

"She's still in the OR. Hang on, Rick told me to page him when you woke," Doris responded as she reached for her cell.

Rubbing her face with her hands in an effort to pull herself out of her exhaustive fog, she said, "How long have I been out?"

"About an hour. You looked like you needed it. By the looks of things, you could probably do with much more," Doris said sympathetically. "Let me just have Rick paged, then we'll know something soon."

"Thanks, Doris," Olivia responded as Doris headed up the hallway. The constant lack of proper sleep and take-away food, along with the drop in adrenaline was giving her a damn headache. She didn't know if a minute or twenty passed as she closed her eyes again, letting exhaustion overtake her.

Blake looked down at her cell phone with a quizzical expression. Well, that was odd, she thought to herself briefly before looking at the previous messages...Natalia...surgery. "Oh, crap," she said quietly and then realized that there were a few people around her that heard.

Josh immediately turned his head toward Blake. "Oh, crap, what?" he repeated.

"Doris is at the hospital with Olivia. Natalia's in surgery," Blake said softly. "Natalia must have been hit in the shooting." Quickly grabbing her coat, she hurried toward the exit.

"Blake, the roads are probably pretty hazardous out there," Josh responded, understanding the need to get to the hospital. "I've got the truck out there; it has better traction." Wrapping his coat around him, he grabbed his keys. "Did she mention anything about the girls?"

Blake glanced up at him and then realized he was referring to Olivia and Natalia's daughters. "Emma and Francesca? No...that's a good thing, right?"

"I hope so," he said gently. "What else did Doris say?"

"That's just it; not much. Said she'd call me back when she knew more," Blake said, still somewhat confounded, but wanting to be there for her friends.

Josh looked back over the small crowd that had gathered around them. "Anyone else coming?" He noticed Reva put her hand up, though he suspected she was coming more to support him. Reva and Olivia's frienemy dynamic was sometimes still a mystery to him. "Okay, let's get moving."

When Anna Li entered the Emergency Department of Cedars with Eleni Andros at her side, she flipped open her detective warrant card to the nurse at triage. "I need to see the physician treating Chief Frank Cooper."

"I'm sorry, Detective, I can't release that information," the nurse responded.

"Look, he's my ex-husband," Eleni added, her voice sounding full of worry. "Please. He was just brought in from a police incident."

"Okay, give me a minute to just check his file," the nurse responded and then got up to go check. When she returned, she looked somewhat apologetically. "Sorry, you're not listed as next of kin."

Glancing quickly over at Eleni, Anna then turned her attention back to the nurse. "Excuse me, Ms. Gillis, is it?" Anna spoke, taking note of the nurse's identification badge. "I get confidentiality, I do, but, I just need to speak with his doctor."

"Only his next of kin can have that information released," Ms. Gillis responded.

"And that would be?" Anna asked, getting frustrated. At this rate, she was going to have to scare up a judge for a release of information warrant, which she didn't want to have to do. "Let me guess, you can't tell me that either."

"Marina Cooper," Ms. Gillis responded, matter-of-factly.

Anna sighed. "She's dead. Who's his emergency contact?"

"Frank Cooper, Sr."

"Buzz," Eleni quietly responded to Anna's quizzical look. She was about to pull her cell phone from her purse when she saw Lillian Cooper coming up the hallway and she motioned for the older woman to come over.

"Hi, sweetheart. Come with me," Lillian said gently as she put her arm around Eleni's waist, guiding her through the triage doors.

"Thanks," Anna said to the triage nurse as she followed behind the other two women. Catching up with them, she asked Lillian, "How's he doing?"

Looking between both women, she paused briefly before continuing, as her own strong emotions and connections to the Cooper family were at the forefront. "Dr. Bauer is treating him for shock. His vitals are improving, but he has a fair bit left to go. And he hasn't yet become consciously aware of his surroundings."

"Can I go see him?" Eleni asked.

"Sure, sweetie," Lillian responded with a smile as she showed Eleni to Frank's room. "The nurses may ask you to leave the room while they're doing assessments, but otherwise, feel free to stay with him, hold his hand. He may start to come around, but I wouldn't worry if he doesn't for a while yet."

"Thanks," Eleni said and then she paused. "Lillian, do you know if Buzz has been called yet?"

Lillian shook her head. "I don't know. I only just came down when I heard Frank was admitted and I wanted to check his status before I talked with Buzz."

"Okay, with everything going on, he should know what happened," Eleni responded before entering the doors Lillian had indicated.

Anna had turned to head toward the elevator bank when she felt a hand holding her back. "Lillian?"

"What did happen out there?" she asked with trepidation.

Anna directed her over to the row of chairs against the wall, and motioned for the older woman to sit before she started. She held Lillian's hand as she relayed the incidents at the lighthouse then gathered her in her arms as the nurse broke down.

Olivia was startled again from her sleep as she felt the chair next to her stir. "How long this time?"

"About ten minutes. I needed some caffeine, so I just headed down to the cafeteria for a few minutes." Doris held up her large paper cup, then passed one over to Olivia.

"Tea?" Olivia questioned with a smirk as she smelled the beverage. Taking a sip of the tea, she then directed a surprised look over at the other woman. "Green tea with honey? Doris, have you been taking notes from Natalia?"

"It's not so bad. I actually like it, myself."

"Then how about you drink it and I have that coffee you have in your hands," Olivia remarked.

"Uh huh. No, you need some real rest and that won't happen with coffee."

"Now I know you've been talking with her," Olivia groused, then let out a long sigh. "I wish I could sleep longer than a few hours at a time, but I keep waking up with nightmares. Every time I fall asleep, I see the kidnapper torturing Natalia and killing her, that nothing I can do would save her."

"She is safe now," Doris replied. "You did save her."

Olivia looked like she was having a hard time believing it was for real. "So, where is our illustrious Dr. Bauer?"

"Right here," Rick spoke and startled Olivia, who had not seen him approach from the other end of the corridor. Deciding to skip the preamble, which Olivia probably wouldn't pay much attention to anyway, he started, "Dr. Jordan was able to remove the bullet fragments from Natalia's chest. A couple of pieces had pierced her right lung, so they had to re-inflate it. She's also got a few broken ribs, and she has pneumonia - she's probably had that for a few days. They've given her some pretty strong antibiotics to start with. Dr. Jordan is almost finished with her, then they'll transfer her to the Surgical Intensive Care Unit."

"When can I see her?" Olivia asked, anxiously.

"Probably not for another hour or so. I'll make sure the nurses page you when Natalia can have family in to see her." Rick took another good look at Olivia, assessing her physical state. "Why don't you head over to the family room and get some sleep?"

"How come everyone's so concerned about my well being? Natalia's the one in surgery," Olivia said, a little frustrated.

Putting a hand on her friend's arm, Doris spoke gently, "Because we care about you as well." Then she quipped, "Besides, you're not going to do Natalia any good if you're a patient, too."

Olivia had to concede that point, but her rest would have to wait as the doors at the end of the corridor admitted Josh, Reva, Shayne, Beth and Blake.

Catching her partner's attention, Blake walked up and gave Doris a hug and sighed deeply, needing the selfish comfort it provided her. After a few moments, she turned her attention to Olivia.

"Hey, Olivia, how are you holding up?" Blake asked, then cringed as she realized how bad that probably sounded. "Sorry."

"As good as one might expect when the person who means the world to you is in surgery, after being kidnapped," Olivia responded dryly. Given this town, that sentiment actually had more merit than one might expect.

Phillip winced, as he entered the hallway, having heard his ex-wife's comment. He had left to go check on Ava and the girls but before he got there, he'd gotten a call from Beth that Natalia had been taken to the hospital and Olivia was with her. Deciding that he'd rather have more information when he talked to Ava, he had turned and headed back toward Cedars.

"Can anyone tell us what actually happened up there? All we had to go by was a police scanner," Blake asked. "No one is saying anything."

Olivia let out a deep sigh; she was really not up to reiterating some of the worst moments of her life. Feeling a tug on her sleeve, she turned to see Doris whisper, "Let me," and was immediately grateful. Resting her head against the wall, she watched as Doris lead them a short distance away and began to tell them about what had happened up at the lighthouse. Surreptitious glances her way every so often was unnerving, until she heard a rather loud, startled, "What?" in a strong male voice. She looked up to see Josh's ashen face; it wasn't a sight she ever particularly wanted to see again. Stubbornly, despite her exhaustion, she stood and made her way over to the small crowd gathered around Doris.

"Is all this true?" Josh asked, hoping against hope, that Marina hadn't been the one to kidnap Natalia, for his son's sake. But the brief flash of hatred he saw in Olivia's eyes before she schooled her face told him different. "Why?"

"I don't really know. When I got up there, she was ranting about Natalia and I taking our 'filthy' family away from Springfield." Olivia sighed. "I didn't know who it was - even though I knew it was a woman, the voice was muffled under the mask - until Detective Li told me once it was all over."

After a moment's silence, Phillip asked, "Does Frank know he shot his daughter?"

Anxiety and worry were chief among the feelings of the folks gathered at Company. The coffee pot had been refilled twice already as people milled about waiting for news. When the phone rang, there was dead silence as Buzz picked up the phone.

"Company, Buzz speaking."

"Buzz, this is Detective Li, could you come down to the hospital, please?"

Picking up on the official tone of the detective's voice, the elder Cooper felt as though time had stopped. With a family of cops, he had learned to realize that early on that official tone rarely meant anything good, and with family being police officers, it could just as easily mean they were injured. Plus, he reasoned, if a police officer died, the detectives would come in person.

"Can you give me any indication what this is about?" Buzz asked, trying to mentally prepare himself for meeting with the detective.

"Sorry, I'd really not like to do this over the phone," came the voice at the other end.

"Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Buzz, before you go, do you know where I can find Shayne Lewis? He's not at home and all I'm getting on his cell phone is his voicemail."

"He's here. Do you need him as well?" Buzz asked as he looked over at the man in question. This was giving him a really bad feeling.

"Yes, that would be good. Thank you."

"Okay, we'll be there as soon as we can," Buzz responded and then hung up the phone. After conferring with the remaining friends, they all decided to car pool in the larger vehicles.

By the time Remy and Mallet returned to the police station with all the evidence they'd gathered and stored in bins, the storm had gotten much worse, despite weather forecasts for it to have already passed.

"Whew, that's the last of the bins in. Now the fun starts with having to log all the items into Eleni's program," Remy remarked as he removed his parka, draping it over a nearby chair.

Shoving his own coat into a spare locker, Mallet turned around and asked, "You want me to go start the coffee pot?" The grateful look he got in reply was sufficient response. Reaching around to rub the back of his neck, Mallet still found it hard to believe that Marina could kidnap and nearly kill Natalia. He could understand her trying to kill what was thought to be Edmund - Edmund had been blackmailing her. But Natalia? He didn't understand what

had pushed Marina to harm Natalia. Shaking his head, he realized he perhaps he didn't know her as well as he thought he did.

"Right now, I'd be so grateful for caffeine, I wouldn't care how bad the coffee is," Remy replied as he glanced over three full bins of evidence and the camera case. "This is going to be a long night."

As Shayne entered the hospital corridor where his father stood with Olivia, Blake, Phillip and Doris, he didn't realize what was happening when 5'7" of pissed off Olivia Spencer came at him full force. Pushing her off, he yelled, "What the hell?"

"Why? Why did she do it?" Olivia demanded.

Startled by her aggressiveness, and confused by the cause of it, Shayne looked at the woman who at one point had been his stepmother. "Who did what?"

"Olivia, back off!" Josh intervened, putting himself between his son and his ex-wife. By that point, even more people had gathered, including Dr. Bauer, who had worked his way to the forefront.

"Really, Josh, how the hell could he not know what his wife was up to?" Olivia fired back.

Affronted by her insinuation and still unaware of what had gotten her so riled, Shayne spat out, "Up to what? Will someone *please* tell me what is going on?!"

"Just give me a minute, son," Josh said as calmly as he could. A crowded corridor in an antagonistic situation was not the place to inform him of Marina's part in the kidnapping and the fact that she had been killed. "I'll tell you what happened, but not here." Josh watched as his son clenched his jaw, seeming to be torn between wanting to know right now and acknowledging the tension.

Attempting to diffuse the issue, Rick stepped in front of the enraged woman. "Olivia, Natalia's been moved into the Surgical Intensive Care Unit. If you want to go see her as they get her settled in, now would be the time."

Olivia was conflicted but her desire to see Natalia won over her need to find out why Marina had taken and nearly killed her. Letting out a growl of frustration, she let Doris guide her down the hallway toward the SICU.

After Olivia left the area, Josh guided his son over to a private room and closed the door. Several minutes later, Josh exited briefly to call Reva over. Henry had been sleeping tucked into her side, so Beth came over to look after the young boy while Reva went in to see her son.

Act III

Buzz stood at the doorway of his son's hospital room and shook his head. Yes, he knew what it was like to lose a child in sudden, violent circumstances. He couldn't imagine, though, what it must be like for what Frank was going through. When Coop died a couple years earlier as a result of a tragic accident, it damn near destroyed him, causing him to spiral into a destructive path and ending in a heart attack. He hoped that Frank's loss would not result in the same way. Sitting by his son's side was Eleni, holding Frank's hand. Shutting his eyes against the tears that threatened to spill over, and the lump that formed in his throat, he thought no one ever told him how crushing it would be to lose a grandchild.

"Hey, sweetie," Lillian said as she approached her husband.

"How is he?" Buzz asked.

"The medications to slow down his pulse and breathing are working. His blood pressure is starting to stabilize and they're keeping him hydrated with intravenous fluids. Right now, though, they're really concerned about his level of consciousness."

"Can I....?" Buzz asked with trepidation.

Leaning over to kiss the elder Cooper, Lillian could see the worry and concern etched in his face. Of course, dear," Lillian responded. The Coopers were a pretty resilient clan, having faced many difficulties and challenges, as much or more than most in this town, and she prayed they would pull through again. Leaning against the doorframe, she watched as Buzz gave his former daughter-in-law a hug. *They'll get through this. They have to.* As Buzz

carefully lowered himself into the stiff plastic chair next to Frank's bed, Lillian moved toward his side and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

When Olivia walked into the SICU, the first thing that assaulted her senses was the incessant beeping of the cardiac monitoring machines and rhythmic hiss of ventilators; they were an unpleasant reminder of her own experiences, and she drew in a sharp breath. After a few deep breaths, she proceeded over to the nursing station but before she had a chance to say anything, a young nurse smiled at her.

"Ms. Spencer, can I help you?" the nurse asked. Noticing that the other woman's puzzlement showed no recognition, she continued, "I helped look after you after your heart surgery."

Truthfully, Olivia was still off-balance, but she covered with a quip, "And I didn't scare you off? You must be good. Or at least you have the patience of a saint."

"I've had worse," the young woman grinned. "I'm Emily, by the way."

Olivia quirked her head to the side briefly as she recalled the young woman's name, she then nodded her head. "You had much shorter hair then."

"Yes," Emily responded to the acknowledgement, then realized the other woman was distraught. "Can I help you with something?"

"Natalia Rivera. She was just brought in from the OR," Olivia said, her demeanor returning to the unknown worry she felt as she stepped foot in the unit. "Dr. Bauer said I could stay with her for a bit."

"We're only supposed to admit immediate family, and only then for short periods of time," Emily briefly hesitated before noticing the stormy intensity of Olivia's glare.

Clenching her jaw to stem off a scathing retort as she realized this woman was going to be involved in Natalia's care and it wouldn't do well to piss off the nurses, Olivia responded tightly, "Natalia Rivera is my partner, and furthermore, I am also her medical power of attorney. That information is on her chart."

"Oh, heavens, I'm sorry, Ms. Spencer. I didn't know," Emily apologized. "We just got her in, and I haven't had time to go through all of her information yet." She sighed. "Look, let me just go check with her primary nurse."

As the younger woman headed down the hall toward Natalia's room, Olivia rolled her shoulders, feeling the tension that rested there. Pacing the floor near the nurse's station, she exhaled in frustration. The confrontation with Shayne Lewis had already added to what had been an absolutely shitty day, and so the politics of hospital administrative policies was not high on her list of things to fight tonight.

Piercing shrills of machines jolted Olivia out of her thoughts, as she looked up the hall to see several nurses and physicians running to the room Natalia was in. Olivia's anxiety notched up several levels. Screw hospital policies, she had to know what was happening with the woman who'd become her soul mate, and so she started her own head-run down the hall.

"You can't go in there!" one of the technicians yelled at her, as he came out and headed for the crash cart.

"Will someone just tell me what the hell is going on? What's wrong?" Olivia fired back.

Not knowing who the woman was, he ignored her and headed back into the room.

At the edge of Natalia's room she was met by Emily who ushered her back down the hall.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Spencer. You need to wait back here," the young nurse responded in as calming a tone as she could. Guiding her to some chairs, the nurse directed Olivia to sit, and then she sat down next to her.

"What happened?" Olivia demanded as she started to stand back up. "I need to see her..." her voice broke and the tears that had been held at bay for she didn't know how long returned.

"Her heart stopped, but they were able to restart it," Emily said gently. "Dr. Jordan is in with her now, checking everything over. She said there was a lot of blood loss, so they've ordered up some more packed blood cells to be infused." Glancing over at the other woman, she took in the near ashen appearance, and she doubted that Olivia would retain much of the information she gave her. Casually she put her hand over Olivia's wrist, her fingers reaching to check the woman's pulse. The bounding pulse worried her.

Her heart stopped. Oh, God. Olivia felt her own heart stop for a moment, as she felt her world falling apart. Then it kicked back in and seemed to go into overdrive as it added to the pressure already pounding against her temples. "When..." she stammered out.

Assuming the other woman was asking when she could see the patient, Emily responded, "I don't know when you can see Ms. Rivera." Realizing she'd gotten the question correctly, she smiled softly, "But I will go check with Dr. Jordan." Noting that this woman still did not look well and halfway to having her examined herself, she quietly stated, "This is not normal protocol for families, but we have a quiet room with some cots up by the nurse's station. Do you have someone to stay with you?"

Olivia yawned. Her body was so overwhelmed, she felt like she could sleep for hours. The adrenaline she'd been using up at alarming levels was wearing off and she could feel her eyelids drop over bloodshot eyes. "Doris," she whispered.

"Okay. I'll be back in a few minutes," Emily said as she stood and headed back to the nurse's station for a minute before heading to the unit's doors.

For Anna, getting official family identifications of a deceased member was one of the toughest parts of her job. Although Frank had technically identified her up at the lighthouse, his state of mind at the time could not be counted on. Making her way upstairs, she met with Josh, Shayne and the others gathered.

"Shayne, can I borrow you for a bit?" Anna asked.

"Detective?" he asked, hesitantly. He was still reeling from the news of Marina's part in the kidnapping and her death.

"Sorry," Anna apologized. "I need an official identification."

Hunching his shoulders and letting out a long breath, the young man stood and stretched. Without saying a word, he gestured for Anna to lead him down to the hospital's mortuary.

Taking advantage of the quiet time, Phillip headed back downstairs to the cafeteria and opened his cell phone. Despite Olivia's wishes of wanting to know more about Natalia

before calling her daughters, he realized the late hour and knew that the girls would be worried. The second ringtone had barely finished trilling when the phone had been picked up.

"Mom?!" Ava asked, anxiously.

"No, it's Phillip. How are you?" he asked, then winced as he realized how inane that question was.

"How do you think I am?" Ava responded sarcastically. "Where's Mom? Natalia?"

Phillip sighed, wondering how much she knew, which he had to admit probably wasn't much. There was a press block-out of the incident, which had been helped with the hindrance of the winter storm, until families were notified. "Natalia had to go into surgery to fix a gun shot wound. She's in the ICU. Olivia went in to see her a few minutes ago."

"Gunshot? What happened out there?" Ava asked, alarmed.

Phillip sighed. This wasn't something he wanted to tell her over the phone. Putting off answering that question, he instead took a different direction. "How are Emma and Francesca?"

"Sleeping. I took them up to Mom's suite a couple of hours ago. After supper, Em watched a movie before passing out cold." Ava sighed as she looked over to the bed where her sister had managed to sprawl herself diagonally on the bed. "Emma was asking about Mom and Natalia. I didn't know what to say, so I just told her Mom would call when she could."

"Okay. Thanks, Ava." Running his hands through his graying blonde hair. He blew out a deep breath. "Look, I'm just going to check in with Beth and then I'll be over. Do you need me to bring anything?"

Wistfully, Ava responded, "Mom and Natalia home safe and sound."

"I know," Phillip said, sympathetically. "I wish I could do that for you. I'll be there as soon as I can." He disconnected the phone and placed it in his pocket before glancing into the quiet cafeteria. With the late hour and the poor weather, the main food area was closed, so he headed over to the small cafe tucked into a corner. Digging some change, he ordered some cups of coffee and tea for everyone. Pouring some milk into his own coffee, he then pocketed some small milk and creamer containers and some sugar packets. He grabbed the

tray and headed up to where everyone had gathered in the lounge area outside the OR, where everyone had gathered.

Leaning over to kiss his wife on the head, Phillip whispered, "I'm going to head over to the Beacon and let Ava know what's going on. Did you want me to drop you home first?"

"Thanks," said Josh as he turned around and picked one of the cups marked with a C. "I can drop her home later if she wants to stay a bit longer."

"Thanks, Josh, but I really should get home. I want to check on Peyton." Beth looked up at her husband and smiled. "After a day like today, I need that."

"Not a problem," Josh said. "It looks like it will be a long night. I don't know that we'll be able to do much for the time being."

The silence that permeated the Springfield Police Department was almost oppressive as Anna walked through the doors. It was if each officer on the floor stared at her, wanting to know how the chief was doing or if she had heard anything.

Every ounce of her body was tired. She stretched before taking her coat off, hanging it on the hanger behind her office door, and dropping her sling bag onto the floor. Booting up both her laptop and her work desktop, she sat down and pulled her notepad out of her bag, flipping through to find the information she needed. She groaned as she realized all that still needed to be done. But first she needed caffeine, and not the regular department sludge; and for that, she grabbed her thermos and headed down to Eleni's office. As long as she contributed to the supply, her friend had given her unfettered access to her beloved Kuerig coffee maker. Lately, she'd been supplying the stock with some heavenly flavored coffees and it made her caffeine cravings all that much greater when she worked long into the night.

Approaching Lt. Andros's office, she could hear two men's voices and when she got to the door, she noted that Remy was calling out the evidence tag identifications and the item descriptions as Mallet entered them into the computer. By the looks of it, she noted, they'd developed a system. Once entered, Remy placed them into individual bins, grabbing a label tag, scribbling the corresponding ID number on them and putting them on the shelf. They were into such a rhythm that they hadn't noticed her arrival.

"Hey, guys," Anna started. "You need a hand?"

"Ha!" Mallet responded, surprised when his heart rate returned to normal. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

The quip that came first to mind, *No, it would be too much paperwork*, died on her lips. After a day like today, it would be like a slap in the face. Shaking her head, she just apologized. "Sorry. I just came down for some coffee. How is it going?"

"Not bad. We've got these two logged. Onto the last one," Remy responded, as he pointed to the large Rubbermaid storage bins.

"Did the abandoned van get back here?" she asked.

Mallet looked up at her and nodded. "Jonathan and Officer Ramirez got back to the department garage a while ago. The techs are going over it now."

Anna winced slightly. As much as Jonathan had been working with the police department lately regarding Edmund, it was on the fringes - a civilian resource. As far as chains of evidence, it would not look good for a civilian to be handling evidence. She was going to have to track him down and deputize him, or order him to stay away from the case, and she was reluctant to do the latter as the young man had an uncanny knack for detection. She supposed his years with his daughter hiding out from Alan and Edmund was extremely useful.

"Hey, Anna," Mallet started, shaking his head. He still found it hard to believe that Marina had masterminded this whole kidnapping plan. He sighed as he looked around him. "Did we get a location on Edmund and your father? I want to bring them in and question them," he said gruffly. "This whole situation is fucked up. Edmund's got to be behind at least part of this."

Thinking back to her trip up to the cabin that morning, which they thought had been a Winslow holdout, she looked over at Mallett. "I agree that they're involved. But we need to do this carefully because he's not above playing dirty." Anna ran a hand through her hair in frustration. "And they're not going to come willingly."

Mallett nodded. "When I got back here, I put out a BOLO on Edmund and Hung Li."

"Great, thanks," Anna nodded, turned to the cabinet in the corner of Eleni's office, and snagged the water container, refilling it before selecting a couple of coffee packets. She put a cup underneath and waited for it to brew. Once done, she poured it into her thermos and restarted the process. *It was going to be a long night.* Turning around to the other detectives, she queried, "Did the evidence from the cabin get processed yet?"

"Eleni got it logged and stored before all hell broke loose," Mallett said, holding up a sticky note. "She left a self-reminder note on her desk to properly catalogue it when she got back."

"Thanks. Look, I've got to get up to my office. If you need anything, let me know," Anna said as she turned and headed back up the hall to the staircase.

The worst of the snowstorm having cleared, a lone twin engine plane stood on an airstrip on a private airfield, its identification numbers emblazoned on its side and wings. Aside from that, there were no other identifying company logos on it. The rear hatch was opened as a sole individual was tossing boxes and bags into the cargo hold.

"Hey! Watch it, you imbecile!" Edmund shouted at the unfortunate man.

"What?" the young man huffed back, as he picked up another duffle bag, preparing to heft it into the hold.

Annoyed with the man's attitude, Edmund sneered, "I paid you to load this stuff into the plane. I didn't pay you to throw it in."

"Whatever," the man replied. *You're not paying me that much.* The bag got tossed in, landing near two medium sized crates. He didn't see the butt of the gun coming as it knocked him to the ground in a heap.

"If you want a job done right, you've got to do it yourself," Edmund smirked as he straightened his jacket, putting the gun back in the leather holster on his belt. He would have liked to have disposed of the idiot, but at this point he just wanted to get the hell out of Springfield and it's tiny-minded citizens. Looking up, he saw Li coming out, talking with their hired pilot, and he made his way over to them.

"I need you to take care of something, Li," Edmund said, nodding his head in the direction of the slumped body.

"Is he...?" the pilot asked hesitantly, wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself involved in.

"No. Unfortunately, the idiot's still alive," Edmund said derisively, then guided the pilot to the front steps of the plane. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Li pick the man up in a fireman's hold and head toward the hangar. He needed to run through the flight plans with the pilot, the official one that would be logged with Air Transportation and an unofficial one that would be taken to a private jet hangar in another state.

When he exited the plane, Edmund met up with Li, who had just finished loading their belongings into the cargo hold. "We all ready to go?"

"Yes, all loaded," Hung Li responded as he followed Edmund back into the plane. "Let's get moving."

As they headed back into the plane, a black SUV made it's way to the edge of the airstrip, its headlights off. Its occupant pulled out a cell phone and typed out a message: *Winslow & Li on plane. Old Murphy landing strip on old ring road. JON* . The SUV headed alongside the plane and attempted to head it off, but the plane reached it's take-off point and took flight. The only things remaining were the soundds of the plane's engines as it gained elevation and the prolonged horn of the SUV.

In a town the size of Springfield, Cedars Emergency Department usually wasn't typically very busy; the occasional heart attack, an injury from a fall, and this time of year, weather related motor-vehicle accidents. Tonight, however, had been different. The Chief of Police had been brought in and being treated for shock, his daughter killed and another lay in the SICU all as a result of one incident. For the time being, Dr. Bauer had ordered a media block out and there was increased police and hospital security presence. In mutual agreement between Rick and Detective Li, all inquiries by police and media concerning Chief Cooper were to be run through Detective Li.

The ER triage area had finally calmed down to its normal state of business later that evening when a bruised, anxious woman approached the Emergency Department's triage desk. She had a split lip and a blackened right eye; the lurid blue, red and purple bruises that spread over her cheek, and there was a laceration on her forehead. A young daughter stood next to her, partially burying her face into her mother's torn, bloodied coat.

"Can you help me?" she asked.

Ms. Gillis quickly stood and came around the desk. "Miss, what happened? Is this all your blood?" the nurse began to quickly assess the woman's appearance and demeanor. "My name is Kari. Can you tell me your name?"

"What? I don't..." She quickly shook her head, her right arm wrapping around her daughter's shoulders.

"Okay, we'll work on your name afterwards," the nurse spoke calmly. "What about your daughter? Is she hurt?"

"Dani?" the young woman responded, her voice breaking slightly as she looked down at her girl. "No, I don't think so."

"May I take a look at her?" Kari asked.

Nervously, the woman shook her head again.

"You need to say 'please'," the little girl spoke quietly. "She lets me do things sometimes if I say please."

Kari nodded and smiled at Dani's contribution to the conversation. "Thank you, Dani. Are you hurt anywhere, sweetie?"

"No, Miss Kari," Dani said.

"That's good," Kari said as she continued her assessment of the mother, who still wasn't talking much. "Dani, do you know what happened?"

"No, Miss Kari. Mommy told me to go hide in my bedroom." Dani seemed pleased with herself.

"Thank you, Dani. And you don't have to call me Miss Kari. Just Kari is fine," she smiled at the girl. "You know what? I'm going to take you to a new room, and there's another nurse that's going to help me. Her name is Lillian."

"But you're going to come, too, right?" Dani started to worry, looking up at her mother.

"Just for a little while. Then I have to come back here, okay," Kari started, resting a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Don't worry, though, okay? Nurse Lillian is going to take good care of

you and your Mommy." Kari looked around to call over one of her colleagues to cover the triage desk for a few minutes, and then she guided the mother and daughter into a brightly lit, colorful room. Looking at the surprise on the mother's face, Kari smiled and shrugged a shoulder. "It's one of our pediatric rooms. I thought she might feel more comfortable than in one of the regular exam rooms."

"Thank you," the mother responded. Biting down on her lower lip, "Kathryn. My name is Kathryn."

"You're welcome, Kathryn," Kari smiled. "Will you be okay for a few moments while I go get my colleague, Lillian?"

Looking up to assess the veracity of the nurse's statement, the young woman nodded after a moment before turning her attention to her daughter.

Kari gently shut the door and headed back up the hall, grateful for the extra police presence, as she didn't know if the woman she'd attended to was still in danger. Coming toward her was just the person she was looking for.

"Lillian, are you busy?" Kari asked. "I need some help." She stopped and looked down at her watch. "Only, I know it's getting late and you're supposed to be off-duty soon."

"That's okay. I don't know that I want to go home just yet. I'd just worry," Lillian replied, saddened. Changing her focus, she smiled at her colleague and said, "What can I help you with?"

After a brief moment's confusion, the younger nurse replied, "Oh, God. I'm sorry. I can go get someone else if you want to stay with your family."

"No, that's okay. I just checked in with my husband. Nothing more I can do in there right now except just sit and wait until Frank wakes," Lillian said as she fidgeted with the pen in her hand. As she was family, she wasn't directly in her son-in-law's care and just sitting around waiting for something to change was just going to drive her crazy. "Rick offered to let me finish my shift earlier, but I need to just keep busy. So, what do you need help with?"

Directing Lillian up the hall, Kari filled her in with what she had learned so far about the mother and daughter who had come to the ER.

Episode 2: Angels Would Fall



Act I

Outside Cedars Hospital, the late January day had turned colder, and as the sun dropped behind the thickening dark clouds, Olivia shivered and tightened her coat around her as she hurriedly typed out the text to Rafe: *Good news, Rafe! Today should be the day that your mom comes home from the hospital. We'll talk to you in a few days. Be safe! Love, Olivia.*

Olivia hit the send button and dropped her phone back in her pocket then quickly retrieved her gloves. When the wind kicked up, she bounced on her toes and moved behind a retaining wall to block the blustery winds. She was waiting for Anna to come by with Emma. It was Emma's day for martial arts practice, and Anna had offered to drop her off so the young girl could help with getting Natalia home. Olivia had determined that, in spite of the chaos of the last couple of weeks, she'd do her best to keep their daughter's life in order. No matter how much Emma pouted or stomped off to her room because she'd rather be close to her Ma than go to school or other activities, Olivia made sure she got out of the hospital anyway.

A buzzing in her pocket let Olivia know she had a text come in. She fished it out quickly and frowned for a moment when it wasn't Rafe. Usually, he'd send a quick message back to let her know he got the text even when he couldn't respond more. She brightened though at seeing Ava's name.

We're ready here!

Olivia slipped off one glove so she could send a quick confirmation back, and when she looked up, she saw Anna and Emma walking briskly across the parking lot.

Olivia smiled brightly at her daughter. "Hey, Jellybean!"

Emma rolled her eyes and shook her head a little. "Mom! I'm not a little kid anymore. Don't call me that!"

"What?" She teasingly ruffled Emma's hair causing the young girl to pull her head away and move out of her mother's reach. Olivia turned back to Anna and said, "Thanks for dropping her off. How was the lesson?"

Anna shivered behind her scarf and raised her chin just enough to speak, "No problem, and it went great. Emma's learning so fast! But let's get inside though where it's warmer, and I can talk without my teeth chattering."

The two women walked down the hospital corridor while Emma trailed in behind them. Anna pulled off her gloves and sniffed back a runny nose caused by the cold air outside. She looked at her friend and smiled. "So, it looks like today is the big day, huh?"

"Yep, she finally gets to come home. I thought I was a bad patient, but she can't stand to stay still for too long," Olivia said with amusement and Anna smiled back.

They stopped in front of the elevator, and Olivia pressed the up arrow.

Anna glanced at her friend who looked like she was finally catching up on her sleep. Natalia had been making drastic improvement in the last several days and had even turned away some pain medications yesterday. Supposedly, that's what convinced Rick Bauer to green-light Natalia for release. The broken ribs would take the longest to heal, but x-rays yesterday showed them healing quicker than expected. As long as Natalia didn't push it, she would almost be back to normal in a couple of weeks. "Are you sure there's nothing I can help with?"

Olivia shook her head, making her hair fall in her eyes. She pushed it behind her ear and smiled at Anna. "No, you've done more than enough. I can't tell you how grateful we both are for all you've done."

The younger woman nodded in understanding. "I'm always there if any of you need me."

The elevator dinged signaling its arrival. Olivia smiled at her friend. "Thank you. Do you want to come up?"

"Unless you need me, I'm going to head down to the morgue to check on some evidence from Eleni before she leaves for the day," Anna answered as she tilted her head toward the stairwell. She glanced over at Emma who was waiting for her mom inside the elevator. "I'll see you next week, Emma."

"Okay," Emma mumbled.

Olivia waved goodbye to the other woman as she stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for Natalia's floor. When the door closed, she looked over at her daughter who was picking her nails, the purple nail polish slowly flaking away under her efforts. "How was your day?"

Emma shrugged before answering, "Fine."

"Didn't you have a math test today?" Olivia questioned, trying to get the young girl to talk more.

"Yeah," Emma said but didn't offer any more information.

Olivia waited for more details, but when none were forthcoming, she took the direct route. "How do you think you did?"

"Okay, I guess." Emma sighed and crossed her arms.

When the elevator lurched to a stop at their destination, Olivia was grateful for the interruption. Lately, talking to Emma had become like pulling teeth. She had thought that all of them seeing Felicia Boudreaux would have helped Emma, but for such a talkative girl, she was becoming more and more withdrawn. Olivia sighed as the doors opened and she watched Emma step off the elevator, her head bowed slightly. With all the craziness that Emma had seen in her short life though, Olivia had been surprised at her resilience, until now. She shook her head and followed Emma down the hall. Of course, she had to remind herself that Emma was also a prepubescent girl. Strange behavior wasn't exactly strange.

Pushing open the nondescript door to Natalia's room, Olivia was pleased to see the turn in Emma's behavior as she ran over to the side of Natalia's bed and hugged her gently. The brunette was sitting up and in her own clothes. It was evident that she was more than ready

to get home. Earlier that day, she had been relegated to the bed to oversee Olivia's packing abilities. A small suitcase with changes of clothes and essentials for both women stood by the door waiting to leave as well.

Natalia pulled back from hugging Emma and smiled. "Hey, how's my girl been?"

"Good!" Olivia marveled at how simply being near Natalia made her daughter sound younger...happier. Natalia always seemed to have that effect on people. Emma bounced a little and asked, "Can you come home now?"

"As soon as Dr. Rick comes back and says so." Natalia tucked some hair behind Emma's ear.

"Well, he needs to hurry up!" Emma exclaimed, making both women chuckle.

Emma settled in to telling Natalia about her day as they waited for Rick. Olivia sat and listened quietly almost afraid to interrupt for fear that her daughter would stop talking. Her mind wandered as she listened to Emma talk. Eventually, she glanced up. She noticed that Natalia was looking at Emma, nodding, but her eyes were far away. She could see the loss and sadness, even fear, hidden in the darkened depths. Natalia was physically present, but not really there.

Olivia sat up in her chair intending to see if Emma wanted to go to the cafeteria for some dinner when Rick entered the room. In short order, he examined Natalia's wound and poked at her ribs, the bruising now a faint greenish yellow. Pleased with the diminished swelling and redness of the wound, he signed the paperwork to release her and Natalia followed suit, scribbling her name below his. Olivia noticed how Natalia grimaced under Rick's examination, but she knew how anxious the brunette was to get home and didn't want to delay it. Besides, the whole family would be around to help Natalia as she recovered so there was no reason to stay in the hospital.

Olivia smiled and turned to Emma and Natalia sitting on the bed. "I don't know about you two, but I'm so sick of hospitals! Come on, let's get out of here."

There wasn't much creepier than a morgue after dark. That's why Anna hustled down the stairs to the basement as fast as possible, careful not to spill the two large cups of coffee in her hand that she had picked up in the cafeteria. She bumped the door to the morgue open with her hip and raised her hands in the air as Eleni looked up.

"I come bearing gifts!" she declared.

Eleni chuckled. "Hey, I'm the Greek here. I'm supposed to say that!"

Standing up straight, Eleni smiled wearily and slipped off her gloves and protective glasses with practiced ease, setting them aside. She walked around the metal table and met Anna on the other side, taking the proffered coffee in her hand. She took a long sip and sighed. "Thank you for this. It'll make this night go faster."

"No problem. So," Anna tilted her head and queried, "What have you found out?"

Eleni took another swallow of her coffee and began talking as she walked over to the cold storage units along the wall, "The gunshot was obviously what killed him. No surprise there. However, there were numerous defensive wounds, old and new, all over his body - forearms, shoulders, face."

With a jerk, Eleni pulled the rack out of the wall that held Michael Howard's body.

Anna looked down at the body on the rack, a neat incision line extending from the base of the neck to the bellybutton and across the base of the ribs. Eleni came up next to her, snapping on a new pair of gloves as she moved, and reached down to lift the dead man's hand.

"See, here." Eleni pointed out the marks of old lacerations, and alongside those, new ones. Eleni placed the hand back down and pointed to other marks on the man's shoulder and face. "There are more fresh lacerations here, the chest, and stomach."

"Can you tell what made them?" Anna asked and stepped back as Eleni re-covered the body then pushed the rack back into the wall, closing the door to seal it shut.

Nodding, Eleni pulled off the gloves again and sat down on a stool near her. "The jagged edges and shallow depth would lead me to think they're scratches caused by fingernails. That's not all though. There are other injuries."

"Really?" Anna asked.

"Bruises on the ribs," Eleni answered and sipped her coffee.

"He was kicked then."

"The mark wouldn't indicate a shoe. That would leave a more defined, much smaller mark. It's too long and across the back, instead of on the side, which is where kicks usually happen," Eleni clarified. She paused before adding her last bit of information, "And, it looks like he was engaged in sexual activity when he was killed."

Anna swallowed. "I don't think I want to know how you know that and I definitely don't want to see it."

Eleni laughed for the first time that day. "The engorged blood was still prominent in the organ when he died so that's where it stayed."

"Ew! See, I really didn't need to know," the detective joked causing both to chuckle. Anna processed the information and then had an idea. "Hey, the rape kit that was done on Kathryn Howard, did you ever get it from the hospital?"

Eleni shook her head, the dark curls bouncing around her face. "Nope, not yet. Somehow there's always a delay or interruption, but I can't finish my report without it."

"Let me make some calls. If I can get it over here tonight, could you get the DNA results ASAP?" Anna thought out loud, already knowing who she'd call.

A mischievous smile came over Eleni's face. "Of course."

"Wonderful!" Anna pulled out her phone and sent a text to Mallet, asking him to be ready on her word to collect the rape kit results and take them down to Eleni. "I'm going to have Mallet deliver them here as soon as we get the word."

"I'll get on it as soon as it arrives." Eleni took a long swallow of her coffee and sighed in pleasure.

Anna nodded. "Good. Jeffrey O'Neill is pushing hard to bring this case to trial and Doris's firm is doing the defense. Both of them need this evidence, but only one needs a fast turnaround. And it's not Jeffrey."

"I'm your girl then!" Eleni smiled happily; glad to be moving forward with this case again. Besides, she was ready to get that body out of her freezer! Death didn't wait for anyone, and her small set of body racks were nearing the full-capacity limit.

Thinking about the station and work made Anna remember that at one time Eleni and Frank had been very much in love. It was hard to believe, but it was true. She had seen them talking a few times in recent months and wondered if there was some renewed interest going on, but events of the last several weeks probably hadn't done much for rekindling a romance.

With everything that had been going on with her boss, Anna felt sad for him. Frank had lost a brother in an accident, he had fallen for Natalia only to discover later that she was in love with Olivia, his youngest daughter was being raised by Natalia and Olivia, and his eldest daughter was dead at his own hands. The years had not been kind to Frank, especially the last few years. The only silver lining for her boss seemed to be Francesca and Eleni.

When she looked up from her coffee cup to see Eleni yawning, Anna realized that the horrible turn of events had taken its toll on the ME too. Looking over at her friend, she smiled with affection. "I haven't much of a chance to ask until now, but...how are you doing?"

Eleni closed her eyes tight and tapped a finger against the side of the coffee cup in her hand. "I'm doing okay. I'm better when I'm working. At least this way I know I'm doing something worthwhile. It's better than sitting around doing nothing."

"Speaking of which, how's Frank?" Anna wasn't trying to sound condescending, but the chief had been out of commission for a couple of weeks to recover from what had happened at the lighthouse. It worried Anna though because he rarely came out of his small apartment. He was scheduled to come back to work next week, but Anna couldn't help but wonder if he was ready.

Eleni rubbed at her tired eyes. "As good as can be expected. He doesn't talk much, even to me. Most of the time he stares off into space and drinks too much beer." She sighed and looked at her friend sadly before continuing, "I was trying to hold off on the service for Marina until Frank was more together, but..."

"There's never a good time to bury your child," Anna commented quietly.

Eleni looked down quickly, nodding to herself. A tear fell and she quickly fought down the urge to release the pain. She had been trying so hard to be strong for everyone, especially for Frank. Every day though it got harder and harder. At least Marina had wished to be cremated. Eleni was thankful for that. She didn't think she could handle the thought of Marina's body in a freezer less than twenty feet away. She kept busy with work. While it was

horrible that it had happened, she was almost grateful for Michael Howard being an abusive bastard. At least she didn't have to be reminded of her catastrophic failure as a parent. If she had only been more persistent in getting Frank to hear her out on what she knew of Marina's illegal activities, maybe this would have never happened. Frank blamed himself, but no one blamed themselves more than she did.

Anna stood and reached over to squeeze Eleni's shoulder, but when the other woman began to cry in earnest, Anna pulled her into a hug. When Eleni pulled away and looked up, Anna rubbed a hand kindly over her back. "If there's any way I can help, let me know. Ever since I've got to Springfield, I wanted to give Frank a swift kick in the ass." Anna was pleased when her effort to break the sad mood caused her friend to laugh.

"Most people do at one time or another," Eleni commented, then murmured jokingly, "I know I have more times than I can count."

When Anna left and stepped out into the cold night air, she pulled her coat around her tighter before pulling out her phone. She sent a text to Doris seeing if she could frighten some underlings into releasing the rape kit results. Certainly, it would help Anna that she knew someone who knew the governor. She followed up her text to Doris with a call back to the hospital where she asked for Lillian Cooper. If there was anyone she could trust at the hospital in this matter, it was Lillian.

"Hey, it's Anna...um, Detective Li," she corrected. It was always hard in this close-knit community to forget to follow protocol. No wonder so many lines got blurred!

The older woman greeted her pleasantly, "Oh, yes, dear. How can I help you?"

"I'd like to ask a big favor." Anna smiled and crossed the street to her car.

"Anything," Lillian quickly responded.

"I've put in some calls to have the rape kit in the Howard case released for Lt. Andros to test. Mallet will be coming by to get them and hand-deliver them to Eleni. Could you ensure that he gets them?" Anna slipped into her car and wasted no time starting it, quickly flipping on the heat.

"Don't worry, Detective. I'll take care of it," Lillian assured her and Anna knew she meant it.

Natalia hid the discomfort of the ride out to the farmhouse. The last thing she wanted was to take a pain killer that would numb the emotions she felt at finally coming home. At worst, she feared going back to the hospital, so when Olivia hit a dip on the long gravel driveway, she gritted her teeth against the pain. She knew it would take time for the pain to ease in her broken ribs, but that time couldn't come soon enough.

Bright lights lit up the farmhouse as they drew closer. When Olivia parked behind Ava's car, Emma didn't hesitate in jumping out of the backseat and racing to the door.

Natalia swung her door open and before she could get a foot on the ground, Olivia was there taking her arm and helping her to her feet.

"Here, let me help you," Olivia whispered.

Natalia huffed at the exertion and the comment. "Thank you, but I can do it. I need to do it."

"There will be time for that. I'd hate for you to wear yourself out before you ever get in the door." Olivia pulled the small suitcase out of the backseat and guided Natalia forward with her free hand resting on the younger woman's waist. She leaned down and spoke quietly, "Besides, there's a toddler in there that's very eager to play with her Mama."

Natalia couldn't help the smile that came to her face at the mention of Francesca. Even though she hadn't been in Marina's captivity for that long, she felt like it had been a hundred lifetimes. She had missed her family and her home so much!

Slowly and carefully, they climbed the steps to the porch. Olivia kept a guiding hand on Natalia's back as she opened the front door to their home.

"Surprise!" Ava, Leyla, and Emma yelled as they jumped from the shadows. Natalia yelped at the noise and barely held back the wince of pain that coursed down her arm and across her chest.

"Didn't I tell you all not to do that?" Olivia chided the girls as she helped her partner remove her coat.

Leyla stepped forward with Francesca wiggling in her arms. The toddler reached out desperately for her mother. "Sorry. We're all just so happy you're home, sis."

Her pain was instantly forgotten as she put her hands under her daughter's arms. "It's okay. Come here, my little Sweet Pea."

As soon as Natalia had her daughter's weight fully in her arms, she hissed at the pain, unable to suppress it. Olivia immediately reached past her and took Francesca. "Whoa! Rick said no lifting. Maybe we should take it slow."

"I'm fine," Natalia nearly growled. "I want to hold her."

Olivia quickly scrambled for a solution. "Um, okay, let's go to the couch. Ava, would you get the medicine for Natalia out of my purse?"

"No medicine; but couch...yes," Natalia clarified and walked away heading for the living room.

Olivia shrugged at the two women. "You heard her." Francesca wiggled as her mother held on tight. Finally, the fidgety toddler tugged at a strand of hair. "Ow! What was that for?"

Francesca pointed a stubby finger in the direction of the living room. "Mama...down."

"Okay, okay." She put her daughter down on increasingly steady legs and smiled as the little girl toddled off to the living room. "And that's why they're called 'toddlers'."

The three women followed the youngest member of the Spencer-Rivera clan into the living room. Emma had settled in to play a game on her Nintendo DS, a gift that Leyla had gotten for her while in Chicago, as Natalia braced her side with a pillow and sighed at the relief it brought. Francesca struggled a little but finally pulled herself up on the couch after Olivia gave her a small push on the bottom and sat down by her mother. Natalia wrapped her free arm around the small girl and hugged her close, kissing her curly head of hair. the fresh clean scent of her calming Natalia's frayed nerves and tired body.

Natalia looked up at Ava and Leyla. Ava scratched at the back of her neck, a nervous gesture she apparently picked up from Olivia, while Leyla shoved her hands in her jeans pockets and looked down. "It looks like you two have been busy."

Across the room, near the fireplace but not too close, was a brand new twin bed with a side table. Natalia could tell it was simple but not cheap. The bedspread was a tasteful neutral beige with hints of purple paisley swirls in various sizes throughout it. It could suit virtually any décor, and her gaze lingered on the feeling of familiarity she couldn't quite place. A

pitcher of filtered water and a clean glass sat on the table along with a slender vase of gerbera daisies.

Ava spoke first. "We, um, thought that the less you had to exert yourself, the faster you'd recover."

Leyla added, "I found the bedspread in your old bedroom. It was tucked away high on a shelf. When Ava called and let me know what happened, I asked Mom if I could bring it home for you. At first she said no until I told her why. She then said I could take it as long as Dad didn't see me leaving with it." She paused a moment, debating on telling her sister the last part. Finally, she said, "Mom told me she was going to Mass the next morning, and she'd say a prayer for you."

Natalia sniffled, remembering why the bedspread was so familiar. "That was the bedspread to my first big girl bed - a white canopy bed." She looked over at Olivia, who had sat down on the couch next to Francesca. "Thank you."

"While I'd love to take credit for anything that makes you smile like that, it was their idea," she said and gestured to the two older girls.

"Hey, I helped!" Emma piped up.

"Oh, look! It speaks!" Ava poked fun at Emma.

Leyla laughed when Emma stuck her tongue out at her older sister, but came to her niece's defense. "Actually, Emma did help. She picked the flowers out and read the directions for putting the bed together."

"Thank you, Aunt Leyla. By the way," Emma looked at her mom, "the cattle prod I had to use to keep these two from killing each other is in the hall closet."

As both older girls gasped at Emma in disbelief, Natalia smiled at her family. "I've missed you guys!"

"Back at ya." Ava smiled.

"Okay, now that all that mushiness is out of the way, and you all know I don't do mushy, let's get ready for bed. Emma, could you take Francesca upstairs and get her changed?" Olivia stood up.

Natalia heard Emma sigh and looked over in time to see her roll her eyes at her mother. "Actually, I'd like to spend a little more time with Francesca. Why don't you go get ready, Olivia, and come back for her when you're finished?"

"Are you sure?" Olivia questioned and looked at the toddler quietly playing with her toes as if they were the most fascinating thing in the world.

Natalia smiled. "She's fine. I'm fine. Go!"

Olivia nodded at her partner in agreement, thinking a few minutes wouldn't hurt anything. "Okay, but holler if you need anything."

"I will," Natalia assured her.

Everyone scattered to their rooms and bathrooms to get ready for bed, even Ava was rooming with Emma so she could be close by to help. Natalia yawned and looked down at the little girl curled up next to her. "It's just you and me, little bit." She pushed a lock of curly hair out of her daughter's face and whispered, "I swear you've grown like a weed since I've been in the hospital."

Francesca stopped from obsessing over her toes to look up at her mother. She used Natalia's shirt to pull herself up to a standing position next to Natalia, who watched her little girl as bright, playful brown eyes met their tired counterpart. "You're up to something, aren't you?" Natalia wondered, warily.

The toddler suddenly put her tiny hands on each side of Natalia's face and smiled mischievously, little dimples showing on her pudgy cheeks. "Mama?"

"Yes, my Sweet Pea." Natalia rested her head back on the couch, wondering at the intense love she felt for her child. The emotions never failed to overwhelm her, and all she wanted was to hold her little girl close.

Bracing herself against Natalia's face, Francesca suddenly leaned over and gave her mom a loud, smacking kiss before breaking out into giggles. Natalia joined her and Francesca was delighted at pleasing her mom. She threw her little arms around her mom's neck, and Natalia wrapped her in a tight hug. All was good until Francesca dropped in Natalia's arms, making all of her weight put pressure on Natalia's upper body.

"Auuggghhh!" Natalia growled in pain and tried to disentangle herself from her daughter's grasp. "Stop, Francesca! Let go! Get off of me!"

The little girl dropped away from her mother and scrambled back into the corner of the couch. Tears fell from Natalia's eyes at the pain, but as she looked up to see the scared and hurt look in Francesca's innocent brown eyes, her full bottom lip quivering, Natalia began to sob. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry."

She reached a hand out to Francesca, but the little girl cringed away. "No, baby. It's okay. Don't be afraid."

"Mama, mad," Francesca pouted and sniffled.

"No, Mama's not mad. It just hurt a little when you did that," Natalia said, trying to console her daughter.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Natalia had been so involved in the moment that she didn't hear Olivia come out of the bedroom. She looked up to see her partner looking down at them with a worried frown.

Natalia quickly brushed her tears away. "Everything's fine."

Descending the stairs, she took in the scene. It didn't escape Olivia's attention that Natalia was gripping her side, and Francesca was hobbling off the couch. When Olivia reached the bottom of the stairs, the little girl waddled over as fast as she could on her short legs. Olivia bent down and picked her up.

"Mama hurt," Francesca whispered and looked at her sadly before dropping her head to Olivia's shoulder.

She pulled her daughter close and kissed her head before looking over at Natalia. "Are you?"

Natalia was so tired. She just wanted to go to sleep. Sighing, she rubbed at her red eyes and glanced up to make eye contact with Olivia. "I was, but it passed. I'm fine now. You remember what it was like for you. How bad you wanted to hold Emma?"

Olivia walked over to the couch and sat down with Francesca in her arms. "I remember. I also remember a certain brunette giving me grief about not resting and allowing myself to get well so I could be here for Emma...and her."

Natalia let her head fall back on the couch and blew a frustrated breath out.

Olivia tilted her head as she regarded her partner. Finally, she came to a conclusion and spoke, "Let me get Francesca settled in Leyla's room, and I'll go get a blanket and pillow so I can sleep on the couch."

Natalia shook her dark head and squeezed her eyes tight to keep tears from falling. "That's not necessary, Olivia."

She reached out her free hand to cup Natalia's cheek. Her thumb caressed the dampness away, and she was relieved to see Natalia relax into her touch. "Yes, it is. Now, stop being so difficult, lady, and let me play doctor." Olivia wiggled her eyebrows for effect making Natalia chuckle.

Act II

Doris paced the length of her office, her arms crossed as she listened to the woman and her daughter answer Mel's questions. Beth sat in a chair behind the large mahogany desk making notes.

Mel leaned forward from her spot propped up on the edge of the desk in an effort to mimic the intimidating body language the prosecution would use in the courtroom. "So, Mrs. Howard, in your statement to Detective Li, you stated that you and your daughter fled Michigan early this past fall while your husband was at work, and you've been in Springfield since..." Mel looked down at her notes then back up, "since September 17th. Is that correct?"

Kathryn nodded as she held tight to Dani's little hand. "Yes, that's correct."

Mel continued, "You claim that you had been abused by your husband since shortly after your daughter, Danica, was born."

"Yes," the mother stated with conviction.

"Yet, you never filed charges against him for abuse and then took his child across state lines without his permission," Mel accused and stood up so she was staring down at the younger woman.

The woman sat calmly with her hands in her lap, never breaking eye contact with Mel, and answered, "I couldn't file charges. I tried. Mike had poker buddies on the police force. They covered for him. Even when I tried to file charges, the paperwork was conveniently lost. My instinct was to protect my daughter at all costs. He was so enraged, so drunk. The things he said and threatened...I couldn't take a chance. Not with Dani."

Mel sat back down on the edge of the desk. "That's very touching, Mrs. Howard, but you still expect us to believe that you endured eight years of abuse at the hands of your husband but there's not a shred of proof that he actually did anything."

Doris crossed the room, listening to Mel's phony cross-examination, and poured a fresh cup of coffee. She turned around and watched the woman respond. She heard the slight quiver in Kathryn's voice and saw the way her eye's dropped as she finished her statement. She walked toward the others and set her cup down on the pad of the desk. "Don't."

The woman and her daughter looked up at Doris. Dani looked scared, but Doris noticed the wave of annoyance coming from Mrs. Howard. "Don't what?"

"Don't create doubt. I heard the uncertainty in your voice," Doris said as she made sure to make eye contact with Kathryn. When the other woman broke eye contact and looked down, Doris continued, "And liars can't make eye contact for long."

The woman's eyes jerked back up and she stood to go toe-to-toe with the crass lawyer. "What are you saying, Ms. Wolfe?"

Doris was pleased and she smiled to herself. "I'm saying, don't give yourself away. Don't give the prosecution and the jury any reason to believe that you are anything but sincere, including emotional outbursts. Now, I'm not here to question your sincerity or your honesty. That's not any of our jobs. We are here to defend you though and that means giving you the best defence possible, including pointing out problems."

When the mother slumped back down into her chair, Mel picked up where Doris left off. "Mrs. Howard, this is how the prosecution will treat you. Both of you need to be ready for this and practice staying calm when they try to agitate you." Mel looked at her colleagues. "Okay, let's continue."

Doris felt her phone buzz in her pants pocket and pulled it out. She looked at the group and raised a finger. "Excuse me, this is important."

Doris closed the dividing door that separated her office from their conference room. "Hey, Anna! What's up?" Try as she might, Doris still got a lazy flip in her stomach every time she heard Anna's voice.

"Good morning to you! I thought you'd like to know what I heard from Eleni this morning." Anna slipped on her leather coat and double-checked that she had her service weapon, badge, and keys before leaving for the station.

"Absolutely! Tell me something good." Doris crossed the room to a window that looked out over a small garden behind the building. The once green flowers had withered and died. In their place was a dense pile of leaves from the trees that surrounded the building.

Anna walked briskly to her car, the clear sky allowing the temperature to drop into the teens. "Well, I wouldn't call being raped, especially by your husband, good news, but that's what the rape kit indicates. There were also numerous defensive wounds on him, some old and some new."

Doris sighed and leaned her head against the window pane. "Well, that's not a surprise really. Unfortunately, most abuse victims don't leave at the first sign of abuse. We all figured that was the truth. At least it proves there was long-term abuse and gives the mother just cause for shooting him. God knows I'd do the same thing."

"Yeah," Anna murmured back. Something niggled at her thoughts and she hedged her bets when she continued, "You're not convinced though that you're getting the full story."

Doris smiled into the phone as her stomach did another flip. "You know me too well." The lengthy silence became tinged with something else and Doris cleared her throat. "So, um, I guess the ballistics on the gun will give us more information."

"Yeah, yeah! Um, Eleni said she'd get to work on that next." Anna jumped back into official detective mode when she heard the change in Doris's voice.

"You'll let me know when you learn something?" Doris stood up straight, feeling more in control.

"Of course, Mayor. Have a good day."

Doris sighed and closed her eyes when she realized that Anna hadn't waited for her to say goodbye. She missed the confident and charismatic detective, and she tried desperately not to remember how Anna's strength was balanced so nicely with her tender femininity. Her stomach flipped again. She growled a little at her own weakness. *"Stop it, Wolfe! That's over and done with, and you have someone else now."* She thought of Blake and felt a flicker of guilt at even thinking of Anna as anything more than a friend. Those days were over. Both of them had new people in their lives, and they had moved on. She sighed as she straightened her jacket and headed back into the other room.

Everyone turned to look at her as she came back through the doors and closed them behind her. She walked over to the group purposefully. She looked at Dani nervously shifting next to her mother before addressing the group. "That was a call from Detective Li. The... examination from the hospital was definitive. There's now indisputable proof of the extent of your abuse."

"And that means?" Kathryn asked.

"We continue prepping for the trial as usual, but this means that we'll probably have to bring Dani forward to testify since she's witnessed some of it," Doris said, looking the woman in the eyes. "If there's anything else we need to know, you need to tell us now so we can be fully prepared. I don't like surprises, but juries like them even less."

Kathryn shook her head. "No! Don't make her testify!" She stood up again and rubbed her hands together anxiously, her voice shaking as she talked, "She's just a kid. Hasn't she been through enough? He didn't hurt her so there's no need for that. The evidence is enough." The young mother was practically begging.

Mel jumped in. "But Dani's emotional appeal will remove all doubt that you had no choice."

Next to her, Dani had begun to cry softly, her head bowed. Her long hair covered her face but the sniffles were unmistakable.

Doris sighed. "I wish there was another way, Mrs. Howard."

"There is!" Kathryn said, anxiety and panic giving way to anger. She would do anything to protect her daughter, including keeping her out of any courtroom if she had to. "There is! Let them prosecute me. I did it! I killed him and it was worth it!" She stood to leave, and put

her hand on her daughter's shoulder, urging the reluctant girl to stand. "Come on, Dani. I'll have the officer drop you off at the children's home."

"No!" Kathryn heard her daughter speak, but it didn't register at first what she had said.

"What, baby?"

Dani swallowed and looked at her mom, determination etched in her innocent face. "No, we're not leaving yet, and you're not going to jail. I don't want to lose you too when all you were doing was protecting me." The young girl looked at the lawyers surrounding her, like a protective shield, and she felt stronger already. "I want to testify because...you weren't the only one he hurt, Mom."

The look on Dani's face told Kathryn all she needed to know. She shook her head. "No... please, God, no."

"He never actually..." Dani paused and swallowed, embarrassment tinting her fair skin. "I think he was afraid he'd hurt me too much because I'm...small, but...he did...other things."

"Baby," Kathryn whispered. As Dani looked over and stared at her mother, Kathryn raced over to gather her daughter in her arms. The two huddled close, consoling each other.

Doris squeezed her eyes shut and turned away, brushing subtly at the tears falling down her face. Mel reached for a box of tissues, taking one, then offering the box to Kathryn and Dani.

Pulling herself together, Doris turned back around. She watched as the young mother brushed Dani's tears away. It wasn't common in defense cases that the accused was innocent, if not legally at least morally. As she watched the interaction between mother and daughter though, she knew without a doubt that was the case here. Years of abuse had taken their toll and a young mother with no other choice, frightened at what could happen to her daughter, did the only thing she could do.

Doris knelt down in front of Dani's chair, placing her hand on top the young girl's hand.

"Thank you, Dani, for telling us that. It was very brave."

Dani nodded. "If my mom hadn't done what she did, he would have hurt me worse. He always said that he couldn't wait until I was old enough."

Kathryn whimpered and kissed her daughter's head.

A flicker of anger swept through Doris. It was a damn good thing that Michael Howard was dead, because there were quite a few people in Springfield, herself included that would have loved to dish out some small-town justice on an abuser like him. Clenching her jaw, she nodded. "Well, he didn't get that chance, Dani. And thanks to your mom, he never will.

So, we'll see what we can do to keep her out of jail, okay?"

"Okay," Dani said, feeling more reassured.

Doris turned to look at her colleague. "Okay, Mel, let's go for another hour, covering some of this new information, and then we'll call it a day."

"Wait!" Beth spoke out behind them. Mel and Doris stepped aside to look back at their colleague, who had been silent the entire time. Beth's eyes were bloodshot from her own tears. "Following Dani's brave example and in the interest of full disclosure, I need to tell you all something."

The two other lawyers exchanged a look, but Mel nodded to the blonde to continue. Beth stood and walked around the desk. She had an urge to gather the young girl in her arms, but she had to get this out first.

"Not many people know this. In fact, only Phillip and my mother know about it, but when I was just a teen, my stepfather beat and raped me. He beat my mother as well." Beth continued, speaking quickly before she lost her nerve, "It made it hard to trust people, and I always wondered what I had done wrong to deserve it. I tried to forgive my stepfather. I said the words, and I thought I believed them. But there were still moments when I felt so angry at him and I wanted him dead so bad. I don't know how you feel about your father right now, but whatever it is, it's okay. You have a right to your feelings."

"Do you still think about it?" Dani asked quietly.

Beth nodded and reached her hand out to the girl, allowing her to take it if she wished. When the smaller hand nestled into her own, Beth answered her, "Not as much as I used to. This case though brought a lot of it back up. I don't think I ever really forgave him. Maybe I never will. But, I'm okay with that. It's not about him anyway. It's about me."

A relieved smile came over Dani's face and Beth turned back to her incredulous colleagues.

"I want you both to know that my heart is fully in this case, but it may be wise for me to remain in the background. I can handle any of the prep work though. I just know that with Jeffrey prosecuting he won't hold back anything. If he so much as gets an inkling that my personal experience could be tainting this case, he'll use it to cast doubt. We absolutely can't allow that to happen."

Doris nodded. "You're damn right about that!" She looked at Kathryn and Dani. "You know, on second thought, why don't you two take a restroom break? We can start again in a few minutes."

When the door closed behind the mother and daughter, Mel picked up where Doris left off.

"You really think that son of a bitch would have the balls to push for conviction."

Anger clouded Doris's face as she spoke, "We all know what he did to Olivia. Let's not make the mistake of assuming he has one shred of human decency."

"You'd think he'd get more mileage out of capturing Edmund and Hung Li," Beth groaned as she slipped back into the soft leather executive chair, the emotion of the last few minutes leaving her exhausted.

"I have no idea what his intentions are by going after Kathryn Howard, but it doesn't matter." Doris tapped her finger on the desk for emphasis. "The only thing I care about and the only thing that matters is keeping that little girl's mother out of jail."

Olivia awoke with a start. She put a hand to her chest to calm her racing heart as she sat up on the couch and tried to place where the noise had come from that scared her. Rubbing at her eyes and yawning, she saw Natalia's empty bed about the same time she heard another rattle and bang, followed by a muttered curse.

She jumped up from the couch, mumbling under her breath, "She better not be..."

Rounding the corner, she saw Natalia standing at the stove with a spatula in one hand and the other bracing against the countertop.

"Honey, what in the world are you doing?" Olivia questioned, shaking her head.

Natalia stood up straighter and looked at her partner, trying to hide the pulsing ache in her side. "Just fixing a little breakfast," she said forcing a smile. "What do you want, scrambled or over easy?"

Walking over to the brunette, Olivia brushed the back of her fingers over Natalia's flushed cheek. "What I want is for you to stop pushing yourself." She reached for the spatula and took it from her gently. "There's a house full of people here that can help. You don't have to do it all."

Natalia banged her hand down on the countertop, making Olivia jump. "I just want to be able to take care of my family, okay?" She dropped her head and rubbed at her pounding temples. She hadn't slept well the night before. Every position she tried to get in caused more waves of pain to radiate through her body. When she did become exhausted enough for her eyes to drift shut, she would awake with a jerk. She knew she needed to take some of the pain medication or at least the sleeping pill that Rick had prescribed, but she didn't want to come to rely on them. She wanted...no, needed, to be aware and awake. For nearly two weeks in the hospital and before that in her captivity, she had been given no choice or voice in the matter. Now that she did though, she didn't want to relinquish it.

Surprised by Natalia's behavior, Olivia wasn't quite sure how to react. Her partner was usually the quiet and indirect type. Even when they had blackmailed Doris, Natalia had thanked the woman for her time. *Who does that? Natalia, that's who.*

Taking a deep breath, she tilted her head down to capture Natalia's dark eyes. "Hey, what's happening?"

Still feeling agitated, Natalia lifted her head and blew out a frustrated breath. At some point, she had grabbed a dish towel and was twisting it punishingly. Realizing what she was doing, she balled it up and threw it on the counter and turned down the stove. "Oh, nothing really. I was just drugged up for weeks. I still barely know what day it is now. My ribs ache. My head is pounding. These damn stitches are itching like crazy! And I really need to pee, but I can't climb the stairs yet without help."

Olivia got it. After her own hospital ordeal, she completely understood, but it didn't stop her voice from rising right along with Natalia's so she could stop her partner's rant. "Then let me help!"

"That's the point though! I don't want help!" Natalia argued back. "I've always taken care of myself and my family."

Olivia tried to reason. "Then at least take something for the pain."

"That's the equivalent of me telling you to have a drink to take the edge off," Natalia said, looking at her lover sadly.

The blonde was taken aback for a moment, considering the meaning of what Natalia had told her. Rick had suspected that Marina may have drugged her to keep her calm and cooperative, and he had ordered a full drug panel. Only now though did Olivia realize that she didn't know the results of the test. If that had been the case, then the surreal nature of the drugs may have been a welcome respite for Natalia from the reality of the situation.

Olivia started to speak when Emma came into the kitchen and interrupted them, "What's all the noise for? Don't you two realize it's the weekend?" Emma shuffled over to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of orange juice. Before the girl had a chance to ask, Natalia had found and handed her a glass. "Thanks." Emma took the glass and flopped down into one of the kitchen chairs.

"Sorry about the noise, baby," Natalia apologized.

"No problem. Besides, the earlier I get up, the earlier Ava and I can leave to go shopping!" The girl suddenly perked up and smiled happily.

Olivia, who had started to make coffee, turned her head to look at Natalia, raising an eyebrow in suspicion. "Does Ava realize how dangerous that is?"

"Nope!" Emma kicked her feet happily back and forth under the table, looking every bit the incorrigible child Natalia had first met years ago.

Smiling back at her partner, Natalia quipped, "Yep, she's definitely yours, Olivia. There was no baby switching going on there."

"Speaking of babies, I can finish those eggs if you want to go get Francesca and Leyla up." Olivia reached again for the spatula.

This time Natalia willingly gave it over. "See? If you just ask nicely..." Natalia left the comment hanging, winking as she passed off the utensil and left the room.

Five minutes later, Olivia was plating up the scrambled eggs and sprinkling a moderate portion of cheddar cheese on top when Leyla came into the kitchen carrying Francesca, Natalia trailing close behind them. Emma raced up the stairs to get Ava so they could hurry up and leave.

After breakfast, Olivia distracted Natalia from washing dishes by having her peel potatoes for Sweet Pea's mashed potatoes. Aside from macaroni and cheese, it was the only food the picky toddler would eat now. There were good and bad things about kids growing up, like being out of diapers and being able to get their own juice. When she saw Emma bound down the steps in a sweater that barely covered her stomach, she was reminded of the bad. She made a mental note to ask Ava to specifically buy everything a size or two bigger than what Emma thinks she can wear.

On the way out the door, Ava mentioned taking Emma to a movie as long as her little sister didn't clean out her wallet. Emma squealed, "Oh my God, we have to see Footloose!"

Ava's eyes bugged out, and she looked to her mom and Natalia with pleading eyes. As Emma dragged her older sister out the door, she mouthed to them, "Help me!"

Both chuckled as the door closed behind the siblings. Olivia looked over her shoulder at Natalia sitting quietly peeling the potatoes, a small smile showing ever so slightly. "There was a time when Emma would have given her right arm for the Chipmunks movie. I don't want her to grow up."

"Sorry, my dear, you don't have a choice in the matter," Natalia joked.

"Nope, not buying it! I'm Olivia Spencer. I can do anything!" She stomped her foot playfully, enjoying the change in their moods from earlier. She wanted to talk to Natalia more about what she had said earlier, but she didn't want to ruin the moment.

She didn't need to worry. When Leyla came into the room with Francesca in a nice dress and the baby bag in her hand, it felt like the air had been sucked from the room. Natalia's smile dropped instantly and she glared first at her sister then at Olivia.

"Why is Sweet Pea all dressed up?" Natalia asked as calmly as possible and the little girl waddled over to her and patted her on the leg.

Leyla stood shell-shocked and looked between her sister and Olivia. "Um, I'm...taking her to the daycare?" The younger brunette pleaded with Olivia for backup.

"I kind of forgot to tell her," Olivia admitted sheepishly.

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," the anger in Natalia's voice was contained but barely, and both Leyla and Olivia were sure it was for Francesca's benefit.

Olivia took a deep breath and decided to jump in head first. "I thought it would be for the best while you're recovering if Francesca was out from under foot. That way you could relax." She shrugged as she finished talking. Her intentions had been good, but the flash of anger in Natalia's dark eyes told her that she had been wrong.

"Thanks for asking me first. Did it ever occur to either of you that maybe I'd want to spend some time with my family? My first full day back and everyone can't wait to leave the house." As soon as the words were out, Natalia mentally kicked herself. She sounded ungrateful and needy, and she hated it.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I was just trying to keep you from getting too stressed." Olivia looked from her partner to Leyla. "She can stay. It's okay." She'd just stay close as well to help if needed.

Natalia spoke up, sounding defeated, "No...no. You're probably right." She paused and looked at both of them. "But just for a little while. I'm not an invalid."

"You're sure?" Leyla asked cautiously.

When Natalia nodded, Olivia breathed out a sigh of relief and another thought came to her. Something that she hoped would make her frustrated partner feel better. "I tell you what. I'll make it up to you."

"Oh, really?" Natalia smirked at her teasingly.

"Um, do I need to remove innocent eyes and ears from this conversation?" Leyla joked.

Natalia shook her head. "Unfortunately, no. That's off limits for a couple more weeks." She sighed at the thought. "So, what is it you have planned, dear wife of mine?"

"How about...mani/pedis?"

Natalia's eyes danced in delight. Ever since their spa trip, she had loved going to get an occasional manicure. Until being with Olivia, she had never allowed herself such luxuries, but she was fairly well addicted to them now. "Really?"

The blonde nodded. "I called that spa over on Jackson Avenue, the really nice one, and asked for someone to come out today." She grimaced a little realizing that she had done something else without asking Natalia. "I hope you don't mind."

"For a mani/pedi...never." A weary but happy smile graced Natalia's face. "Okay, I'll forgive you this time. Next time ask though before assuming anything, okay?"

Olivia mock saluted. "Yes, ma'am!"

The small café was quiet as the morning rush receded. Servers in crisp white shirts and black aprons hustled to clear empty tables and reset for the smaller, but demanding, brunch crowd made up of the wealthy and bored, mixed with a few senior citizens looking for a good cup of coffee.

Ava smoothed out the new salmon-colored blouse she'd bought the other day while shopping with Emma. Taking a slow, deep breath, she glanced around quickly. A hostess, her ponytail swinging cheerily on the back of her head, greeted her immediately.

Ava smiled and cut off the girl's inquiry, "I see who I'm looking for. Thank you."

Jeffrey looked up from his phone when he sensed someone approaching. He stood smiling and gave Ava a kiss on the cheek. "Good morning, Ava. I'm glad you could meet me."

Taking the seat across from her father, Ava shifted a little uneasily. "I was surprised to hear from you. The last I heard, you were trailing Edmund and Anna's dad. What's up with that?" She was curious why he wasn't still on his grand adventure chasing bad guys.

Jeffrey took a deep breath and rubbed a hand along his shaven chin. "Let's just say that's still a work in progress. I have a lot of contacts all over the world, so...hopefully, that'll be resolved soon."

Ava shook her head and looked down. "Sorry, it just seems odd that you'd give up when Edmund's such a threat to Collin and Reva; that you'd want to protect them."

He looked across the table at Ava for a long moment pondering what to say. He tried unsuccessfully to hide his annoyance. "Don't worry about that. It's taken care of. Besides, Reva has someone else to protect her now. She made her choice."

"So did you," Ava retorted. She was a bit surprised that she was enjoying watching him squirm.

He nodded and reached for his half empty coffee cup. "True. So, how's Natalia doing?"

Ava sighed at the sudden shift in conversation, but let it go. "She's getting settled in back at the farmhouse. Mom won't let her do anything, and I think it's driving Natalia crazy. She can't stand to be waited on."

Jeffrey chuckled a little, able to see the domestic scene in his head. "That's Olivia though. So, physically, Natalia's improving?"

She nodded as she took a sip of her own coffee that the waitress had brought. "Yep! They saw Rick yesterday and got her stitches removed. Her endurance is getting better and her ribs don't hurt as much as before."

"Good...good. Will she be able to get back to work soon?" He asked.

Ava was getting annoyed at the small talk. He didn't ask her to breakfast to find out about Natalia's recovery, and she knew it. She shook her head and glared at him. "What's with the questions? You asked me here for a reason, and I seriously doubt it had anything to do with concern over Natalia's well-being."

"Damn, you're more like your mother every day," Jeffrey commented with a snort and shook his head on seeing Ava's delighted grin. Pressing on, he continued, "You're right I didn't get you here for that. It'll be on the news later, and I wanted you to hear it first."

Ava closed her eyes and grimaced. "Oh God, what did you do now?"

"Oh, funny. You have Olivia's sarcasm, too!" He leaned forward again, smiling at her like he had a big secret to tell. "Actually, it's good news for your old man. I've been reinstated by the governor as district attorney."

Ava was taken back. "Oh, wow...really?"

He nodded at her goofy smile. "Yeah, really. And guess what my first case will be?" He noticed her shaking her head, indicating she didn't have any idea. He continued on, "The Howard murder case." She shrugged having no idea what case he was talking about. With keeping things running at the Beacon for her mom and helping out around the farmhouse, she hadn't taken the time to keep up with the news.

Excited at the prospect of getting back into his old role, he told her more about it. "You know...the case about the woman who shot her abusive husband."

Ava recalled the story that she'd read in the paper and her stomach sank as some of the details she'd overheard came back to her. "She was abused for years," she said incredulously. Angrily, her voice then sank to a hiss, "and raped! Why in the world would you want to prosecute a case like that?"

Jeffrey was surprised to see his daughter react as she had and he paused for a moment. "But, baby, it'll make my career! I win this and I could be the next mayor of Springfield. You know...tough on crime and all that jazz. I thought you'd be happy that I was planning on sticking around so we could spend some time together."

Closing her eyes, Ava fought to hide her tears of disappointment. She tried to keep her voice low as she spoke, but with every word she said, her voice rose, "I'm not so sure you're someone I want to know anymore. How can a man, who at one time raped a young girl, sit across the table from the product of that rape, and tell her that he's going to prosecute a woman for defending herself from her abusive, rapist husband just for political gain? It's bullshit and you're sickening!"

Seeing the patrons turning to stare, Jeffrey adjusted his tie to hide his embarrassment. He spoke low and put on a fake smile for those looking, but his voice held a warning tone. "Ava..."

Standing quickly, angered by her father's plans for political gain, Ava balled up her napkin and threw it down on the table. "Go to hell...Daddy."

Though she could hear him calling her name, she refused to turn back as she headed out of the café, not wanting to give him the chance to try to talk to her further. When she had learned of her mother's rape and Jeffrey's role in that, she had been angry and disgusted. But she had tried to push those feelings down to try to rationalize that for the sake of her mother. Sighing, she realized that he didn't really know her if he thought she would be happy with his new direction and there was nothing between them left to salvage.

A fast rat-tat-tat on the glass made Leyla look up from the book she was reading. The small group of toddlers huddled around her followed her eyes as well. One little girl jumped up from the group and ran for the door.

After swinging it open, the little girl stood back shyly, her red pigtails bouncing as she moved. She gave him a little wave. "Hi, Mr. Jon." The way she said his name made it obvious she had a small crush on him.

Since Sarah had spent some time with the kids when he was working, he knew a few of them by name. He smiled down at her. "Hi, Clara. How's your bunny doing?" Clara's bunny, Patches, had been sick the last time he was there, and she wouldn't stop talking about him.

"He had babies." She giggled and so did a couple of other kids.

"Oh, really! I guess 'he' wasn't a 'he' after all." Jonathan smiled again and looked over at Leyla. "Do you mind if I borrow Ms. Leyla for a moment?"

The little girl shrugged in an effort to hide her jealousy. "I guess."

As Leyla stood and walked over to Jonathan, a couple of the kids started to singsong, "Ms. Leyla's got a boyfriend! Ms. Leyla's got a boyfriend!"

Shaking her head, she took the proffered coffee he carried in his hand. "Mmmm, thank you! This is just what I needed."

"It takes a lot to keep up with these kids!" He agreed and looked around the room. In the back left corner, one of the new employees Leyla had hired was working with a group of kids on their alphabet, and along the right wall, another group of kids were on computers playing a learning game. Finally, up near the door in a small area blocked off by colorful toy

storage containers were the infants. He saw Francesca playing with a set of blocks, her curly dark locks of hair falling in her face.

She raised the cup to take a sip of her coffee. "Yes, but it'll get better next week. I have two new workers starting. They'd be here now, but they needed to go through a CPR refresher training first. And you, what are you doing here in the middle of the afternoon?"

He shrugged a little and put on a charming smile. "Maybe I just wanted to see you."

Leyla played over the last week since she'd come back from Chicago. Jonathan had been hanging around the daycare, showing up at odd times, more than he was actually working. "Uh huh, you've been doing that a lot lately."

Jonathan stuffed his hands into his jean pockets and rocked back on his heels. He confessed, "Business has been slow, but that's not uncommon in the winter. Besides, with the economy struggling, people aren't doing as many renovations and construction projects as before, so...we do some odd jobs here and there, but nothing really sustained. It'll turn around though."

"But in the meantime..." Leyla left the thought unfinished. They both knew what it meant.

"Lots of leftovers?" he joked.

Any time she heard of people struggling with finding work or making ends meet, Leyla looked around and counted herself among the blessed. While it was true she was working the longest hours in her life in one of the most tiring, but rewarding, professions out there, she was incredibly grateful to have it. Being in a position to offer employment to people who really needed it was a great bonus too. Suddenly, a great idea came to mind. It was so great she nearly jumped with happiness. She would have to pull her ideas together first, make sure all the funds were there and such, then present it to Jonathan when her plan was more solid. Looking around the cramped space her daycare was quickly outgrowing, she smiled. Yes, it was time for a change.

Turning back to look at Jonathan, she smiled up at him. "So, handsome, I need to get my niece up to see her mom. Olivia should be finishing a meeting in a few minutes, and she has to get her baby fix. Would you mind accompanying me?"

Jonathan puffed his chest out and pretended to dust off his t-shirt. "I'd be honored, Miss Rivera."

Leyla switched Francesca from her right to her left hip as she walked down the hall on her way back to the daycare. Jonathan had decided to hang around for a few more minutes and talk to Olivia, but not before he asked Leyla to the movies for Friday night. She accepted but in her mind she was already thinking of how to get him to stay in for the night. If work was that slim, she knew he didn't have the money to spend on a movie.

She was looking down trying to adjust her niece's dress as she rounded the corner and ran into Ava. The taller woman jumped back and nearly lost her footing.

"Damn it! Watch where you're going!" Ava growled. Having just come from seeing her father, she was low on patience, and her tenuous relationship with the other woman was the last thing she wanted to deal with.

"It was an accident! What's your problem?" Leyla responded defensively. Noticing the redness and puffiness around Ava's eyes, and the streaked makeup, she realized that the other woman was furious, and it had nothing to do with her.

Frustrated and angry, Ava threw a hand up in the air as she tried to get her sense of dignity back from nearly falling down. "Nothing! Just stay out of my way, okay?"

Leyla looked her over condescendingly and scoffed. "Fine by me, but something is wrong."

Ava didn't want to upset her little sister, so it took every ounce of control she had not to yell at the younger woman. "Just stay out of my goddamn business, okay?"

Raising her free hand, Leyla felt it would be wise to back off. "Okay. Whatever you say." Without waiting for a reply, she turned to head to the flight of stairs up to Olivia's office with Francesca and Jonathan. "Good." Ava adjusted her coat and hurried down the hall. The last thing she wanted was to fillet her parentage open for Leyla Rivera to revel in with glee. Not that Ava had any proof that was what Leyla would do, but their relationship had been at turns contentious and amiable. She just didn't know where she stood right now with the other woman and she wasn't in the mood to let her guard down, just to run the risk of getting kicked.

Reaching the elevator, Ava punched the button for the penthouse. For just a little while, she needed a refuge from the world.

Practically bouncing up the walkway to the farmhouse, Olivia adjusted the bag loaded with Buzz burgers and other goodies from Company. She was delighted that life was getting back to normal. Natalia was getting better, even had her stitches removed the other day. Jonathan and Leyla were so cute and adorable together. Standing in her office watching them as Leyla held Francesca, she could almost see them with a child of their own. A silly smile crossed her face as she slipped her key in the door and opened it.

In an effort to be quiet, just in case Natalia was resting, Olivia eased inside and lightly closed the door. Slipping off her heeled boots, she padded softly over to the table to set the food down on the kitchen table. As she turned around, she saw a blur come at her and heard a familiar but frightening scream. Her world was flipped upside down as she was knocked to the floor. Above her, all she saw was Natalia with a crazed look in her eye and a fireplace poker held above her head.

Instinctively, Olivia raised one hand and scrambled backward as she screamed Natalia's name. The attack had surprised and scared her and she held her breath. Feeling her heart race as she closed her eyes and braced for impact, she waited as everything fell silent before she heard the metal clang to the floor.

Opening her eyes, she saw Natalia fall to her knees, her hands covering her mouth as she began to rock back and forth. A strangled cry erupted from Natalia, somewhere deep inside, and Olivia was crawling to her side.

She pulled her frantic partner close, wrapping as much of her body around her as possible, kissing her head and saying over and over again, "It's okay, sweetheart...it's okay. I've got you."

After a few minutes, Natalia's tears subsided and Olivia felt her going limp in her arms. She thought the brunette was asleep until a tired, muffled voice spoke up, "It's not okay."

Olivia pulled back to look down at her. "What?"

Pulling away from Olivia's embrace, Natalia struggled to get to her feet. Her entire body ached from the unexpected exertion from moments before. "I could have killed you, Olivia. That's not okay."

Olivia couldn't argue that point. She had dealt with some scary situations before in her life, but this was only the second one at Natalia's hand, and never since they'd fallen in love. She wasn't quite sure how to feel at the moment, but worried and cautious were at the top of the list. "What exactly happened here?"

Natalia wanted to slide out one of the kitchen chairs and sit down, but she was afraid she'd never get back up. She was bone tired. "I must have fallen asleep on the sofa. I heard a noise that woke me. Next thing I knew, you were on the floor screaming at me."

Understanding better what had happened, Olivia relaxed a little and reached out for her lover. "You've been through a horrible and traumatic experience. This is not a strange reaction." She shrugged, feeling for her hurting partner. "I should know."

Instinctively, Natalia knew she was right, but it didn't make her feel any less guilty. Even with knowing Marina was gone and other threats, like Edmund, had fled the area, it didn't relieve her anxiety. She felt so chaotic and out of control; like her mind couldn't stop racing and replaying everything. She closed her eyes and saw the darkness again, felt the cold brick walls and hard floor all over again.

Taking a shaky breath, she nodded her head and looked up at Olivia. "I know. I'm so sorry."

Olivia took the other woman in her arms. "It's all going to be okay. I promise."

Natalia knew she couldn't promise something like that, but she let her lover believe it. She groaned a little as a dull pain hit her. Olivia rubbed her back and pulled away. "Hey, why don't you sit back down and I'll bring you some tea?"

"Mmm, that sounds like heaven."

Olivia watched as Natalia headed back to the living room. Looking down, she saw the fireplace poker resting innocently on the floor. She bent over and picked it up, placing it on the table. *Thank goodness Gus had a nice strong heart!*

Natalia rolled her head to the side as Olivia came into the room holding a steaming mug of tea. She took it gratefully, but when Olivia reached out with her other hand, she looked at it strangely. Olivia turned her hand over and opened it revealing two white pills.

"It's just ibuprofen," Olivia offered.

"I don't care what it is," Natalia said, placing her mug on the coffee table and stood up. It was strange how when she felt the adrenaline of anger course through her she didn't feel as much pain. "It's not your decision to make. Last time I checked, this is still my body and I have the right to decide to take a pill or not."

Olivia ran her fingers through her hair. Her frustration with Natalia's short temper was becoming almost intolerable. She could barely do or suggest anything without Natalia becoming angry. "You know, you gave me a hard time after the transplant for being difficult, but you...YOU take the cake! Every time I try to do something nice or help out, you bite my head off! I know you've been through a terrible ordeal, but this attitude is getting really fucking old!"

A fresh wave of adrenaline pushed through Natalia as she stepped into Olivia's personal space. "Just who the hell do you think you are?" Then just as quickly, she took a step back and threw her hands up in the air. "Oh, wait... you're the great Olivia Spencer! The bitch on wheels who can say the most hurtful and hateful words, but when it's dished back, she screams foul." She stepped in closer again. "Oh no, it's okay for you to be angry and frustrated and even scared, but not me. Why? Why do I always have to be the good girl, the docile one, the quiet one? Maybe I'm not as nice or innocent that most people seem to think."

Natalia's chest heaved up and down as she drew in deep breaths. Looking at Olivia, she noticed that her heavy breathing matched her partners, her eyes dropping to settle on the rise and fall of her partner's breasts. She licked her lips, the urge to strip Olivia naked and suck those beautiful breasts into her mouth almost overwhelming. It occurred to her that any time they've fought with such intensity, it sparked such sexual desire that it nearly overwhelmed her. For a long time in the early period of their relationship, when they'd fought, she'd also experienced a desire for this woman that she couldn't quite put into words, or actions. The intensity of her feelings had confused and scared her then, but now that she knew what she was feeling, she revelled in that desire.

Olivia reeled from the words thrown at her, and against her will, her body reacted to the way Natalia looked at her as dark, fiery eyes caressed her body. She remembered these feelings well. It was the way Natalia made her feel when they first met and started trading blows. Even then their fights had a sexual energy to them, and Natalia was absolutely breathtaking when she got mad. Olivia took in a few deep, audible breaths as she fought to control her temper and her libido, realizing she didn't want to fight with her partner. Fighting was definitely not what she wanted to do with the beautiful brunette.

She stepped a little closer to Natalia, not touching but close enough to feel her heat. "I know better than anyone that you're not innocent or docile." The words drew a gasp from Natalia and she watched Olivia's mouth intently as she kept talking, "But you are good, and this... whatever this is, it's not you."

Leaning down, she placed a tender kiss to Natalia's lips, letting herself linger as her tongue flicked out to tease Natalia's full lips. Instinctively, Natalia moved into her and opened to her lover's kisses, but Olivia moved back, knowing that until they got the all-clear from Rick they couldn't do anything more.

"I love you...no matter what you do." Then Olivia sealed her promise with another kiss.

Doris closed the case file in front of her and blew out a tired breath. Eleni's autopsy report on Michael Howard was finally complete, but what she saw left her more confused than comforted. There was no doubt that the husband had beaten his wife and she had shot him. The ballistics clearly showed the bullet came from the same position and angle Kathryn was in. The problem though was explaining how he was hit from behind with a blunt object if Kathryn was down on the floor in front of him. The only other person in the house was Dani, which pointed a fairly guilty finger at the girl being involved in the murder of her own father. Doris would like to believe that self-defense and the sincerity of Dani's explanation of the events would be enough to keep the jury from finding Kathryn guilty of murder. If she was Jeffrey O'Neill though, she knew exactly how she'd play this hand - entrapment and coercion. The mother planned the homicide and coerced her daughter into being the bait to draw the husband out.

Doris leaned back in her chair, grumbling, "That rat bastard would do that, too!"

Her phone beeped and she picked it up to read the message. She smiled when she saw it was from Blake: *I'm finished meeting with the new writer outside Chicago. I'm heading home. Should be there in a few hours. How about dinner?*

Smiling mischievously, she texted back: *I have a better idea. Fireplace. Marshmallows. Chocolate syrup...and no, we're NOT making s'mores.*

She barked out a laugh at Blake's response: *Only if I can bring whipped cream.*

You're on, darlin'! She sent a message back and laughed just as a call came in.

She accepted the call and raised the phone to her ear. "Perfect timing, Spencer. How's the Mrs.?"

"How about we talk over a martini?" Olivia dodged the question with one of her own.

Doris could tell something was going on. Her friend's voice was guarded as if anyone could be listening in and she didn't want to be heard giving away state secrets. As any good friend does, Doris accepted the invitation, actually welcomed it, considering how the Howard case was lining up with a deck stacked against them. At first it had seemed like an open and shut self-defence case, but every day it got a little more complicated.

She took her time locking up the case files and shutting down her computer because Olivia told her she was coming from the house, not work. That was easily twenty minutes without traffic. Slipping on her coat and gloves, she locked up and decided to take the long way to Towers where she agreed to meet Olivia. The crisp January wind cut through her as she exited the building, and it made her even more grateful to have a warm Blake and a warm fireplace to cuddle up to tonight.

The scene at Towers was calm for mid-afternoon. The sun dropping in the sky cast a hazy glow over the room as it refracted through the blinds on the far wall. Patrons were scattered at tables talking either secretly over a business deal or animatedly over drinks.

At the bar in her usual spot sat Olivia as she nursed a martini. Doris descended the steps to the bar area and slid around behind her friend to take the seat on the opposite side. Olivia's coat rested on a seat between them, so Doris shed her own and tossed it on top.

"What's a beautiful lady like you doing all alone at a bar like this?" Doris used her sexy voice.

Olivia chuckled, knowing Doris had been there the whole time. The perfume she wore always gave her away. "You're not funny, Wolfe."

The lawyer and part-time mayor shrugged her shoulders. "I always wanted to say that to a woman. At least I don't have to worry about you slapping me for it."

Olivia raised her eyebrows and smiled. "Oh, well, I didn't know you liked it rough! Considering I wouldn't mind getting a smack in, let's try that line again."

"Not on your life!" Doris laughed and signaled the bartender to bring two more of what Olivia had. "I assume there was a reason for needing libations. Spill it!"

Groaning a little, Olivia pinched the space the bridge of her nose and looked over at Doris. "Let's just say that I'm lucky to be here right now."

Doris's eyes became as big as saucers. "Why? What happened?" she asked before raising her glass to her lips.

"Natalia nearly killed me," Olivia deadpanned.

Doris nearly choked on her drink. She coughed and patted her chest to clear it. Looking at her friend in shock, she gasped, "She did what?"

Olivia waved her hand in the air. "Oh, I'm exaggerating...a little. It was kind of scary though." Olivia fingered the edge of the napkin beneath her drink and pouted.

Holding up a finger, Doris said, "Okay, wait. Don't say a word." She gulped down the rest of her drink and looked back at her friend. "Now I'm ready. Tell me what happened."

Olivia stared down into her glass, pondering exactly how to go about telling the story. "I went by the house to surprise her with some lunch from Company. Next thing I know, I'm on the floor and she's standing over me, screaming, with a fireplace poker in her hand. I screamed her name and it must have snapped her out of it or something did. She just dropped to the floor and started crying hysterically. I guess I startled her and she just reacted. We argued though." Olivia shrugged, the moments after the incident blurring in her mind.

Doris had leaned closer, listening intently. "About what?"

She pinched at the bridge of her nose again. "God, I can hardly remember. She was just so angry." Olivia paused for a moment as if trying to remember the details. "I had gotten her a couple of ibuprofen, and she just blew up at me, said she had a right to decide what to do with her body."

Sitting up straighter, Doris got an epiphany. "Ohhhhh..."

Olivia turned to look at her friend. "What?"

"You had fallen asleep when Rick once came by once at the hospital. He asked me to tell you the results of the drug panel, but I totally forgot!" Doris smacked her forehead.

"Tell me what about the drug panel?"

Doris raised a hand in the air. "It all makes sense! She had phenobarbital in her system. Marina had been keeping her drugged so she'd be compliant. No wonder she doesn't want to take any drugs!"

Olivia's mouth fell open and then she covered it with her hand. "Oh my God! She probably thinks I know about it, but I'm still pushing them at her. God, I must look like a completely insensitive asshole to her!"

"But that doesn't explain attacking you," Doris suggested as she turned back to her now refilled drink.

Olivia turned back as well and took a long swallow. "Actually, I think that I get it. Remember, I've been there before. Trauma like that makes you react in crazy ways."

For a long moment the two friends were quiet. Doris was thinking about how to phrase her next question. "Did you ever check out that therapist I mentioned, Brooke Tremain?"

Olivia nodded. "I did a couple of times, but it's been hard to keep appointments, for obvious reasons. I kept taking Emma to Felicia though and Natalia opted for working things through with Sister Anne. You know Natalia. She likes the touch of the spiritual in it, before the kidnapping anyway. Obviously, that's gotten off track, and Emma...well, I'm not sure what's the point anymore. Emma mostly just sits there and pouts."

Olivia rubbed at her tired eyes; the defeat - an emotion not at home on Olivia's face - seemed to flash at Doris like a neon sign. She couldn't stand to see her friend like this. It just wouldn't do. "Well, I have a suggestion. Well, actually, it's a recommendation. One of our new clients has started to see Brooke. Maybe you all need to give it another go, as a family." At first, Kathryn Howard had been resistant to the idea, but seeing the pain Dani was going through, she agreed that it couldn't hurt her daughter anymore than she was already hurting.

Olivia shook her head and groaned. "I don't know, Doris. It seems pretty pointless. They're all the same with their annoying way of answering questions with more questions and

looking at you all serious and intent, asking you 'how do you feel about that?', when you know they're doodling pictures on that damn legal pad!"

"Not Brooke. She specializes in trauma and grief counseling, Olivia. Actually, she did a couple of tours in Iraq before getting discharged. Did you know that?" Doris spoke enthusiastically.

Olivia shook her head. "Discharged for what?" she asked warily. Every therapist she'd ever met was a little bit crazy themselves. A military discharge didn't bode well in Olivia's mind.

"Shooting a gun while gay. She was in under *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* and was caught with another soldier." Doris related sadly.

"Ouch!"

Doris finished off her martini and nodded. "Yeah, she was devastated at first. Her whole family is military, and to be kicked out of the service like that was humiliating."

The blonde shrugged her shoulders as she swallowed her drink. "Can't she go back with it being overturned?"

The lawyer smiled. "If she wanted to. Now she sees it as a blessing in disguise. She's out personally and professionally. She's doing something she loves and helping people she can relate to."

Olivia caught Doris's warm smile as she spoke about this woman. "She's an ex, isn't she?" Then she gasped. "Or she's a current! Oh! Doris, you better not be..."

"No! Of course not!" Doris exclaimed. "I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a cheater. I do have some morals." Doris rationalized that no one needed to know that she still got some butterflies around Anna.

"Of course you do," Olivia joked half-heartedly.

Doris scoffed at her friend's sarcasm as she dug through her purse for her keys. She stood and smiled down at Olivia. "Give her a call. It can't hurt. Hell, as much as I'm giving Brooke's card out, I should get a referral payment!"

Olivia laughed heartily for the first time that afternoon. "If you did, you'd be rolling in the dough with all the crazy here in Springfield!"

"Hmmm," the lawyer hummed, jokingly considering the option. "I better get going. Blake's coming back into town from meeting with a new author, and we're having dinner in tonight." She saw the smirk on Olivia's face and stopped her as soon as she opened her mouth. "And no sushi or fish taco jokes!"

Olivia feigned innocence and shook her head. "Wasn't necessary."

With a parting glare and a giggle from Olivia, Doris left Towers. Olivia let out a heavy sigh. Pulling out her phone, she double-checked but there were no messages from Rafe. She didn't dare tell Natalia about not hearing from him, but she was starting to get a little worried. She fired off a new message: *Please, Rafe. Just say 'Hi' or something. Worrying here.*

Act III

Eleni scribbled some notes on her pad as she held the phone to her ear. "Uh, huh...yes, Marina. Like where yachts stay. Okay...I can get that to you today, Mr. Morrison. Thank you for working with me on such short notice." She paused and listened before dropping her pen to rub her forehead that was beginning to throb with a headache. "Thank you for the condolences. You, too. Goodbye."

Eleni hung up and dropped the phone on the table. She closed her eyes and rested her head in her palms. This was the part she had been dreading - the cold, calculating details of the funeral. She looked at the numbers on the pad, and even though it was still outrageously high, she was grateful that Mr. Morrison was willing to work with her because the Coopers were long-standing members of the community. The discount he offered cut the funeral costs nearly in half.

When she heard footsteps and the doors to the kitchen swing open, she looked up to see Buzz coming through. His graying hair stood up in every direction, and he looked like he hadn't shaved in almost a week.

He greeted her as enthusiastically as he could muster. "Hey! How's it going?" Wandering behind the bar, he pulled two coffee cups out from under it and poured a cup for each of them.

Leaning back in her chair, she watched him walk over, the slight limp more evident when the weather became more intolerable. The thought made her glance outside to see fat snowflakes lightly falling. Hopefully, this one wouldn't last too long, and they could get this service out of the way. "The funeral arrangements are made. You may need to offer some free coffees to Mr. Morrison for about, oh...ten years, to make up for the break he gave us." Buzz sat down stiffly. "It's the least I can do. Thank you for taking care of this, Eleni. I wish we could have taken care of it sooner, but..."

She knew what the older man was referring to. "Frank's no better?"

"I've tried everything. I've yelled, cried...God forgive me, but I've even slapped him." Buzz dropped his head into his free hand and began to cry. "Our family's been through so much, but it's never been this bad."

Eleni's heart broke for the man that had once been her father-in-law. She slid into the chair next to him and pulled him into a hug. "It's going to be okay. We'll get him through this. We just have to focus on that, not the pain."

Not wanting to look weak in front of the younger woman, Buzz sniffed and sat up, rubbing roughly at his eyes. "You're right. We'll figure this out...together."

"Maybe I should try talking to him again," Eleni offered. She'd been by to see Frank many times over the last couple of weeks, but he was completely shut down. The smell was so bad. Part of it was the booze he was consuming like candy, but she truly wondered if he'd even bathed since the shooting.

"It can't hurt. Nothing can. Be warned though, he's graduated from beer to whiskey, and God knows what else." Buzz shook his head, the torment showing in the worn lines that creased his face and in the depths of his eyes. "It's awful."

She nodded resolutely. "I can try."

Buzz shifted subjects, not wanting to dwell on the heartache he felt for his whole family but mostly his son. "So, what are the details on the funeral?"

Eleni turned and pulled her notepad over. "Day after tomorrow. Ten o'clock in the morning. I'll call the paper and the news station to give them a false date, just to cover our bases. The

last thing any of us need is a headline in the paper." She blew out a sigh as she acknowledged Buzz's nod. "Father Ray already agreed to officiate, and it'll be close family and friends only. No announcements. I'll send an email to everyone to let them know about it and to keep it quiet."

There was a long moment of silence as Eleni was preoccupied with re-adding some numbers.

"Thank you," Buzz said, causing her to look up. "For everything; but mostly, for being here for Frank." She looked down as tears came to her eyes. "He never stopped loving you."

Eleni pulled her coat around her tighter as a cold wind blew with force under the open porch of the house. Nervously, she shifted her feet before pushing the button and praying that no one was home. As the wind died down, she could hear footsteps faintly shuffling toward the door. She wasn't exactly looking forward to this, but after seeing Frank last night in a last ditch attempt to reach him like she'd promised Buzz, she had an idea about how to get him out of his depression.

The door swung open and the brunette on the other side looked at her with surprise and confusion. "Um, hi, Eleni." Natalia glanced past Frank's ex-wife as if she expected to see someone else nearby.

"Hi, Natalia. Forgive me for dropping by unannounced. I know you're recovering, and I don't want to take up a lot of your time, but...", she was interrupted as Natalia stepped back.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Come in!"

"Thanks," Eleni spoke hesitantly as she stepped in and loosened her coat while Natalia closed the door behind her.

Eleni wasn't really sure how to start, and she felt that simply announcing her request would be rude considering the circumstances. "Look, I...Well, first of all, I should apologize to you. About Marina."

Natalia sucked in a deep breath at the mention of the name and waved a hand in the air. "No, don't. It's not necessary." She really wasn't in the mood to re-hash this with a virtual stranger.

"You're wrong. It is necessary," Eleni started again. She needed to do this. She had to at least try. "See, the thing is I kind of blame myself for what happened. Marina was always... challenging, to put it mildly. She was always kind of angry and bitter, especially with me. I thought most of that was from leaving her with Frank, but now I wonder if that was just the way she was - an angry young woman looking for an excuse to lash out."

When Natalia didn't respond, simply turned around and walked into the living room, she wasn't sure if she had been dismissed or not. Resolutely, she followed the other woman into the other room and removed her hat. Natalia stood silently and watched her from across the room, her arms crossed. "When I came back to take DeSilva's job, I didn't know what I was walking into. Part of my reasoning had been that I needed the job. The other part was that I missed my family and everyone I knew. I missed Frank and Marina. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I was willing to take that chance. I just had no idea what Marina had gotten herself into though."

Natalia shook her head, wondering where Eleni was going with this, and if she even cared that much. "What do you mean?"

Eleni took a deep breath thinking of the best way to summarize all that she knew. "As I dug through some of the files of past cases, getting a feel for what had happened since I'd left Springfield, I came across some...inconsistencies. All of them had a common thread, actually two threads. Marina and DeSilva were on all the cases, and they were all cases that Marina successfully solved. Some of the results that DeSilva came up with though were forensically impossible."

"You mean they were doctored records. He falsified them for her," Natalia concluded.

Eleni nodded. "So she looked like a great cop. She always wanted to please Frank, so I shouldn't be too surprised that she went to those lengths."

Natalia felt suddenly drained. She ran her hand over her forehead and closed her eyes. "So what does this have to do with me?"

"I can't say why she targeted you as the one to kidnap. I'm not 100 percent sure about that, but I knew she was troubled. I knew she was willing to lie, cheat, and steal in order to stay blameless." Eleni sighed then continued, "I did try, though. I tried to tell Frank, but he wouldn't listen. He didn't want to believe that Marina had been guilty of any wrongdoing, or that she'd be a dirty cop. I should have pushed harder, Natalia. I should have noticed how troubled she was and done something."

Natalia raised her hand again and shook her head. "No, there's no way you could have known...known that she'd go from faking her records to kidnapping. Actually, I'm a little to blame too, and I accept that." She noticed Eleni shake her head, attempting to interject, but Natalia continued on, "No, don't. If I had not been so afraid of making a stand for Olivia and our relationship, and told Frank the truth before things got out of hand, this may not have happened. Marina hated me for calling off the wedding, and when she found out about Olivia, she was livid. I never imagined though..."

Eleni watched as the other woman seemed to drift off into her memories, the tips of her fingers brushing the edge of her top lip as she thought. She was pulled back to the conversation as Natalia spoke again, "We were getting married - Olivia and I...It was our wedding day. The day I was taken."

Eleni swallowed and closed her eyes, feeling the other woman's pain. "I know. I'm so sorry."

Natalia nodded sensing the sincerity in the woman's voice. "I guess it's only appropriate, really. I ran out on Frank during our wedding, and his daughter kidnapped me on the day of my wedding to someone else." She chuckled a little at the irony of it all. It truly was madness. She looked at Eleni as she watched her intently. "Is that all you wanted to say?"

"Oh! Actually, no. I just thought since I was here, and it needed to be said..." she left the thought hanging and moved on, not wanting to take any more of Natalia's time. She could sense the woman was getting tired from the emotional nature of the conversation. "What I really came for was to ask a favor."

"Ah, you're buttering me up first?" Natalia smiled, relieving some of the uncomfortable tension around them.

Eleni chuckled. "No. It's about Frank. I know you haven't been able to get out so you probably don't know."

"No, I haven't," Natalia said as she shook her head already concerned. "What's wrong?"

Eleni swallowed. "Frank's in a really bad place right now. Buzz and I, even Lillian and Anna...we've all been trying to get him to snap out of it, but he's just...not. We've tried everything, but he's drinking, a lot, and he's not eating or sleeping or taking care of himself. We're kind of at our wit's end. When I saw him last night though, he finally started talking a little. Of course, it was all about Marina, but it was what he was saying that stuck with me.

He talked about failing his children and being a bad father, a bad example. How he wished he could fix it. Things like that. And I thought of Francesca."

From across the room, Natalia waited. In spite of all that had transpired to bring Francesca into this world, she knew nothing could be a person's saving grace like a child. "And?" She asked even though she had a feeling of what was coming.

"He hasn't seen her since you were found," Eleni started. Hesitating, she continued, "Maybe seeing his daughter might help."

Natalia considered all that had been said - her own guilt, Marina's madness, Frank's pain and loss. Her world was flipped upside down, and she felt lost and on edge. One thing that always grounded her and brought her back though was her family and especially her children. As she came closer to Eleni, searching her eyes for any malice and seeing none, she nodded. "Okay, I'll consider it, but let me talk to Olivia first."

"No problem! Thank you." Eleni gave her a quick but awkward hug and left.

Natalia watched the door close. The decision she'd just made left her feeling anxious. Instinctively, she felt for the cross hanging around her neck. Realizing what she'd done and how pointless it was, she jerked her hand away. Looking around the room, she searched for something to do. Settling on the coverlet on the couch, the red stain of Emma's spilled soda staring back at her, she walked over and pulled it off, balling it up and heading in the direction of the laundry room. Now that she had a purpose, she felt much better.

Doris stepped gingerly over the small mound of snow that had piled up overnight to the relative safety of the cleared sidewalk. The good thing about living in areas that got snow often was that people were prepared for it. Business owners kept salt and shovel on hand to clear the walkway in front of their shops and the snowplows set out before dawn to make sure the roads were cleared. She still breathed a sigh of relief though as she reached the back door of the funeral parlor. There wasn't anything less dignified than ending up flat on your ass in broad daylight on a city street. *Well, except for that one time in college when...*

She was drawn out of her thoughts when she saw the small group of people huddled together at the front of the room. Mallet, Anna, and Remy stood with two other officers she didn't recognize and Shayne hovered near the front close to a small picture of Marina that

stood next to what Doris presumed was an urn of ashes. Josh stood near his son for support but kept his distance so he could deal with this as he saw fit.

Anna broke away from her fellow officers and walked over to Doris, a faint smile greeting her. "Hey, how are you?"

"I look at it this way, Anna. It's not my funeral, so my day has turned out better than someone else's," Doris quipped to her ex.

"Good to know you have a positive outlook." Anna smirked then turned to stand next to her and look out at the people present. "So, has anyone heard if Frank will be here?"

Doris shook her head. "No word." She looked at her watch. "It's time to start. They should have been here by now."

Suddenly, the door at the back of the room creaked open. Buzz and Lillian entered, immediately finding Shayne and giving him a hug. Lillian could be heard asking about Henry and Shayne quietly saying, "Reva has him."

Doris and Anna turned to look as the door creaked open again. This time Eleni came in with Frank trailing slightly behind her. She had managed to get him to shave, but the dark circles under his eyes and the way his suit hung loosely on his frame gave away the emotional turmoil he'd been under the last several weeks.

Doris muttered to Anna, "Christ, he looks like shit!" Hearing how bad off he was hadn't done the actual image justice, and Doris had a hard time hiding the shock she felt.

"You would too if you'd killed your own child," Anna whispered as they watched Eleni put her arm around Frank and guide him to the front seat of the small room. She had a feeling that Eleni would get him to the service though because she'd called late last night excited that she'd gotten her ex-husband to shower and eat a meal. When Anna asked her how she'd managed that small miracle, Eleni said that she told Frank to get it together or he wouldn't get to see Francesca again.

Eleni and Frank passed behind Mallet and Remy who were huddled together deep in conversation, but the two police officers didn't see their chief.

Anna grimaced when she heard Mallet say, "She always was a little off her rocker."

Before anyone realized what was happening, Frank spun around and punched Mallet in the jaw. The younger man was knocked out of his seat and he fell to the floor. Remy jumped to his feet and blocked Frank as he tried to climb over the back of the seat to get to Mallet.

"Stop, Frank! That's enough!" Remy screamed at his chief.

Mallet scrambled to his feet with Anna's help, rubbing his jaw as he stood. "What the hell's wrong with you, Frank?"

"You are!" Frank yelled as he struggled against Remy's restraint, but he was quickly losing steam; the punishment that his body had recently been through finally took its toll. He slumped a little in defeat as Josh came over to help Remy. Setting Mallet with a glare, Frank seethed, "You were supposed to love her. You promised to protect her. But where were you when she was falling apart? Chasing a cheap piece of ass around Europe?"

Mallet growled at the older man. "Shut your damn mouth, Cooper, or I'll shut it for you!" He wanted more than anything to knock Frank on his ass, but he felt too sorry for the bastard.

Taking matters into her own hands, Anna came up to stand between the men. She decided to try a little distraction. "Frank, I seriously doubt this was just a case of Marina being brokenhearted." She glared at Mallet to make sure he understood his error too. "Or crazy." Turning her attention back to Frank, she spoke evenly and calmly, "There's still a lot of evidence to go through, so let's get all the information before jumping to conclusions. Okay?"

She made eye contact with Mallet as he shifted his sore jaw and nodded quickly. "Yeah, sure."

Frank gritted his teeth as he straightened his coat. He fixed his gaze on his ex-son-in-law. "Fine, just stay away from me and my family."

"Is everything okay?" Father Ray had come in during the argument and no one noticed.

Eleni spoke up first, "Just a little misunderstanding. It's cleared up now." She took Frank's hand, noticing how it shook. Looking up at him, she saw that he looked even more exhausted than before. She tugged on his hand. "Come on, let's just sit down."

Doris had watched the scene with Frank and Mallet unfold, but she was still taken a little by surprise. She had seen Frank mad and knew he was capable of violent outbursts, after all

she had seen him unsuccessfully take on her two bodyguards. She had to give him credit for trying though. But this...no, this was different. It was like a train wreck she couldn't help but watch with morbid curiosity.

Doris was so lost in her own thoughts that she didn't realize the service was over until Anna put a hand on her arm, startling her back into the present.

"You didn't pay attention to a word of the service, did you?" Anna said softly as she slid into the chair next to her. "What's going on in your head, Doris?"

"I don't think Frank's ready for work," Doris said, watching Frank and Eleni talking to Father Ray.

The brunette blew out a long breath. She had a feeling this was coming because it had crossed her mind too. Sometimes getting back to some normalcy is the best medicine though. "Give him a chance, Doris. Who knows? Maybe it'll help."

Somehow, Anna always had a way of making her do what she wanted. "Okay, for you." Then she sighed. "But only on a probationary period." If Frank screwed up, it would fall on her to fix it.

If it hadn't been for Olivia standing at the stove and Natalia sitting at the table, dinner at the farmhouse wouldn't have seemed off. Normally, the roles were reversed because Natalia got immense enjoyment from cooking for her family, but Natalia's kidnapping and shooting had turned all of their lives a little upside down.

Olivia couldn't help but think of these things as she stirred the soup adding a little more pepper to make it just right. Setting the spoon down, she glanced over her shoulder at her family. Natalia was helping their youngest with getting all of her macaroni and cheese on her spoon. Leyla and Emma were giggling over pictures and silly stories in a fashion magazine. She caught Ava's smile as her oldest daughter pulled down some bowls to start setting the table. Everyone was there, which was amazing. Lately, it seemed like Ava and Leyla tried to stay as far from each other as possible.

"What's it like to kiss a boy?" You could have heard a pin drop as the three oldest in the room turned to look at Emma and Leyla. The younger Latina's mouth was hanging open and a faint pink was staining her cheeks.

"Um, we'll talk about that later, 'kay, Em?" Leyla grumbled to her niece when she noticed the others watching and waiting for her response.

Emma was oblivious to the amused women listening in, or if she did notice, didn't care. "Cool! We'll talk when you help me pick out an outfit for Jody's birthday party."

Leyla groaned a little and Emma noticed her looking around the room. She leaned closer to her aunt. "There will be some cute boys there." Leyla rolled her eyes in response.

Natalia had overheard the comment and stifled a giggle at her sister's look, but barely. "Is the soup almost ready, querida?" She asked Olivia.

"Yep, right on time!" Olivia turned around wiping her hands on the dishtowel over the oven door.

"Good! Everyone, go clean up," Natalia instructed, as she wiped the yellowish-orange mess from around her daughter's mouth and chin. "Looks like someone else needs to be cleaned up."

She leaned over to pick up Francesca but was stopped by Olivia before she could get all of the way out of her chair. "Let Ava do it!"

Natalia continued on, reaching under her daughter's arms and lifting smoothly, no pain evident on her face. "Okay, Olivia, stop it! I'm fine!"

Francesca reacted to the anger in her mother's rising voice, and her bottom lip began to quiver, followed by a whimper and sniffly tears.

Here we go, again! Olivia sighed and leaned against the counter. She pinched the space between her eyes and tried a different approach. "Well, she still needs to be cleaned up, and Ava is going to the bathroom anyway, so she can take her."

Natalia gritted her teeth, knowing she was being difficult and unpredictable but agitated nonetheless. She didn't want to give in to Olivia's logic, but she didn't have a good reason not to follow it either. The heartbreaking look in Francesca's eyes wasn't helping Natalia's resolve either. A deep wave of regret and embarrassment washed over her. "Okay," she said, her voice shaky as she handed the child over to Ava, kissing the little girl. "I'm sorry, Sweet Pea, Mama's not feeling very good and I didn't mean to yell, okay?" She waited for her young

daughter to nod. "Ava's going to take you up to get tidied up and I'll see you in a few minutes."

Olivia waited for them to be alone in the kitchen before approaching her partner, who had already begun to clean the area where Francesca had been eating. While normally Natalia's penchant for cleaning when upset would be amusing, right now it just made Olivia feel annoyed.

She reached down to still Natalia's hand as she made a swipe at some crumbs. The brunette stilled but didn't look up. Olivia came closer, her body warming at the nearness to Natalia. "I'm at a loss, sweetheart. And you know how I hate feeling helpless, but I just don't know what to do."

Natalia sighed and leaned into Olivia. The blonde's arm instinctively went around her partner's waist, pulling their bodies together. Natalia's voice was small as she spoke, "How did you get over being raped?"

That was a question Olivia didn't expect and it threw her for a loop. Leaning back, she cupped Natalia's cheek, turning her face to make eye contact with her. "What?"

Turning in Olivia's arms, Natalia dropped the rag she had been using to clean the table, and placed both hands on Olivia's shoulders. "I mean, how did you feel afterwards? How did you get past it?"

"I think I felt every emotion possible; shame mostly, but anger and fear were pretty close behind," Olivia said quietly. She felt as though a lump had formed in her throat as she spoke. At times, her memories of that period were both blurred and vivid. Swallowing past that feeling, she understood Natalia's need to find a way through her own torment and she continued, resting her head against Natalia's, a long, sad sigh escaping her in the process. "I didn't have time to get over it or work through the feelings, though. I was pregnant and trying to survive day-to-day. I didn't trust anyone."

Natalia nodded almost imperceptibly letting the words Olivia said sink into her thoughts and feelings and trying to mesh them with her own. It didn't matter that Natalia wasn't raped. She still felt violated and helpless. Hearing what Olivia said wasn't new. They'd talked about her rape before, but now she had her own frame of reference for similar feelings. Olivia's rape had changed and defined the young and hopeful girl she had been into the woman she eventually became. Natalia furrowed her brow trying to imagine what she'd

become from her kidnapping, and she couldn't even form an image in her mind. She couldn't even see herself anymore. All she saw was a vast blackness.

Shivering at the thought, Natalia turned and curled into the comfort and safety of Olivia's arms. A part of her felt so distant from the love being freely given by her partner. She wished more than anything she could give the older woman a clue how to help her, but she had no idea where to go in her current turmoil or how to even make sense of it. All she could do was try to hold herself together long enough until she could figure it all out.

Later that evening, Olivia and Natalia had settled in the living room and tried to focus on something other than the tensions of the day. Looking over at Olivia on the opposite side of the couch, Natalia noticed how incredibly sexy her partner looked with her reading glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. The Sudoku puzzle book she'd been working on had dropped to the floor as the more attractive sight of the other woman pouring over an expenditure sheet caught her attention. The fact that Olivia held her foot captive with one hand while doing so, massaging the tension out of the tendons and muscles, was an added distractive bonus. The older woman aimlessly massaged Natalia's arch, her fingers occasionally roamed up her calf, sending a delicious tingle through Natalia's body. It was all in an effort to sooth her anxiety. It must have worked, because for the life of her, Natalia had a hard time remembering why she had been so upset earlier. Olivia definitely had magic fingers.

A faint smile came over Natalia's face and Olivia must have sensed it because she looked at her partner over the rim of her glasses. "What has you so tickled, Ms. Spencer-Rivera?"

"Aside from those amazing fingers of yours?" Natalia attempted a poor imitation of Olivia's eyebrow raise.

Olivia chuckled at the brunette's attempt. "Don't strain something doing that."

Natalia gingerly swatted at Olivia's arm. "Hush, you!" Both of them giggled a little. Natalia sighed contentedly and looked around the living room. "It's hard to believe at times like this, that four other people live here, at least for the moment. When everyone is up, it's this crazy chaos, but when everyone is asleep, I'd swear that we're the only two people in the world."

Dropping her spreadsheet, giving up on doing any more work, Olivia removed her glasses and rested her head back on the couch, looking over at her partner. Smiling, she captured one of Natalia's hands in her own, interlacing their fingers and sighing with content. "Don't get me wrong. I love our family more than anything in the world, but there are moments when I wish it was just you and me."

Natalia quirked a small smile at Olivia, as she understood exactly how the older woman felt. Having so many people in your life that you loved sometimes made it impossible to find time where you didn't worry over something. Even now, in this wonderfully simple moment, those worries crept into her mind.

The brunette glanced at the open laptop on the coffee table in front of them and then at the clock on the fireplace mantle. "Speaking of which..."

Olivia followed her gaze. "I'm sure he's fine, honey."

With effort, Natalia held back the frustration she felt. She didn't want a repeat of earlier. Instead, she nervously brushed her top lip with the tips of her fingers before dropping her hand back to her lap. "You don't know that." Before Olivia could respond, a flash of hope came over Natalia's face. "Wait, did you remind him of the chat?" Natalia had hoped, with all of the upheaval recently that Olivia had simply forgotten.

Olivia shook her head already knowing where Natalia's thoughts were going. "I didn't forget. He's probably just on a mission and can't get Internet access, or he's just really busy. Maybe we can wait a little longer." Olivia didn't dare tell Natalia that she had texted and emailed Rafe probably a half dozen times in the last week and never got a response. She was becoming increasingly worried too, but she didn't want to fan the flames of Natalia's agitated state.

"He's already thirty minutes late, Olivia," Natalia said, drawing her lower lip between her teeth.

"And he's been late before," Olivia countered, giving Natalia's hand a squeeze. "Just another thirty, okay? For me?"

Sighing, Natalia realized that she didn't really have a choice as she waited on her son to call. What else could she do?

When Natalia nodded her head and picked her puzzle book up, Olivia mentally thanked whatever deity that might listen that her partner had let it go for the moment. Going back to her spreadsheet, Olivia lost track of time and didn't realize when both she and Natalia had fallen asleep.

Awaking with a sudden jerk, Olivia glanced around to get oriented with her surroundings; beside her were her glasses and the abandoned spreadsheet. The darkened laptop rested on the coffee table, and Natalia's feet remained stretched out on her lap. Following the line of sight from the legs up to her partner's face, she noted the younger woman's head was turned to the side, mouth agape as she lightly snored or, as Natalia liked to correct her, "breathing heavy." Looking around further, she noted that the Sudoku book had fallen to the floor beside the couch. Olivia couldn't remember when either of them had fallen asleep and she squinted to look at the clock...three o'clock in the morning. As gently as possible, Olivia leaned over to the coffee table and tapped the keyboard. No messages.

Tamping down her own worries, Olivia quietly reached for the blanket on the back of the couch that she'd been using as Natalia recovered. She moved the paper and glasses beside her then carefully spread the blanket over their feet and legs as she snuggled her way down between Natalia and the back of the couch. The brunette mumbled and Olivia froze. She waited as Natalia shifted and rolled to her side, tucking her hands under her cheek.

With a little more room to move, she settled in behind Natalia and covered both of them up with the blanket. Snaking her arm around Natalia's waist, she smiled as the younger woman sank back against her, fitting perfectly against her curves. She could feel a dull ache start low in her belly from the contact, but she closed her eyes, fighting for patience. The all-clear from Rick couldn't come soon enough!

Act IV

In the short time that Frank had been back at work, his subordinate officers had been walking on eggshells, simply trying to do their jobs and give him time to settle back in. There were still rumblings though that he'd come back too soon, and a few wondered if he'd make it through the probationary period Mayor Wolfe had put him on.

The slamming of Frank's office door made Remy cringe. He felt sorry for the new recruit that was trapped in there with him because he could hear the chief's voice booming through the door. He'd met the young man when he came in and introduced himself as

Joseph Cleary. Joe, or Joey as he preferred, was probably all of about nineteen and at best 140lbs soaking wet.

Frank stuck his head out of his office and yelled for Joe's beat partner to join them. Remy groaned a little, mumbling quietly, "This isn't good."

Joe had literally finished academy training the previous week and had been put out on a beat within a couple of days. It had been unreasonable of Frank to think a newbie could come on the force and be instantly ready for a beat job. Joe's partner wasn't the best officer either. Remy had tried to talk to Frank, even offering to ride with Joey for a while to help out, but since coming back, his boss had been like a bulldog with a meaty bone. To say Frank had been demanding would be an understatement - reports due the next day, double shifts for those who made mistakes, time off requests routinely rejected, and now this. When a bank the next street over from where Joe and his partner were patrolling was robbed, they bumbled the entire pursuit allowing the robber to get away.

According to Frank's grumbled comments when he heard about it, the pair looked like the lead characters from Dumb & Dumber.

"Jesus, who is Frank ripping into?" Anna came around the corner with a cup of mud that passed as coffee in her hand. She really needed to make a pit stop downstairs in Eleni's lab for the good stuff.

Remy rocked back in his desk chair, shaking his head. "That new kid."

"Joey?" Anna asked, then saw the handsome man nod out of the corner of her eye. Both of them jumped as something banged loudly in Frank's office. "Damn! Joey was at the top of his academy class too. I'd hate to see what Frank is unleashing on the bottom rung."

They shook their heads simultaneously. Remy spun his chair around to his desk to get back to work, and Anna turned in the opposite direction to go find Mallet so they could head out to the shed that Marina had been using as a hideout. When she did, she nearly ran right into...

"Doris! Jesus, you scared me!" Anna shook off her hand where her coffee had spilled and looked up at the slightly amused smile on Doris's face.

"Nice to see I can still surprise you," Doris said with a smirk.

Anna laughed and mumbled low enough so that only Doris could hear, "No problem there."

A brief, knowing smile passed between them before Doris heard the racket coming from Frank's office. Her eyes narrowed, then the door flew open.

Glaring heatedly at the young man's back as he exited, Frank spoke loud enough for most of the squad room to hear, "Consider this your one and only warning, kid! Maybe a week of file duty in records will keep you from making stupid mistakes again."

For a few moments, Doris watched the retreating form of her Chief of Police before glancing over at Anna. "Is this a common occurrence?"

Anna crossed her arms, annoyed that she'd advised Doris to give Frank a chance, and now it looked like her advice was backfiring.

When Anna didn't respond immediately, Doris turned to Remy who was trying very hard not to be noticed. "Remy?"

Remy fought the urge to admit what he'd seen during the last week. From where his desk was located, he never missed anything. Sometimes that was a good thing, but right now, it was a curse. He looked up at the mayor pleadingly. No cop liked to see another cop lose his grip on his emotions, but Remy had a hard time denying that was exactly what was happening to his boss.

"Fine. Don't tell me. The only problem with that, however, is that I already know." Doris crossed her arms.

Both Anna and Remy looked at her, and she raised her hand. "I can't talk about the details."

She looked sadly at Anna then and continued, "Letting him come back wasn't the best decision. We tried. I wanted it to work out for him, too, but it's just not."

Anna wanted to say something to Doris to defend her boss, not because she necessarily liked Frank but as a matter of fraternal loyalty. However, Doris was right, and there really was no room for anyone to argue otherwise. Frank wasn't ready to be back on the force yet. Her eyes followed her ex-lover as she moved past her and walked in the direction of Frank's office.

It wasn't until the door closed quietly behind Doris that she slumped into her desk chair. "Shit!"

As Frank had been tapping angrily at his keyboard, completely engrossed in the disciplinary report he'd been writing up on Joe Cleary, he hadn't noticed that someone had entered his office until Doris was standing in front of him, tapping the edge of his desk.

Coughing to cover his annoyance, he slid his chair back slightly and stood, gesturing to a chair on the other side of his desk. "Doris, please...have a seat."

Doris crossed her arms. "That won't be necessary, Frank." She took a deep breath and simply decided to dive in head first. She may not like Frank for all the harsh things he's said about Olivia and his not-so-stellar reaction to his ex-fiancée being in love with Olivia, but she never enjoyed - despite what anyone may think - seeing a person flounder in their own personal hell. God knows, she'd had enough personal experience with that kind of hell that she wouldn't wish it on anyone.

The chief sat back in his chair and stared at her defiantly. Annoyed at her presence because he had a feeling where this was going, he beat her to the punch. "I guess you're here to kick me out of my office again."

Doris sighed and surprisingly resisted being baited by him. "I think we pushed you too fast, Frank. I don't think you're ready just yet to come back to work. In fact, I'm putting you on paid administrative leave effective immediately. Your return will be on the condition that you pass a psych evaluation." There! She said it.

Frank stood and slammed his hand down on his desk, causing Doris to jump in shock though she tried to hide it. "Bullshit! What justification do you have? Nothing! You've got nothing! I've done everything by the book."

Feeling the fire of confrontation stir in her blood, Doris set him with a deadly glare, a look diametrically opposed to the calm in her voice, "Justification?" She pointed toward his desk indicating how he had just acted. "That right there is all the justification I need. Should I tell you about the half dozen calls I've received from people in this town that have witnessed your emotional outbursts first hand, or the handful of officers that have filed complaints about you, or maybe I should get a statement from that new officer you humiliated in front of the entire squad room?"

Frank gritted his teeth and looked down, but he didn't say anything in his defense. Doris continued, softer and more tempered this time, feeling her sails get deflated by his kicked puppy dog look, "Look, Frank. You've had a really shitty couple of years, and I don't want to add to your troubles, but honestly...it's either this or I let you go for good. I don't want to compound your pain, so please, get some help."

Silently, Frank unclipped his badge from his belt and placed it on his desk. He did the same for his gun. His fingers traced along the barrel then over the lettering on his badge. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his keys and took off the key to his office as well as the master key for the prisoner cells. He placed them beside the other items on his desk. He came around his desk and before heading out the door, he picked up several framed pictures - his wedding day with Eleni, a family Christmas picture that included Coop, and one of Marina and Henry. Without looking up or saying a word, he left his office and the station.

Feeling her energy drain from her, Doris leaned back against the wall of Frank's office...well, former office now. Resting her head back against the wall, she groaned realizing that she had to start a search for an interim chief. "Wonderful!"

When her phone buzzed, her first thought was to ignore it, but there's no such option when you're both mayor and lawyer in a crazy little town like Springfield. She reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. She smiled when she realized it was a text from Blake.

Meet me for lunch? I really need to see you...in a good way.

She sent back a response as quick as she could. It amazed her how fast Ashlee could send a text sometimes. *Okay, give me 30. I'll pick you up.*

Anna stuck her head around the opening of the door. "Hey, you okay?" Doris had lingered in Frank's office so long after he'd left that Anna had begun to worry about her. The faint smile on Doris's face though let Anna know that her ex wasn't upset after all.

Doris tucked her phone back in her purse and straightened up. She couldn't explain it, but something about texting Blake about a lunch date while Anna was in such close proximity made her feel unbalanced. With her previous lovers there had always been clear lines of demarcation; if the relationship seemed to be getting more serious, she seemed to find a way of sabotaging it somehow. They'd part ways, rarely to ever cross paths again. Considering her political ambitions and life in the closet, that result was usually best for all concerned. While with others, there had been understandings, mutual agreements to be

temporary. With Anna though, their relationship was out of Doris's comfort zone. She'd never been so in love with a woman, only to have it end, and still have to deal with her presence. It was for this reason that Doris sometimes felt off kilter with Anna around. The possibility that it could be anything else was something she didn't want to consider.

Doris sighed. "Yeah, I'm fine. I need to go though. A lunch date." She wasn't sure why she had to tack that on at the end.

Anna nodded as Doris passed close to her to exit the office. "Tell Blake I said 'hi'."

"Sure. I'll see you later." Doris smiled and continued to weave her way out of the precinct. She had reached the door when an angry voice behind her stopped her exit.

"Doris Wolfe! Hold it right there!" Eleni was taking long strides to reach the mayor before she could escape. She pushed at the door that Doris had barely opened and it slammed shut with a bang. The medical examiner held up her cell phone. "Explain this."

Doris leaned back in shock at first, then squinted trying to see what was on the small display. It was a text from Frank: *Doris fired me. Going to get a beer.* Groaning at Frank's melodrama, the likes of which would rival most gay men, she guided Eleni's hand down and stated calmly, "He's not fired. He's on paid leave."

Eleni threw her hands up in the air in frustration. "Technicalities! Why, Doris?"

"Because he's not ready! Look, I'm not happy about it either, but he's just not ready." Doris said in annoyance and sighed before continuing, "He needs to get his head together and then come back," Doris implored the woman to understand.

Eleni looked down, shaking her head a little and rubbing her fingers over her forehead. Her voice, when she spoke, pleaded with Doris for understanding, "He killed his daughter, Doris."

Doris got it. She really did, and she couldn't imagine losing Ashlee, then having to work at the same place she did and act like everything was fine. Nodding, Doris said calmly, "And Marina worked here too. She had a desk and belongings here. A locker and a coffee mug probably. Her memory is all over this place, Eleni; all over this town. You come in here every day. You understand that, but it wasn't you that pulled the trigger."

With the excitement of the moment dying down, the other officers had dispersed back to their duties. Only Anna stayed nearby; concern over two women she cared about evident on her face.

Eleni ran shaky fingers through her hair. Distressed, she finally said, "I don't know how to help him."

Doris reached out and squeezed the dark-haired woman's arm in an unusual show of tenderness. "You don't. You just find someone else who can."

With a grunt, Anna lifted the box of evidence onto the table. On the other side of the table, Mallet did the same thing though not with as much effort. He patted the top of his box and said, "Well, that's the last of them."

"Thank God!" Anna huffed. "I didn't realize Marina had kept so much crap in that little hideaway. It didn't look like that much when we were there before."

He glanced down at the boxes, feeling like he'd never known Marina. "It's like she had a completely separate life."

Anna noticed the sad and wistful look on his face. "We've been going nonstop with this case so I haven't had a chance to say it, but...I'm sorry. This can't be easy for you."

Mallet ran his hand over the top of the box in front of him. "Near the end, we weren't getting along that great. We were growing further apart, and Dinah...she was just...I don't know, consistent? Easy to deal with? Everything with Marina had become an effort."

"That doesn't mean you didn't love her," Anna offered.

He nodded. "I definitely loved her. She wanted...needed more. Something solid and consistent too, but in a different way. Shayne fit the bill better than I could." He chuckled and smiled a little.

"Shayne does seem to be the homebody type," she added.

Her mind wandered as she considered the similarities between Mallet and Marina, and her and Doris. She had no problem admitting to herself that she still deeply loved Doris, and

that wasn't changing just because Doris was seeing Blake or she was dating Callie. Some feelings just didn't go away. She wanted to be the solid and consistent type for Doris, but at the moment, she simply wasn't. Blake could offer Doris something that she couldn't, and it would be unfair to ask more of Doris. She deserved better than that.

"And Dinah likes adventure and drama," Mallet commented with a mischievous smile.

Anna removed the top of her box and decided it was time to get down to business. There was a lot to sort through, but it didn't mean they couldn't work and talk. She was actually interested to learn more about her partner-by-default. "So I take it that things are working out for you and Dinah?"

He nodded. Following Anna's lead, he removed his box top, put on some sterile gloves, and emptied the contents of the box onto the table. Smirking, he responded, "Yeah. So far, so good anyway. At least until she decides to go off on a random goose chase around the world again."

Anna laughed and looked down at the items on the table. As if they could respond to her, she spoke to the inanimate objects. "Okay, guys, talk to me."

For the next few hours, they examined each item, carefully dusting for possible prints and lifting them as they went. When that was done, they arranged the items as they'd been seen in the shed, hoping that bringing it all out into the light would help them see motive better. They needed the reason for Marina focusing on Natalia to be more than simply anger at Natalia dumping Frank at the altar. It was a motive but not a very strong one.

They also knew that Marina had DeSilva doctor his forensics reports so it looked like Marina was solving cases. That much Eleni had discovered because DeSilva's forensics reports came back with results that were off. The average cop wouldn't realize the results were false, but another forensics expert wouldn't have a problem seeing the inaccuracies.

Anna dropped her head in her hands and groaned with frustration at not finding a breakthrough when she heard Mallet speak.

"Hey, take a look at this," he said as he poked through the box.

In the small shed where Marina had been hiding, she had kept a dozen or so books on a shelf. The books were classics ranging from Thoreau's writings to Twain and Shakespeare. When Mallet had seen them on the shelf, he thought it was a little odd because Marina

never seemed to be the literary type, but now as he opened the covers to reveal hollowed out books, it now made sense.

Out of the book, he pulled several small cassette tapes. "They're dated too. These are from about six months ago." He grabbed the rest of the books and pulled them closer, opening each cover and finding the same thing. Within the cut out space in each book, there were several more discs that were carefully labeled. He left the discs in the books he found them with in case there was significance attached to their placement. Grabbing their camera from the cabinet, he snapped a few shots of the books opened up, taking note of the labeled items.

Anna came over with a pad of sticky notes and a marker. She wrote down the dates of the discs and then placed the sticky on the cover of each book, arranging them in date order. The most recent one was the day before Natalia's kidnapping. After that...nothing.

She squinted at the line up of books and suddenly noticed what stopped her. "Look, they're in order. That's how she kept up with the location of the discs."

"Is there any meaning to the books?" Mallet wondered.

Anna shook her head. "Not that I can see off the top of my head. Then again, I'm not a literature expert. Callie is though. She's getting her master's degree in English at the university. I'll have her come by later to look at them."

"Sounds good. In the meantime, I think we should listen to these tapes," Mallet suggested. "Then I'll get the tech guys to make digital copies."

"Hmmm, it's strange that we didn't find the actual recorder in the shed," Anna said curiously. "I wonder where she put it. Hang on just a second. I'll go look for one in the supply room." She patted Mallet on the shoulder and left the room.

Mallet stretched back in his chair, then stood up. Looking down at the dates on the yellow paper, he sighed sadly. "You were doing this even when we were married. Jesus, Marina... why?"

Doris smiled at Blake across the table from her, then reached out to tenderly caress the

redhead's hand. The restaurant was small and intimate, with dimmed lights that mimicked the look of a candle flame. The flickering light cast a glow over the face of her lover.

The waiter came out to refresh their wine glasses. When he left, Doris tilted her head in curiosity before asking, "Not that I'm complaining, but what's with the low lighting and romantic setting? It's only lunch after all. I was thinking burger and fries."

Blake smiled fondly at her lover and chuckled. "Mmmm, burger and fries. You're such a romantic, Doris Wolfe."

Doris brushed her thumb over Blake's palm, hitting the right spot so that it drew a sharp gasp from the redhead. "That's why you're the romance writer slash publisher, and I'm a lawyer."

"There's always a first time, darling. Valentine's Day is coming up. I'm sure you can figure out some way to top this," Blake hinted boldly.

Leaning in and propping her chin in her hand, while still holding Blake's in the other, Doris queried, "I assume, for a romantic like you, that Valentine's is your favorite day of the year?"

There was a momentary pause as Blake just looked at the woman across from her. She swallowed and looked down.

To Doris, the redhead looked sad and even lost. She tilted her head down to capture the shadowed green eyes of her lover. "Hey, where'd you go?"

Blake lifted her head and quickly smiled, waving her hand in the air. She then reached for her wine glass and took a decent swallow. "I'm fine. My mind just wandered." She could tell that Doris wasn't fully buying it. She sighed and slumped over in resignation. "Valentine's wasn't always my favorite day, but it is now and that's all that matters to me."

Doris considered her answer and felt it was good enough for now. "Good answer. I'll let it slide...for now." Soon though she'd inquire more about why it hadn't been her favorite at one time. Doris had a similar feeling about the romantic day so it made her curious about her lover's reasons.

Both sighed and reached for their glass of wine, settling into a comfortable silence, when Blake's phone rang. She quickly rifled through her purse for it so she could silence it.

There's nothing more unromantic than having a cell phone ring in the middle of a romantic moment. Finding the phone, she pulled it out and glanced at the display. A slight growl of frustration escaped her as she pressed the button to ignore the call and tossed it back in her purse.

Blake's behavior amused Doris and she chuckled. "What's that for?"

"I've been getting these calls off and on for a few days now. It's really getting annoying," Blake said and dismissed it all with a wave of her hand. "Probably some stupid telemarketer."

"Then answer it and tell them to take you off the call list," Doris stated the obvious solution.

Blake sat back in her chair with a grimace. "I don't have that much willpower. What if they want me to give money to starving kids in Africa? I couldn't resist that!"

"And that's what I love about you," Doris whispered tenderly.

For the first time in a long while, Emma was acting like her old self. In the car riding over to Company, she talked excitedly about her day at school. She was chatting away about her upcoming field trip to the junior high school for an orientation. They'd get to learn the layout of the school and find out who their teachers would be. The last two weeks of school they'd even get to spend the day there so it wouldn't be as overwhelming on their first day. "But that would be months away," Emma added.

Olivia smiled at her animated daughter in the rearview mirror as Natalia asked Emma questions from the passenger seat. With Francesca at the daycare and it being just the three of them, the excursion out for ice cream felt like old times.

Natalia asked, "Are all of your friends going to be there next year?"

Emma nodded. "I think so. I know Jody will be there and some of our friends. But Jayson's parents are moving."

"Really? Where?" Olivia asked. She was surprised to hear it since Jayson's dad worked at the Beacon, and she hadn't heard anything about it yet.

Shrugging, Emma said, "I'm not real sure of the name of the town. He said it's close to Mexico though, and he was excited about that because he likes tacos. It's his favorite food. And he said he'll be able to play on the beach all the time." She paused, thinking and then said, "You know, I think we should go to California."

Olivia turned the corner and looked for a parking spot so Natalia responded, "Well, I'm sure we can take a trip out there. Maybe over the summer?"

When the car stopped, Emma unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned forward. "No, silly! To live! Wouldn't that be cool to live on the beach?"

Olivia turned in her seat and looked at her daughter. Smiling, she remarked, "Not that I don't love the beach. I grew up on an island after all, but you're forgetting something very important."

"What's that?" Emma said it in a way that there was nothing that could change her mind.

Olivia poked Emma's belly. "You forgot that your daddy lives here. You'll miss him very much, and he'll miss you."

The girl scrunched up her mouth and the look on her face told Olivia she was trying to puzzle out her dilemma. "Oh...well, Daddy and Beth and Payton can just come out there to live too!"

Natalia laughed. "I can see it now. A big sign over our door that says: The Spencer-Rivera-Spaulding Family Commune. I'm sure we could make a reality show out of it."

"Uh, let's just leave family drama to the Kardashians, m'kay?" Olivia said as she opened her door, dreading the idea of someone making a reality show about their family. "Come on you two! I want some ice cream!" She poked her head back in the car and smiled. "Last one to the door pays!" She slammed the door and took off.

"Get her, Emma!" Natalia urged as Emma scrambled to get out of the backseat and race for the door. Natalia didn't even bother trying; instead she took her time and enjoyed watching her family being playful. She wanted that back, and that's why it was so important for them to have this talk with Emma.

Walking into Company felt strange for Natalia. She hadn't been there since her kidnapping, and she looked around a little anxiously, half expecting to see Marina any minute. Taking a

deep breath, she tried to work through her unease. She knew she was safe now, and she had virtually no more pain from her injuries. Tomorrow, they were going to check in with Rick, and she expected to get the clear for limited normal activity. Of course, she still couldn't pick up heavy objects, including Francesca, for a few more weeks, but with the physical healing as it should, it was time to work on the emotional.

When she saw Buzz come out of the kitchen, she drew her lip under with her teeth with trepidation. She wasn't sure why she was nervous about seeing him; really, it should be the other way around. For a brief moment, Buzz bowed his head like he wasn't sure what to do. Just when she thought he would turn and leave, he tossed the dish towel in his hands over his shoulder and walked over to her, opening his arms in invitation.

He hugged her firmly but gently. "I'm so glad you're okay," he spoke reverently.

Natalia held on to him as tears started to fall, not realizing until that moment how much she'd missed him. "I'm sorry."

Buzz shook his head. "No, no apologies. This was on Marina, okay?"

Nodding, she pulled back and wiped at her tears. She smiled when Buzz reached up with the dish towel and dabbed at her eyes before smiling at her sadly and cupping her face in his hands.

"You're like a daughter to me, Natalia. It was bad enough losing Marina and having Frank..." Filled with emotion, the words seemed to catch in his throat, "but if I'd lost you too, I'd be beyond heartbroken. But you're here and for that I'm thankful."

She reached up and took his hands in her own, smiling to ease the melancholy. "Stop it! I won't have any makeup left if you keep making me cry."

He smiled back at her, appreciating the reprieve. He glanced over at the booth where Olivia and Emma sat watching them. "Is it an ice cream day?"

"What else would it be with us?" Natalia joked.

Buzz tilted his head. "Go to your family. I'll get you ladies hooked up. Sundaes all around!"

She gave him a kiss on his stubbly cheek and walked over to the booth where Olivia and Emma were sitting.

"What were you doing talking to Grandpa Buzz for so long, Ma?" Emma asked as she tried to make a spoon stick on her nose.

"Well, I was putting in our order of course!" Natalia said as she slipped in on the other side of Emma.

Olivia looked across the table at her beseechingly and Natalia gave her the "you go" look. Olivia tried to give it back to her partner but she got the bug-eyed-head-tilt-thin-lipped "no, you go" look instead. She rolled her eyes at Natalia.

"Okay, what's going on? You two are giving off the weird vibe." Emma waved her spoon back and forth between her moms. "Oh, geez, you two aren't breaking up for real, are you?"

Olivia quickly shook her head in surprise. "No!"

Natalia matched with a slower shake of her head when Emma glanced over at her. "No way."

Emma leaned back in the booth, her sundae forgotten. "Then what is it?"

"Really, it's a good thing. Something that's good for all of us," Olivia started. Pausing for a moment, she sighed at her quickly growing up daughter. "I know things have been a little tough lately because of what happened with Natalia, and it's worried and stressed all of us. That's why we thought that maybe it wouldn't hurt to start seeing another therapist - one that's really good in situations like this."

Emma furrowed her brow and looked at her mom. "What about Ms. Felicia? Can I still see her?"

"Honey, you didn't even talk to her when you were there." Olivia laughed a little.

"But there was nothing to say! She kept trying to get me to talk about Jane, and I didn't want to talk about Jane." Emma pouted and slumped back in her chair.

As Natalia reached for Emma's hand, she looked down at the small appendage nestled in her own. Despite the recent growth spurts, she was reminded that Emma was still only twelve, and her protective instinct was stronger than ever. "Emma, honey, our family has been through so much in the last couple of years. You and your mom have dealt with some pretty tough situations, and you've been such a big girl by taking care of your mom and looking out for her." Natalia reached up and brushed a stray lock of hair from Emma's

forehead, then caressed her cheek. Sighing, she continued, "But sometimes, all the stuff going on around us gets clogged up in our heads and we can't seem to make sense of it. It can kind of overwhelm us, and the people around us have their own stuff going on in their heads, so they can't always be that helpful. That's why we all need to have someone we can share those burdens with, someone that can be more helpful. There's nothing wrong with Ms. Felicia; she didn't do anything wrong. But your mom and I feel like this change would be good for all of us."

Emma was staring down at their entwined hands, thinking. She then reached over for Olivia's and pulled it into her lap as well. She put her two moms' hands together and smiled a little as she cradled them in her smaller ones.

"Okay." Emma nodded.

As Olivia leaned over to kiss her daughter's head, Natalia continued to caress the girl's cheek. Looking up, she noticed her partner's warm brown eyes shone with hope and happiness; something she had feared losing so much lately. She smiled as Natalia nestled closer to her two girls and she leaned over to kiss her partner's welcoming lips.

"All right, you two. There's a kid present," Emma jokingly chastised them.

Olivia and Natalia shared a knowing look over Emma's head, and when Olivia nodded slightly, both women began to tickle her. None of them had laughed so hard in a long time.

The setting sun only made the dank bar seem seedier. Eleni didn't exactly imagine herself to be the type to worry about getting her hands dirty, she dissected dead people, for crying out loud, but even she was disgusted by the grimy feel of the handle on the door.

Rubbing her hands on her pants leg, she stepped a little further into the dimly lit bar, squinting her eyes to adjust to the change in lighting. Locating Frank at the end of the bar, she quickly walked over to him and glanced down at the bar stool. She couldn't identify what was on it so she opted to keep standing instead of sit; it wasn't like she planned to stay anyway.

Frank was well on his way to having a full-blown bender. He was completely oblivious to her presence as he sloppily poured another shot of whiskey and quickly tossed it back.

"Why not just drink from the bottle, Frank? No sense in bothering with the extra step," Eleni said with a mixture of sadness and annoyed frustration.

He looked over his shoulder and smiled. "Heeeeyyy! Hey, baby, here," he tapped the seat she refused to sit on. "Have a seat. Join me."

"No, thanks," Eleni spoke, her voice unearthly, calm, and clear.

He shrugged and turned back to pick up the bottle, knocking it over with his lack of coordination. "Damn!" There was no need to worry though. The bottle didn't really have enough liquid left in it for anything to spill.

Eleni sighed. Rapping her knuckles on the bar to get his attention, she asked him, "How much have you had, Frank?"

"HMMMMM," Frank stalled, not even sure at this point, but the bartender saw what was happening and came over.

"It was a new bottle, ma'am," the good-looking blond man offered. "I took his keys." While he noticed that Frank's attention was elsewhere, he handed them over to her.

"Oh, shut the hell up, Sam! Not helping, 'kay?" Frank looked back at his ex-wife. "He's the reason I can't drink from the bottle. Said it's against the law. Well, it's not, dumbass! I'm a cop...WAS a cop. I should know!"

Eleni became worried at Frank's agitated state and knew she had to get him out of there before he got thrown out forcibly. She gently placed a hand on his arm. "Speaking of which, it's getting late, and I wondered if you'd walk me home."

She knew she'd said the right words when Frank stopped ranting at the bartender and looked over at her. "Of course...sure."

Eleni helped him down from the stool so he didn't fall. She looked at the bartender. "Does he have a tab?"

"I have his card number."

She took two twenty dollar bills from her purse and tossed it on the bar. "For your troubles." She noticed his grateful smile as she guided Frank to the door.

Outside, she caught up with Frank as he aimlessly stumbled toward the parking lot. "Hey, where you headed, handsome?"

He stopped and simply stood there, looking at her sadly and swaying a little. "I'm sorry."

Eleni reached out for him as his face contorted in unimaginable pain. It was like watching her heart being ripped out as the man she'd once loved and made a family with, broke down in front of her. She knew where his pain came from, but she knew he needed to get this out. "Sorry for what?"

He dropped his head and his shoulders shook as he began to cry in anguish. When Frank fell to his knees, Eleni followed him and held onto him. "For killing our baby. I'm so sorry!"

Eleni couldn't hold the tears back anymore. She joined him in his grief as they held onto each other.

Natalia stood in the bathroom doorway as Francesca squirmed on the lid of the toilet seat, while Olivia tried to get their youngest undressed for her bath.

"Stand still, you little wiggle worm," Olivia teasingly chided. It didn't help the toddler stay still though when her mom leaned over to playfully nibble on her bare belly, causing the little girl to squeal in delight. "I'm gonna get me some pea salad! I am!"

A happy smile lit up Natalia's face. She fought the joyful tears down that threatened to come up. She didn't want Olivia worrying needlessly as she seemed to be having more good days than bad for the first time since she got home from the hospital. The road ahead of them would be tough, but she knew without a doubt that she wanted it to be at this woman's side.

"Mama!" Francesca yelled and pointed, causing Olivia to look over at her.

"Inside voice, Sweet Pea," Olivia automatically corrected.

Natalia walked over to them and took Francesca's hand into her own and kissed it with a loud smack. "Is there a stinky little girl needing a bath?"

"I stinky," Francesca agreed with a big smile.

"Well, then, let's get this party started," Olivia said. She questioned the little girl, "Would you like your Ma to bathe you?"

Francesca nodded happily and tried to get off the toilet seat. Olivia picked her up and took her to the tub, tickling the little girl on her naked butt as she went, making Francesca giggle. "I got a bootie! I got a bootie!"

"Argghh!" Francesca imitated a pirate as Olivia placed her in the tub. "Mama got bootie!"

Natalia came up behind Olivia and reached down to grab Olivia's butt, and said, sotto voce, "Yes, she does."

Olivia jumped at the surprise contact and smirked mischievously at Natalia as she sat down on the side of the tub, a washcloth and soap within easy reach. Olivia reached for a couple of Francesca's bath toys and leaned down to toss them into the tub. She whispered to her partner, "Can you do this?"

"I'm good. I've missed this actually," Natalia said, smiling back at her.

Olivia nodded. "Me too."

After giving Francesca a few minutes to play in the tub, the two women towed her off and took her to her bedroom to dress her for bed. As Natalia pulled out a pair of footie pajamas, the Elmo ones that Francesca loved so much, she saw the picture of Frank holding Francesca sitting on top of the dresser.

She walked over to the bed and handed the clothes to Olivia as the older woman finished getting Francesca into her pull-up. "I forgot to mention something."

"Oh yeah?" She guided Francesca's stubby foot into one leg of the outfit, then the other.

"Eleni Andros came by the other day," Natalia answered.

Olivia gave her an odd look. She couldn't imagine why Eleni would come to visit. "Why?"

Natalia sat down on the bed and looked up at Olivia. "It seems like I'm not the only one having a hard time recovering."

The blonde looked at her with sudden awareness. "Oh God, Frank! I was so wrapped up in our own situation and your recovery that I didn't even think about what Frank was going through. He shot his own daughter."

Natalia nodded sadly and looked down. "From the way Eleni tells it, he's in really bad shape emotionally. She asked if we could bring Francesca by to see him, thinking it may snap him out of his funk."

"Makes sense," Olivia said as she finally got her squiggly daughter fully into her pajamas and zipped it up. She looked at the brown eyes so much like her mom's. "Would you like to see your daddy?"

Francesca's face lit up and she bounced on her bed. "Daddy! Daddy!"

"I think it's unanimous then. Come on you, lay down." The little girl flopped down on her bed giggling happily. Olivia tucked the covers up around the little girl as she settled down. "Okay, who's reading tonight?"

When Francesca looked back and forth between them contemplating her decision, Natalia smiled a little at the behavior that was very much like Emma. She smiled at how much Francesca acted like a Spencer. If she hadn't been there, she could almost convince herself that Frank had no part in her genetics.

Finally, the little girl sleepily smiled and said, "Both mommies."

Both of them shrugged and settled down on each side of their daughter, a book propped between them. Olivia felt the book push against her hand. She looked up to see adoring brown eyes staring back at her.

"I love you," Natalia mouthed silently.

Olivia's stomach flipped a little and she returned the sentiment. "Love you, too."

Episode 3: Let Me Count the Ways



Act I

The first pink and purple rays of dawn peaked through the farmhouse master bedroom window and slowly inched along the thick duvet covering the bed. Finally a warm beam of sunshine crept across the sleeping woman beside her, highlighting the natural beauty found there and filling Olivia Spencer's heart with love.

Natalia Rivera was stunning. And the fact that she didn't even realize it, made her all the more beautiful in Olivia's eyes. To think she had almost lost this precious gift in her life was almost too much to bear sometimes. Blinking back tears, she watched her lover sleeping, peaceful and at ease. Peace was something the younger woman had been missing during her waking hours these last few weeks. Understandably so. It had been a shocking and tough ordeal for all of them, but life finally seemed to be slowly returning to normal.

Olivia smiled softly as Natalia shifted slightly, softly smacking her lips and then sighing as she slipped back into sleep. She longed to reach out and trace the dark eyebrows with her fingertips, and tickle down along her perfect nose, to trace those adorable dimples that called her name and then finally trail her thumb across that full lower lip practically begging to be kissed.

Something she thought she'd never get a chance to do again, not all that long ago.

"Stop it." Natalia mumbled, inhaling sharply as she woke up a little more and stretched ever so slightly.

"Stop what?" Olivia cocked an eyebrow and snuggled closer, pleased her lover was awake as her hand burrowed along under the blankets to find a warm tummy. Natalia sighed happily and rolled to her side, tucking her back along Olivia's body, enjoying just being held, safe in her lover's arms.

"All that loud blinking," Natalia smiled softly as Olivia shifted to spoon her from behind, nuzzling along her ear and into the fine hair at her temple. "I can hear you all the way over here."

"Oh, well, we can't have that now, can we?" Olivia chuckled before squeezing her partner gently, pulling her closer still. Natalia cracked an eyelid open and looked at the digital clock before slamming her eye closed again and groaning.

"You're up early," She mumbled sleepily, tucking the duvet tighter under her chin and yawning. Olivia nodded into her hair and she could just make out a sigh.

"Yeah, had a dream and couldn't get back to sleep," Olivia didn't go into details. She rarely did when talking about her nightmares, not wanting to worry her partner with something neither of them could do anything about. Natalia was used to her restless sleep patterns, but Olivia still didn't want to discuss how often she had been having the recurring dream of her lover falling from the lighthouse. She did make a mental note to mention it to Brooke Tremain at her next therapy session though. "And so I was just watching you sleep until I could drift off again."

"Mmm, sounds like a good way to pass the time," Natalia tucked Olivia's arms up under her own, holding her tighter as sleep was now eluding her as well.

"That's what I thought," Olivia smiled, her hands beginning to rove across the warm material of Natalia's sleep shirt and the tempting curves underneath. They just lay together for a short time, enjoying the closeness and peace together.

"So what are our plans for today, Ms. Spencer?" Natalia yawned softly, her fingers playing along Olivia's arm. "World domination?" Natalia smiled as her partner snorted behind her.

"No, Emma has that pencilled in from 10 am to noon today, and I wouldn't dream of interfering." Olivia grinned at the thought, pleased when Natalia chuckled softly. "Actually, Doris wanted to meet up for our usual Sunday brunch," Olivia noticed Natalia stiffen ever so slightly in her arms. "But I can cancel if you like, I wasn't sure what you wanted to do today."

Natalia sighed. Any other Sunday morning she would have been up getting the girls ready for church and have been out the door before Olivia had barely stirred. But that was before. There was a part of her that wanted to go to Mass like normal, disappear into the

comforting words and traditions, having it wash over her like a balm on her soul, pretending like everything was normal again.

But it wasn't.

Something within her had broken, shattered like glass and then reformed again into something different. The whole ordeal had changed her, and everything around her, as if everything shifted subtly in the darkness. Natalia knew it, she just didn't know how to fix it. Deep down she was aware that she was angry, but didn't know what to do with it. She was angry at Marina sure, but also with herself, and even on some level with God, and until she had worked through some of these feelings, she just didn't think the church was where she needed to be.

Hopefully this too would pass, with time.

Natalia sighed softly and rolled slightly onto her back so she could see Olivia's eyes, those oh-so-expressive eyes, that always gave away what her lover was thinking and feeling. They had been arguing and bickering more than usual, it would do Olivia good to vent a little with Doris.

"You go meet Doris like normal, sweetheart," Natalia could also tell that Olivia was worried about her, but she was holding it in. Typical. Reaching up, she swiped her thumb across the lines on her lover's forehead, as if she could wipe the worry away with the simple movement, before tangling her fingers in the honey-blond locks and pulling Olivia down into a slow, tender kiss.

They had yet to make love since getting the thumbs up from Rick, it just hadn't felt right. Natalia had been achy or tired or both, and Olivia was more than willing to wait until it felt right. Suddenly in the dawn of a new day, in the warmth of each others arms it felt fragile and new, almost sacred. In this everyday ordinary moment, Natalia once more felt her passion growing, her desire to feel something other than sad or angry leading her way. Giggling together, both women began to wrestle for the upper hand in a fun little power struggle.

Olivia smirked down at her as she finally won the round, Natalia grinned back wildly before her lips were captured once again, and she bucked against her eager lover. Truth be told, she didn't mind losing this particular battle one bit, the need to feel alive, loved and safe

burned deep in her soul. And she could only find this level of solace in Olivia's sure embrace.

Panting, they finally broke apart, Olivia pressing her forehead to Natalia's temple, dropping soft butterfly kisses there, the need building steadily within both of them. She had missed this, more than she had thought possible.

"And I've decided that I'm just going to stay right here and sleep in this fine Sunday morning." Natalia sighed happily against her skin, sending a shiver of desire down her partner's spine.

"Oh, you think so, do you?" Olivia's hands moved across Natalia's body, finding the edge of her sleep shirt and sliding underneath, tickling across smooth warm skin. Natalia gasped softly, clearly wanting more, and Olivia obliged, rolling slightly to settle her leg against her and sucking gently on a nearby earlobe. "Somehow I don't think sleep will be coming anytime soon."

"Well as long as someone is coming soon, I won't complain..." Natalia grinned cheekily, as Olivia gasped in mock shock at her words. She rolled her hips against Olivia's strong thigh and began her own exploration of her lover's body, her hand sliding beneath the band of her jammie bottoms and squeezing the toned butt she found there for good measure.

"Minx," Olivia grinned, catching Natalia's gaze, marvelling as the dark eyes seemed almost black with desire.

"Trouble," Natalia all but growled back, nipping playfully at the strong jaw line, her body wanting so much more. It seemed like such a long emotional journey to get back here and Natalia knew that she had needed this more than she had realized.

"And don't you ever forget it, my love," Olivia murmured as her head dipped, her eyes growing serious as she once again claimed the soft lips beneath her.

Neither woman spoke and yet they knew. Together they reaffirmed their connection, their devotion to each other, the give and take growing more passionate. They thrilled to the touch, taste and smell, of the other as they made love, like it was the first time all over again, bittersweet and new. They didn't need wedding vows to know that they were married, truly and completely. This was all the sacred blessing that they needed, given and exchanged in the depths of their eyes, in the very beat of their hearts and it was more than enough.

Outside, the snow silently fell.

Several hours later, a light dusting of snow continued to fall outside the farmhouse, tiny flakes swirling against the frosted panes of glass in the kitchen windows. Emma Spencer pressed her nose against the window, watching and hoping that there would be a lot more falling.

"Do you think we'll have a snow day tomorrow?" Emma asked hopefully, turning back to the excitement unfolding in the kitchen.

"Somehow I doubt it, kiddo." Leyla Rivera smiled softly. For all her preteen drama, it was nice to see a little of the old Emma peeking through. She stirred the cookie dough in the bowl briskly as she met the girl's eyes.

Emma sighed sadly and went to help Francesca with her spoon, scooping the cereal up and directing it towards the young girl's mouth. Shadow, sat dutifully at the foot of the high chair, wagging her tail patiently as she waited for the inevitable food fallout from the littlest family member's plate.

"How come Natalia can't help us make cookies? She does them differently than you do," Emma asked, frowning as Leyla added oil instead of butter to the mixture. Leyla glanced up at her niece and tried to stop the grunt of frustration. Natalia this. Natalia that. If she heard how Natalia did things better one more time, she was going to explode.

"Because Ma needs her rest, Em," Olivia said from the doorway, slipping an earring into her lobe before wandering over to her girls. Leaning over she kissed Emma's head first and then Francesca's dark curls.

"Mama?" Francesca asked happily, turning to offer a messy grin to her mother while thumping her spoon on the top of her high chair. Shadow dove for the bits that hit the floor.

"That's right baby, Mama is sleeping, so I'm going to have to do for now." Olivia ran her fingers into the dark curls of hair.

Leyla glanced up at the clock, realizing that once again Natalia would not be attending Mass this Sunday. Natalia had not stepped foot in the church since she'd been kidnapped. Olivia met her eyes, both of them thinking the same thing, but choosing to not discuss it.

"I want to take some cookies to school, Mom," Emma said happily. "I want to give them away with my cards on Tuesday for Valentine's Day. And some for Dad and Uncle Frank too."

"That sounds like a great idea, Em. Good thing you're making a couple of batches," Olivia said, stealing a cooling cookie from the rack on the stove top and starting to pour herself a travel mug of coffee. "Maybe Ma will help wrap them up with you later today, if you ask her nicely."

"Cookies!" Leyla grinned devilishly as she scooped some more cookie dough balls onto a freshly waxed sheet. "For your new boyfriend?"

Emma's face flushed bright red at the teasing, Olivia noted, her daughter's lips pressed tightly shut. She didn't even want to think about how her baby girl was growing up, whether she liked it or not.

"I don't have a boyfriend." Emma ground out, her eyebrows lowering dangerously as she glared at Leyla. Olivia was becoming very familiar with that look. In fact, she was sure she'd used a similar Spencer Glare of Doom on more than one occasion. She reached out and stroked a comforting hand along Emma's shoulders, watching as the tension eased from the girl. She handed her a cookie, and winked.

"Well, just keep the noise down to a dull roar so you don't wake your Ma up, okay? She was pretty worn out." Olivia hid her smirk as she took a quick sip from her coffee mug, all pleased with herself. "Now, I'm off to meet Aunt Doris at Company. My cell phone is on if you need to get me." Olivia snapped the lid closed on her travel mug and headed for the back door, the smell of fresh baked cookies, a chorus of goodbyes and the warmth of home following in her wake.

Mayor Doris Wolfe sat in her usual booth at Company, pretending to read the menu as she watched her girlfriend, Blake Marler, chat with several customers at the counter. She ground her teeth ever so slightly as Blake smiled warmly and giggled winningly at whatever the man had just said.

"Your face is gonna freeze like that, Wolfe, if you keep it up." Olivia said from beside her, causing Doris to jump.

"Jesus! Warn a girl, will yah, Spencer?" Doris said, startled. She put a hand to her chest and glared as Olivia simply chuckled and dropped down opposite her friend.

"Now, where would be the fun in that?" Olivia waved at Blake, who nodded and moved to get her a cup of coffee. "Besides, you never even noticed me come in; you were so busy checking out Blake and glaring menacingly at Mr. Findlay."

"Well," Doris grumbled, not really having an excuse for her behavior. "I just...well, I really don't like it when guys flirt with her like that."

Olivia glanced over at Walter Findlay, who had his false teeth in today, for a pleasant change. His clothes were rumpled and styled from at least the early 1990's if not the late 80's and he desperately needed a shave.

"Seriously?" Olivia looked back at Doris and cocked an eyebrow. "You have nothing to worry about on that front, Doris. Besides Blake only has eyes for you and apparently loves you for some sick reason." Olivia grinned as Doris' eyebrows dropped at her teasing. "And let's face it; we both know that men will be men. They only stop flirting when they're dead and even then..." Olivia cocked an eyebrow and wagged her hand, as if that concept was an iffy prospect.

Doris snorted and rolled her eyes but realized Olivia was right. No need to be jealous of everyone. Blake loved her and she needed to trust in that. She rolled her shoulders and tried to relax, reaching out to grab her coffee mug and taking another sip of her coffee.

"Soooo... speaking of love and mushy stuff, have you figured out what you and Natalia are going to do for Valentine's Day yet?" Doris took the opportunity to change the topic abruptly as Blake sashayed towards them.

"You are like a dog with a bone, you know, trying to organize the perfect Valentine's. Maybe they don't have to do anything for Valentine's but spend time with each other," Blake said shaking her head at her girlfriend and topping off Doris' mug as she put another cup down on the table for Olivia and filled that one up as well. "It's just a shame that you and Natalia had to give up the honeymoon trip to Paris. That would have been so deliciously romantic." Blake's eyes seemed to glaze over at the thought.

"Yeah, I know," Olivia sighed. They had been really looking forward to their honeymoon trip to France, before everything fell apart at Marina's hands. "But Natalia really didn't want to

leave the kids again so soon after...everything." She shrugged and stirred some sugar into her coffee.

"Well, maybe it's for the best then." Blake reached out and squeezed Olivia's shoulder in understanding. "Besides, I have to say I'm thrilled that Leyla is running a Valentine's Day overnight camp for the kids. It's a stroke of genius."

Doris chuckled and raised her mug of coffee in full agreement. Blake's house, free of Clarissa and those hellion boys of hers, was well worth the outrageous price of shipping them off to The Beacon's Little Lights Valentine's Day Overnight Camp.

"Well, guilt is a wonderful thing," Olivia said, smiling to herself. Leyla was definitely working hard to get herself back in to her good books. And while nothing much had ever been really said about her role in Natalia's disappearance, Olivia had found it difficult to warm up again to the younger Rivera again since her return from her visit to Chicago. "And Leyla was keen to show some business initiative. It's actually a really great idea, and even with extra daycare staff needed, the discounted rooms for the kids to stay in and the shuttle bus to take the kids to school the next morning, it's still a nice little money maker for the Beacon at this time of year."

"And the sucking up to you and Natalia was just an added bonus," Doris said, frowning as Blake swatted her shoulder in warning. "Ow! What's with the hitting? It's true and you know it." Blake just rolled her eyes and headed back towards the counter, new customers waiting for her to return to take their orders.

Olivia smiled and waited for the woman to move out of earshot.

"And how goes the elaborate plans on your end for Valentine's? You know, nothing like dating a romance novelist for added pressure, Wolfe."

"Tell me about it," Doris groaned, glancing back at the counter. For all of Blake's romantic leanings though, there was something about Valentine's that seemed to put a sad look in the woman's eye, and she just couldn't put her finger on what it was. She was determined to figure it out though. "I'm still working out the details myself actually. Something is telling me that bigger is not necessarily better in this case with the lovely Ms. Marler."

Olivia wisely said nothing, taking in Doris' change in mood. She knew from experience that it would be better to wait until the woman was ready to share and until then she knew the

lawyer would put on her best courtroom face and stonewall her. She took a sip of her coffee and decided on a topic change.

"How is the hunt for your new Chief of Police going?" Olivia asked taking in the pile of folders beside her friend. Doris had been stressed the last few weeks, interviewing potential candidates along with the hastily thrown together city hiring committee that had been assembled to get the task done as soon as possible.

"Well, progress there at least. We've narrowed it down to two." Doris pulled out two files from the pile beside her and tossed them onto the table top. "I've got a final meeting with the hiring committee tomorrow." Doris' cell phone buzzed and she checked the text message quickly. Glancing back she saw Olivia subtly checking the files out. "Hey, did I say you could look?"

"Sorry," Olivia smiled not looking extremely sorry in the least. "As they say, it's better to ask forgiveness than permission." Doris just rolled her eyes and looked at her friend, her mind starting to turn. Olivia hired and fired powerful executive types on a regular basis, maybe she would see something the others hadn't.

Flipping open the first one, Doris slid the file closer. Olivia was met with the headshot of a stern looking older woman, definitely a tough customer. Scanning through the woman's resume and the interview notes scribbled in Doris' handwriting, the contender was very by the book. Olivia couldn't put her finger on it, but the prospective candidate left her cold.

Doris watched her carefully before sliding the next file forward. Olivia opened it up to find a very handsome man staring back at her, his warm dark complexion and charming smile immediately called to her. Underneath his well-tailored suit, Olivia could tell the man was built and the image definitely indicated the man had style. It was his eyes though that shone with a quiet confidence, something that oozed experience and spoke more than any of the interview notes did.

"He's hot." Olivia cocked an eyebrow and smirked. Doris' eyes widened slightly at the flippant comment. Olivia shrugged at her friend's reaction. "What? I'm gay, not dead..."

"No, it's just..." Doris leaned a little closer as she struggled for her words. "I mean, I'm just surprised you're interested in Butch McStuddly here when you've got sweet little Natalia waiting for you at home."

"Hey, I still like men; I just don't want to sleep with them." Olivia grinned at her friend, her mind filling with memories of the adorably tousled naked woman she'd left worn out in bed that morning. She smirked as she realized what Doris had called the man. "Butch McStuddly? Really?"

"Oh, come on it suits him, don't you think?" Doris wagged her eyebrows as Olivia just shook her head. "His name is Michael Thorne. Brooke Tremain knows him from Chicago. Anna Li does too, at least by reputation. Apparently he's made quite a name for himself there."

"So I see," Olivia raised an eyebrow as she skimmed through his resume a little more. Not just a pretty face, the man had serious detective skills and extensive narcotics experience. She looked up and met Doris' gaze, knowing in her gut that this was the one for the job. She slid the files back over to her friend and picked her coffee mug back up. "Well, well, well...a competent police chief. Springfield PD won't know what hit them."

Phillip Spaulding stood staring out across the snow covered patio outside the kitchen door, the white layer of fluff making the world look fresh and new. If only it could be that simple. He smiled as he felt warm arms wrap around his waist and the warmth of his wife's body press against him.

"Morning handsome," Beth murmured before dropping a quick kiss to his shoulder and squeezing him closer. Phillip smiled and turned in her embrace, dipping his head to kiss to those full lips he adored. Beth leaned back and smiled up at him. "Or should I say good afternoon. You let me sleep in way too long, mister."

"Guilty as charged." Phillip grinned as he made his way over to one of the stools by the kitchen island and Beth shuffled towards the coffee maker. "You've been working so hard lately; I thought you could do with some extra sleep."

"And it has nothing whatsoever to do with playing me out last night." Beth grinned as she glanced at him over the rim of her mug, taking a much needed sip of the hot brew.

"Well," Phillip rubbed his jaw and smiled at the memories. "There is that." Beth grinned at him and popped some bread into the toaster before digging into the fridge for margarine and strawberry jam.

"I've been meaning to tell you, I've signed Payton up for an overnight camp," Beth said as she rooted around for a knife in the drawer and pulled out a small plate from the cupboard, before starting to slather her popped toast with toppings. "The Beacon has this Valentine's Day camp thing, and I thought it might be nice to have the house to ourselves." Beth levelled a smouldering gaze at her husband, before licking some strawberry jam from her thumb.

"What an excellent idea." Phillip raised his eyebrows in pleasant surprise.

"I thought so." Beth smiled and continued to prepare her toast. "Olivia mentioned that both Emma and Francesca were going, but Emma wants to swing by here first. I guess to give her Daddy something special. So I volunteered you to drop them all off at the Beacon."

Phillip glanced up at that bit of cheekiness on his wife's part, but didn't really mind. Any extra time with his daughter was certainly cherished.

"Oh, I almost forgot, your mother called to make sure we're still on for dinner tonight." Phillip said, as Beth came around to slide up on a stool beside him.

"We are, aren't we?" Beth said, crunching into her toast and pulling the Sunday Springfield Journal towards her to read the headlines. She frowned as she noticed the image of Jeffrey O'Neill standing outside the courthouse downtown. What was that blowhard up to now? Apparently it was yet another speech on the need for Springfield to get tough on crime. Why didn't he just announce his intention to run for mayor already and be done with it?

"Absolutely. I think it does Buzz good to get out of the house and relax a little," Phillip said, tearing off a corner of toast from his distracted spouse and popping it into his mouth. "He's pretty worried about Frank."

Beth glanced up from the newspaper and met Phillip's eyes. "Between Marina's death and this Howard case dredging up some tough old memories, it will do us all good to spend a little family time together." Phillip reached out and squeezed her hand, knowing the case was hard on Beth too. She smiled sadly and turned back to the newspaper. "And don't think I didn't see you take a bite of my toast either..."

Phillip shook his head and took another sip of his coffee. He never could get anything past his wife.

It was quiet in Company, the afternoon shift slowly coming to an end, as Blake rushed around behind the counter restocking the coffee supplies kept there. She checked her watch, counting the minutes until she could grab her jacket and head out for the evening. Doris had already texted her that she was on route to pick her up after having grabbed a pizza for the family for dinner. She smiled softly at how domesticated the good Mayor was becoming with her little brood.

"Somebody sure is in a hurry tonight." A familiar voice said from the other side of counter, snapping Blake from her thoughts and turned to find Frank standing there, smiling at her. He looked a little rough around the edges, and he needed a shave, but at least he was out of his house.

"Frank! I'm so glad to see you." Blake smiled back, honestly meaning what she said. When Buzz had said that he was out for the night and that someone else would be covering the evening shift she had thought it would be one of the other part-timers. This, however, was a very pleasant surprise and it was good to see him out and about.

"If you ask me how I'm doing, I'm going to have to arrest you, you know." Frank cocked his head to one side and grinned wider. His stomach churned a little at the thought that he couldn't really arrest anyone anymore thanks to Doris fucking Wolfe, but he didn't want to dwell on the anger at the moment. He'd done enough of that lately. And even though it was a lame joke he had offered up, a part of Frank was serious. He'd had enough of people walking on eggshells around him.

"Oh, please." Blake leaned against the counter, not wanting the world to hear her comments. "We both know you just like playing with your handcuffs." She waggled her eyebrows seductively and she laughed outright at his suddenly flushed complexion, knowing exactly where his mind had gone.

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear I just saw you blush, Frank Cooper," Eleni Andros said, slipping her leather gloves off and tucking them into her jacket pockets. Frank's mouth opened and then closed and then opened again, sending both women into a fresh round of giggles.

"That fish out of water is a classic Cooper look," Blake teased. Frank thought his head might explode with both his former and his current lover ganging up on him. Blake shook her head and took pity on the man. "Enough tormenting my ex-boyfriend, as much fun as it is,

I'm afraid that I am out of here, now that he is here to relieve me." She smiled warmly at Eleni and then disappeared to retrieve her belongings from the back room.

Frank shook his head and came around to the back of the counter. He felt comfortable there, like slipping on an old shoe. In a way he felt closer to Marina, the side of his daughter that he remembered and loved. The young woman who had a son she was proudly raising and an interest in the business, with lots of ideas on how to improve and upgrade the old joint. If only...

"Stop it," Eleni said, her voice low and intense.

Frank blinked and looked into her gorgeous eyes, getting lost there for a moment before snapping out of it again.

"Sorry," he offered with a sad tilt of his head, not even bothering to deny that she had guessed what he had been pondering. She always did know what he was thinking, could judge his moods a mile away. He had forgotten how annoying he had found it before, but right now, it just felt like she was taking care of him, looking out for his best interests. She always brought out the best in him, if Frank was smart enough to get the hell out of his own way. He reached out across the counter top and squeezed her hand, a silent thank you for being there.

The phone behind the counter rang, breaking the small moment. Frank sighed and then turned to answer it.

"Company, how may I help you?" Frank said automatically. He frowned a little and then nodded. "Sure, she's just in the back, hang on a second." He put the handset down on the counter top and leaned around the corner to yell into the staff area.

"Hey, Blake," Frank called out. "Phone call, it's for you."

Blake frowned as she rushed out wondering just who in the heck was calling her here? She came around to the back of the counter and grabbed the phone.

"Hello?" Blake turned away trying to listen as some customers entered the restaurant, the little bell over the door chiming as they came in. Frank nodded a greeting to them as he leaned forward to speak with Eleni a little more.

"So, will you join me for dinner?" Frank said slowly, a little unsure of her response and refilled her coffee cup. He had been so withdrawn and well, drunk lately that he hoped he hadn't screwed up his chances with his ex-wife.

Eleni nodded, quickly agreeing to the heartbreakingly tentative question and smiled back. Baby steps were definitely required here, but she was up for the challenge. And the huge grin on Frank's face was certainly encouraging.

"Damn it," Blake grumbled, slamming the receiver down on the cradle of the phone. Both Eleni and Frank turned to the annoyed woman.

"What's wrong?" Eleni asked the clearly flustered woman. "Who was it?"

"I have no clue. I keep getting these weird hang up phone calls, and it's starting to drive me a little nuts." Blake shook her head and grabbed her purse from behind the counter. "I've gotten them at home, on my cell phone, and now even here at work."

"That's a little creepy." Frank frowned and glanced at Eleni, who seemed just as concerned. After all Edmund was still on the loose, not to mention your regular garden variety stalkers and weirdoes out there. "How long has this been going on?"

Blake grabbed her coat from the hook on the wall and tugged it on, thinking back. Just how long had this been happening?

"Well, I guess since Christmas." Blake chewed her bottom lip in thought. "But I was so wrapped up in the holidays and then Natalia and Olivia's wedding preparations..." Blake froze, realizing what she was saying, and to whom, a little too late. "So, erm... I've noticed that it's been happening more frequently lately, and it's really starting to bug me."

Frank took a breath and tried not to focus on the flashback running through his mind, the crack of the gun going off, the smell of the gun powder in the air as it kicked back in his hands. The masked figure spinning and dropping in slow motion... he shook his head, desperately trying to think of something else. He cleared his throat and swallowed down the tears that were threatening to rise, and then was surprised to feel the comforting touch of Eleni's hand rubbing small circles on his lower back. She had remembered that the soothing motion always settled him, more than anything else in the world could and for that he was grateful.

"Well, it was a man on the other end that I spoke to," Frank finally said. "And the voice seemed a little low and scratchy, even somewhat familiar, but I couldn't say if I knew who it was."

"Well, I haven't got a clue who it is." Blake shook her head and zipped up her coat, slipping her purse over her shoulder and checking the time. Doris would be waiting for her outside. She didn't want to worry her lover but this was starting to piss her off. "This is the first time they've ever said anything."

"Maybe they're escalating," Eleni said softly, not wanting to scare Blake, but even the sleepy town of Springfield needed to be ready for anything. Maybe if they'd all been more vigilant with Marina someone could have stopped that tragedy from happening too.

"Do you think?" Blake asked, getting a little scared. "I was just going to change my phone number if it kept up, but maybe I should go down and report this to the police."

"It never hurts to have this on the books," Frank said gently. "It's probably nothing, but still you shouldn't take it too lightly."

"Great," Blake sighed. "A stalker, just what I need." She zipped up her jacket and smiled at her friends. "As if having to deal with a crazy mother isn't bad enough, now this."

Frank and Eleni laughed and just waved as Blake dashed out the door. She'd see what Doris thought, but most likely she'd be making a visit to the police station in the morning. It was kind of creepy, and she really needed to see what could be done to stop it or figure out who it was.

Mostly though, Blake just had a very bad feeling about this.

Act II

Monday morning came bright and early and couldn't pass fast enough for Springfield's newest District Attorney, Jeffrey O'Neill. He shifted in his chair and glanced at the door of the small Beacon bistro before checking his watch for the third time. Finally, it was almost noon, he just had to have faith that his daughter would show.

Jeffery had spent the last few weeks trying to get Ava to come around and give him another chance. Finally, she had agreed to meet him for lunch. The last time they had met things had

gone horribly wrong, but Jeffrey was nothing if not persistent, especially when it came to family.

When Reva finally got bored with Josh Lewis again, Jeffrey knew he would be ready to pounce and eventually woo her into giving him a second chance. In the past, although it had taken some effort on both their sides, he had been able to forge a friendship with Olivia. Despite Natalia's meddling influence now, he was determined that it would remain so. And even though his relationship with his daughter was on again and off again at times, Jeffrey was determined to get back onto a decent footing with the young woman. He had wasted too much time already in not being a part of Ava's life.

So a lunch date at the hotel's in-house bistro had seemed the best choice. It was on Ava's home turf and Jeffrey hoped that this comfort zone would help keep them talking and clearing up the issues from their last visit. He could see her side, and knew how insensitive it looked, but no one said politics was a pretty game. It was a game he was certainly hoping to win. Glancing up, he smiled as Ava came through the door, standing as she made her way to the table.

"Thanks for coming, Ava," Jeffrey said softly. Ava just cocked her head to one side as he pulled out a chair for her to sit down. Jeffrey smoothed down his tie and sat opposite her. The server appeared and handed over a menu, taking drink orders before disappearing again.

"I don't know what else there is to say, Dad." Ava huffed. She had no time for this. There were at least three meetings she had to prepare for later today with her mother already on a rampage upstairs. The bickering between Natalia and her mother was starting to affect Olivia's mood on the job as well, and not for the better. Ava spared a quick glance at her BlackBerry and realized that there were several texts needing her attention too.

Jeffrey took a sip of his ice water and watched his daughter squirming in her chair. This was going to take a little more effort than he anticipated. He straightened his tie, ready for the challenge.

"I wanted to apologize. It was thoughtless of me to discuss the Howard case as insensitively as I did last time. I didn't really think about what I was saying, and I'm sorry, sweetheart. The thing is that this is not only my job, deep down I believe in justice, Ava." Jeffrey leaned forward in his chair, putting his elbows onto the table top, preparing to make his case to his own daughter. "Don't forget that a man was killed here; I certainly can't lose sight of that

fact as district attorney. Despite the circumstances surrounding the case and how atrociously he behaved to his family, no one deserves that."

Ava shifted in her chair and sighed. She knew he had a point, and yet a part of her wondered at how he could do this, especially considering his own past with Olivia. It made her question if he even had a heart and if she really knew him at all. The waiter arrived with their drinks and she gladly took a sip of her white wine as they ordered their lunch. Finally alone again, Ava locked her gaze with her father, her mother's rapist and spoke her mind.

"How can you of all people represent this sleaze ball? You know how rape can devastate someone, first hand. We both know that the real victim in this is Kathryn Howard and that little girl of hers. Couldn't someone else in the DA's office handle this one?" Ava growled at her father.

Jeffrey swallowed hard but didn't back down from the fire in his daughter's eyes. This was more important than just how he felt, it was his job to defend and protect the rules. He took a moment to think about how to phrase his response.

"Ava, you know that your mother and I have worked through our differences, and despite the painful circumstances neither of us can ever be sorry that you came into this world." Jeffrey reached out across the table and squeezed Ava's hand. She sighed but didn't move away. "It was a blessing in disguise; you are a blessing for both of us. This case has absolutely nothing to do with us. Was Howard a dirt bag? Yes. Did he deserve to be locked up and punished? If what Kathryn Howard said is true, then yes, most definitely. Did he deserve to die for his crimes? I don't think that's up to any one person to decide. This state does not support the death penalty, so on those grounds alone, I have to say no." Jeffrey leaned back and took a quick sip of his white wine, trying to gauge if his argument was swaying Ava to let him back into her good books. "As a lawyer, and a concerned citizen, I have a lot of questions about the circumstances around Howard's death. Was it accidental and committed in the heat of the moment, or was it premeditated, cold-blooded murder? These are the questions that I need answers to. I think any decent human being would want that."

Ava ran a finger along the lip of her wineglass, avoiding her father's gaze, not wanting to admit that he had a point. Maybe she had been a bit harsh with him, in response to his almost gleeful anticipation of a big case to open up his career options. As pissed off as her father had made her, she couldn't ignore the fact that the man had helped her through some tough times when her baby had died and she was wallowing in her depression. And as

much as she hated that he had deceived them when chasing Edmund and his cohorts, it had become painfully clear how much she loved him when she had thought he was dead.

Ava swirled the golden liquid in her wineglass thoughtfully for a moment longer. Between that and the more recent events with Natalia's kidnapping, it certainly brought home the notion that life was too short. Taking a drink, she made up her mind.

"All right, Dad. I still think taking the Howard case is unethical considering your past, and a potential political mistake, especially if it ever comes to light, but whatever." Ava really didn't want to talk about it anymore. There were things about her father and the past that were too painful, and she realized it was probably better that they just didn't go there if she wanted to continue to have any sort of decent relationship with her father. Topics like throwing away his family for his obsession with Edmund or her mother's date rape so many years ago. Who knew what other skeletons were waiting to be uncovered? On one hand she hoped it wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass someday, but on the other it might just be what he had coming. Karma could be a bitch sometimes.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." Jeffrey's eyes twinkled with happiness at his success at winning his daughter's favor back. Now he just had to make sure he didn't screw it up again, at least for a little while. They were spared any further conversation as the server arrived with their food and silence descended for a while as they began to eat, the quiet sounds of cutlery clattering around them in the busy bistro filling the air.

"So, why don't you tell me what's new with you?" Jeffrey began, honestly wondering what his beautiful daughter had been up to the last few weeks. "Any new men in your life I need to intimidate within an inch of his life, or has Olivia already beaten me to it?"

Ava sighed, not thrilled with her relationship dry spell in the least. She was about to answer when she felt a hand gently land on her shoulder and she turned to look up into the sharp eyes of Dr. Brooke Tremain.

"Hi, Ava," Brooke said softly, glancing over at Jeffrey. "I stopped in for an early lunch and was just on my way when I saw you and thought I'd stop by and say hello."

"Hi, Dr. Tremain." Ava smiled up at the therapist she had gone a time or two with her mother to see. Brooke Tremain was quite intriguing, with her short spiky hair and no bullshit way about her. Olivia had been strongly hinting that Ava should make some appointments with her and Ava had to admit she was tempted. "I'm just having a quick bite

with my father, Jeffrey O'Neill." Jeffrey stood and smiled his most appealing smile at the woman. Ava rolled her eyes, realizing that she really needed to clue her father in that he just wasn't anywhere near her type.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Jeffrey smiled wider, charm practically oozing from every pore as he extended his hand. Ava flinched, hoping this would be over soon before he said something stupid.

"Ah, District Attorney O'Neill, I've heard so very much about you," Brooke said, both eyebrows inching up her forehead. "It's very nice to put a face to the name."

"All good, I hope." Jeffrey smiled winningly, not exactly sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. He sank back down into his chair, tugging his suit jacket straight and running a hand over the trim beard on his chin. Brooke just shook her head slightly at his unconscious preening before turning her attention back to Ava.

"Anyway, I've got to run." Brooke smiled warmly down at Ava. "I've several appointments lined up this afternoon before I dash back up to Chicago. I'm hoping to miss that snowstorm they were calling for later today."

"You'll just need to surrender and move to Springfield," Jeffrey said, drawing the woman's attention again.

Brooke grinned back, the thought having crossed her mind more than once, especially since breaking up with her long-time girlfriend and going through a messy break up with her long-time girlfriend. She didn't even want to think about the lawyer's meeting on Tuesday in Chicago to go over the division of property. Happy fucking Valentine's.

"I just might do that." Brooke nodded coming back to the here and now. "It was very nice to meet you, Jeffrey. And I'll see you again soon I hope, Ava." And with that, the therapist waved and made her way to the bistro exit.

"She seems...uh," Jeffrey murmured, distracted by the good doctor's swaying backside, before returning his attention to his daughter. "Nice. Very nice. I wonder if she'd go out with me sometime." Ava just rolled her eyes and shook her head at him. "What? What did I say? Your old man is still a great catch."

"Down, big fellah, Dr. Tremain is gay," Ava said, taking an odd pleasure in telling him. He really needed to work on developing his people skills and become a little more observant. Not that her own was all that developed but she was better at it since living in San Francisco. It had opened her eyes a little, and that was definitely not a bad thing.

"Oh, really?" Jeffrey sighed, disappointed. "What a shame." Tossing his napkin onto the table, he stood and quickly excused himself, heading to the washroom before he embarrassed himself further.

Ava chuckled softly and began to dig into her salad, when she felt a tingle on her neck, as if someone was watching her. Glancing up she noticed the Beacon's catering manager mincing his way towards her from the cappuccino counter. Now what was Greg up to?

"Not that you need it, I'm sure, honey," Greg said with a thin smile, before sliding a business card across the table top. "But my new side business venture might come in handy with other family members." He glanced over as her father started to make his way back from the washroom. "And we're having a Valentine's Day sign up special this week. Anyway, I'll see you later at the Food and Beverage meeting!"

"Uh, thanks, Greg." Ava nodded as the odd little man disappeared. She glanced down at his business card. "The Springfield Rainbow Connection, love matches for the discerning single. Hmm..." The new business was for an online dating site. She frowned, not sure she liked what the man was inferring. She'd been alone too long, that was true, but really? Online dating?

Ava took a sip of her white wine, and tapped the card on the edge of the table. She glanced over, watching as her father checked out the waitress, who was way too young for him. A thought started to take hold, and she smiled to herself, slipping the business card into her purse lying at her feet.

Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all, and perhaps she could kill two birds with one stone.

Natalia sighed as her eyes failed to focus on the budget report she was trying to get through for what seemed the millionth time. She pushed herself away from her desk, leaning back in her chair and stretching her tired back muscles, feeling a faint pull on her barely healed

ribs. It had taken forever to talk Olivia into letting her return to work and then to get her to stop hovering around her office all the time, checking up on her. Finally, meetings and their usual work routine had pulled her away, giving Natalia a chance to get back into the swing of things at the Beacon. Ava had been doing an excellent job filling in and helping Olivia out until she could return to her office.

Natalia groaned as her desk phone rang, yet again. With Olivia stuck in meetings all afternoon, both on and off site, she had been fielding a wide variety of calls all day. She glanced at the call display, recognizing the phone number of Emma's school. Frowning, she quickly picked up the phone handset.

"Natalia Rivera speaking." Natalia focused on the woman's voice on the other end, dread filling her. "Principal Smith, how can I help you? Is Emma okay?" Her stomach churned for another reason as concern quickly turned to annoyance. Closing her eyes, she realized that she was going to have to reschedule her afternoon appointments. "Olivia isn't available, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

Dropping the handset back onto the phone cradle, Natalia stared at the phone for a moment, trying to calm herself down before making her way to the school. She flashed back to those visits to the principal's office when Rafe was a boy. She had hoped having girls would be easier.

"Oh, Emma, what are we going to do with you, hmm?" Natalia bit her lower lip and got busy composing a text to Olivia to let her know what was going on.

"I don't know how the fuck I feel about it, okay?" Olivia finally ground out, glaring at her therapist. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, not wanting to really dig any deeper. However, that was the point of talking about all of this emotional debris floating in her life. To dig deeper and deal with it, instead of drowning it in a bottle or yelling at someone.

Brooke was maddeningly silent, her eyes steady and calm, as she waited patiently for Olivia to continue.

"Natalia is just so touchy lately," Olivia finally said. "I can't say or do anything without her biting my head off. She wants to get closer and then when I do, and try to help her do

whatever, she blows up and says I'm telling her what to do all the time. It's frustrating and I can't win."

"Well, anger is a normal response to what has happened to her," Brooke said carefully, leaning back in her comfortable chair, tapping a few quick notes into her ever-present iPad.

"And I get that, I do," Olivia said quickly, meaning it too. She'd had her own demons to fight, so she could certainly understand the nightmares and moodiness. "It's just... I guess I miss my old Natalia, the sweet woman I fell in love with, who would bake cookies or clean the floor like a madwoman to work out her problems and look to me for advice and reassurance."

Brooke smiled and nodded her head. Olivia sighed and shifted in her armchair, getting depressed with the situation all over again.

"Anger sometimes masks feelings of being hurt or scared, while another response could be tears. Maybe Natalia doesn't know how to release what she is feeling inside yet, and so it comes out as anger, at everyone, or you specifically since you're her safe place," Brooke offered, not sure if it would help Olivia understand or not. "Give her some time, Olivia. All you can do is listen and be supportive and patient and try not to rise to the bait."

Olivia raised an eyebrow at that last one.

"A challenge for you, I know," Brooke smiled ruefully. "However you need to also remember you can't fix everything. Sometimes you should step back and let Natalia fight her own battles, figure it out for herself and to be in control. You should try to find a balance in nurturing others and yourself equally." Behind Brooke, coming from somewhere on her desk, a quiet beep sounded indicating the end of their session.

"Saved by the bell," Olivia smirked, relieved her time was up. She had a lot to think about, like usual after these meetings. Brooke smiled and stood, sliding her iPad onto her desk and following Olivia as she made her way to the door.

"I'll see you next week, same Bat time, same Bat channel," Brooke said grinning. Olivia chuckled and nodded as she headed down the hallway. The therapist's door clicked shut as she waited for the ancient elevator to arrive, and Olivia smiled to herself, suddenly feeling lighter than when she had arrived.

Maybe there was something to this therapy stuff after all.

Company was bustling with late afternoon business as Frank manned the counter and Blake dashed back and forth to the customers in the various booths. In the kitchen, Buzz could be heard cursing at something going astray. Frank glanced up as the bell above the door chimed and a clearly annoyed Emma stormed into the restaurant, Natalia hot on her heels.

"I'm not finished, young lady," Natalia hissed, not wanting to make a scene. She gritted her teeth as Emma just rolled her eyes in response and slumped down onto the nearest stool at the counter. Oh, her teenage years were just going to be wonderful.

Frank moved towards the kitchen to see if Natalia's takeout order was ready yet. Finding the completed order packed and ready to go, he poked his head out from the kitchen, more than happy to get out of Buzz' grumbling way. He pulled up short however, taking in the scene before him. He didn't think that he'd ever seen Natalia so angry and for a minute he was a little worried about Emma.

"You know what? I'm not you, Ma. Yes, I got caught with those boys cutting class but I didn't run away when we got caught. I don't run away when things get tough." Emma stopped abruptly, realizing that she crossed a line at Natalia's soft gasp and seeing the hurt and anger flash in her mother's dark eyes.

"Right," Natalia grabbed Emma's arm pulling her roughly to her feet. "We are out of here. Now."

"Fine," Emma said, a hard edge to her voice masking her emotions. This was so not her fault. Natalia was being unreasonable, after all Kevin had smiled so sweetly when he asked her to cut class with him and his friends, and it's not like they did anything bad. It was just art class after all and all they did was kick a soccer ball against the storage shed for a while. A wave of sadness washed over her, a part of her ashamed that she had disappointed her Ma. Still, Emma refused to let Natalia see her cry, after all she was not a baby anymore. She bit her lower lip and stared at her mother defiantly, looking every inch like a small Olivia.

"Fine." Natalia growled back. She'd had more than enough, dealing with all of Emma's attitude after sitting through Principal Smith's condescending lecture about family troubles sometimes working their way into a child's school life. What the heck did he know about it anyway?

Natalia's eyes sparkled with dark emotions, and she desperately wanted to hit something to get it out of her system. She froze as she realized what she was feeling. Where had that come from? Natalia sent up a silent prayer for patience and understanding, not even noticing what she was doing until it had been thought, and then she felt guilty. Why did she always feel like she couldn't express her emotions? Was that even healthy?

God, she was so confused.

Natalia glanced to one side, her gaze meeting Frank's concerned eyes. She felt a fresh burn of anger and shame deep in her guts at the perceived disappointment she saw there. That's just what she didn't need, Frank Cooper butting his nose into her business.

Natalia inhaled sharply, as she suddenly flashed back to that cold cement cell, the disoriented swirling of voices around her, taunting her. She once again felt the bone weary despair that came over her when she had realized that she would be dead before too long. She gave herself a mental shake and stuffed down the memory of the terror that Marina had subjected her to, focusing on the here and now, taking control of what she could. And right now, that meant disciplining her daughter and to hell with what Frank thought. As if he could throw the first stone anyway.

"All ready." Frank grinned and shuffled forward with the plastic bags filled with their dinner order. Olivia had prepaid with her credit card so there was nothing else to do but hand them over. Natalia smiled but it didn't reach her eyes as she relieved him of their food and then glared down at the pouting girl beside her.

"Let's go, Emma. We'll finish this discussion in the car." Natalia sighed as Emma stomped dramatically out of the restaurant; her only option left was to follow the girl out, all but biting her tongue off. This conversation was so not over.

Frank stood shaking his head, wondering if Natalia was really as good a mother as he had always thought. After all Rafe had ended up in jail, and now here was Emma, getting into trouble at school. It was enough to make him rethink leaving Francesca in her care.

Frank cocked his head at the wayward thought. The more he considered it, the more he realized that he wanted a second chance. A chance to do everything right this time. He'd be careful, no mistakes this time around and he could raise Francesca into an amazing young woman.

Tomorrow he would call his attorney and see what his options were. Frank smiled, suddenly feeling a lot better about everything. He would prove that he was a good father after all.

Olivia sat on the couch, slowly flipping from channel to channel, before pausing at the local news. She noticed headlights coming up the driveway and then glanced at her watch. It must be her girls coming home with supper. She glanced up when the back kitchen door opened abruptly, followed by the heavy footsteps of her daughter entering their home.

That seemed odd.

"Emma?" Olivia called out, not sure what was going on.

"We are not done with this conversation, young lady." Natalia's voice could clearly be heard as the back door opened again, a cool draft blowing into the living room this time bringing with it the smell of food. Olivia stood up from the sofa, but before she could move Emma came storming through.

"I'm going upstairs, Mom. I'll get something to eat later. After being trapped with Ma in the car for the last twenty minutes I've lost my appetite." Emma glared back at Natalia before brushing past Olivia and dashing up the staircase, slamming her bedroom door behind her.

"Emma?" Olivia called after her daughter, more than a little shocked that Emma and Natalia were fighting. Sure they needed to discuss the visit to the principal's office and discipline her daughter, but it looked like this issue at school must be bigger than she thought, if the two of them were arguing. She turned back to stare at Natalia, hoping for answers. "What the hell is going on?"

Olivia knew she said the wrong thing as soon as Natalia gasped, watching with mounting dread as her partner's mouth dropped open and her dark eyes glittered with so many emotions.

"First of all, as you are well aware," Natalia all but growled, "I have to drop everything and go drag our daughter out of the principal's office, again, caught for cutting class with some strange boys." Tears began to sting at the back of Natalia's eyes as she started to feel overwhelmed. Still she refused to let Olivia see her cry, damn it. "And then, when I try to discipline her, you immediately jump down my throat."

"What?" Olivia's eyebrows nearly shot off her forehead. "I did not--"

"Don't even start." Natalia ground out, zipped her winter jacket back up and grabbed her car keys. "You know what, I'm not doing this. I need some air." She spun on her heels and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Olivia sank back down onto the couch, cringing as the back door slammed shut. She glanced over at Shadow, staring at her from in front of the fireplace.

"What the hell just happened?" Olivia asked quietly. Shadow just cocked her head and sneezed.

The predicted snowstorm had started, sending heavy flakes slamming against the windshield as Natalia pulled into the parking lot behind the lighthouse. Swallowing hard, she glanced up at the steady light flashing into the fading afternoon light. It seemed like ages ago that she had been there and at the same time like it was just yesterday.

Opening the car door, Natalia got out and made her way around to the lake side, the rough hewn stones scattered everywhere along the shore. Lake Michigan was frozen, at least a good mile out from the shoreline anyway, and with the snow falling, there was a hush over the entire area.

Peace at last.

Natalia knew it wouldn't last long though, with high winds and freezing rain in the forecast yet to come. Internally a storm raged too, her emotions swirling and churning within her. She had driven past the small Catholic church, a light on in Father Ray's office, but she couldn't, wouldn't, stop to speak with him. There was no peace or solace in that place for her right now. Eventually the car had just seemed to make its way to the lighthouse, the place where everything had fallen apart for her.

Tears began to flow freely down her cheeks, mixing with the melting snowflakes landing on her. She wiped at her face as she began to cry harder, the ball of hurt and anger inside becoming too much to carry. Marina was gone, and yet she was still holding her hostage, keeping her from living the life that she wanted and now even causing a crisis of faith and problems with her family. Damn it, everything was all screwed up and she just didn't know how to fix it.

Natalia glanced up at the bright beam coming from the lighthouse, steadfastly circling, guiding the way for lost souls. She wondered briefly if heaven had a lighthouse, and smiled softly at the mental image it produced. If only it was that easy. Natalia sighed and stared back out across the lake, lost and confused.

"Please, God," Natalia whispered into the wind that was starting to pick up around her. "Help me find my way."

Only the howl of the coming storm answered.

Blake smiled as Doris made her way into the busy restaurant. It had been a last minute decision, a quick call to see if the busy Mayor was available for dinner, and then rushing to make the reservation.

"Sorry I'm late," Doris said, dropping down into the chair opposite her lover. She glanced up and saw that the woman wasn't annoyed with her. Rather she had that sad little look in her eyes again. "There was this thing with Jeffrey O'Neill pushing for moving up the trial date for the Howard case and I had to talk Mel off the ledge."

"It's okay, you're here now and that's what counts." Blake reached out and squeezed Doris' hand, smiling softly as her girlfriend released a long breath and seemed to relax with her touch.

"Enough about work, I'm glad you called and wanted to go out for dinner," Doris grinned as their server brought menus and filled their water glasses before disappearing as quickly as he had arrived. She glanced over, noticing that Blake was fidgeting. "So spill it, what's bugging you? I can tell something isn't right. Is it that hang-up caller again? I swear I will personally--"

"No, no. It's nothing like that," Blake said quickly, touched by Doris' protective streak. Her girlfriend had all but forced her to see the police that morning. "I filled out a report with the police, but nothing new there." Blake paused and took a sip of her water, trying to find the right words. Something had been bothering her; it seemed to rear its ugly head at the oddest moments, usually at this time of year or on Ross' birthday. And some years were worse than others, this being one of them apparently.

"Okay, good." Doris settled down again, not wanting to mention Edmund's name, but it had hovered in the back of her mind, worry about that madman causing her to toss and turn at night yet again. Blake squeezed her hand, before leaning back again.

"You know I love that you want to do something special for Valentines, I do. But," Blake sighed and turned to stare out across the lazy traffic flowing along Main St. outside the restaurant window. "Sometimes I think I hate Valentine's Day. It always reminds me of what I've lost and the mess around the plane crash."

"Oh," Doris said quietly. Blake had never said much about her husband's death; the plane crash had been devastating for all concerned. Now that she thought about it, it had been in February or March when the accident had happened. Doris suddenly felt bad; she should have asked sooner what was going on with Blake. Damn. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize--"

"And how would you? After all, it's not like I talk about it," Blake said sadly, reaching out for her glass of ice water and taking a much needed sip. "I mean, Ross was everything to me, but not many people know that there was a Valentine's dinner that had been billed to his credit card just before his death, and it wasn't with me. I'll never know for sure if he was cheating on me or not." Blake stopped abruptly, tears threatening to fall.

Silence stretched out between them, Doris waiting for Blake to continue. She just wanted to scoop her girlfriend in her arms and comfort her, but she also knew the woman needed to get it out of her system too.

"I know its old news and Ross has been dead for years, but this time of year is always a little hard for me. And now, Phillip Spaulding is apparently sane and back in Springfield living his life to the fullest and Rick is married and in love. A part of me is pissed off that they got their happily-ever-afters and Ross ended up dead. I guess this year is hard for me too because I've finally found someone to love and believe in again and I feel guilty about that." Blake sniffed and pulled up her napkin, dabbing at the corner of her eye.

"Oh, honey," Doris stood then and came around the table, kneeling down to stay at Blake's height as she sat in her chair. "We don't have to do anything big and outrageous if you don't want to. I thought you wanted something super romantic. I'm just as happy having dinner and hanging out with you."

"Really?" Blake said a little shocked. "I thought it was a big deal for you and I didn't want to ruin it for you by being such a downer about it."

"Are you kidding?" Doris smiled widely, leaning in to drop a soft kiss to Blake's temple before wiping at the tear slowly tracking down her flushed cheek. "I know last year was such a let down for you with Frank out of town, I just wanted this year to be perfect."

"Doris, you're going to be there," Blake shook her head and flashed a watery smile. "That alone will make it perfect."

Doris blinked, extremely touched by her lover's heartfelt words. It had been a long time since she had felt like this, safe and secure, wanting to commit to something and someone. For once she wasn't going to question it, waiting for the inevitable shoe to drop on her head. She was just going to trust and accept it, gratefully. She squeezed Blake's hand and stood, leaning over to whisper in the redhead's ear.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you, crazy girl?" Doris grinned as Blake giggled and playfully swatted at her shoulder. Standing upright, she looked indignant. "Hey, again with the hitting." Blake just laughed louder as Doris made her way back to her chair, dramatically rubbing her shoulder.

And just like that, everything was all right again.

Eleni sank down into her leather chair, dropped a two inch thick file on her desk and moved her mouse to wake up her computer screen. So many meetings, too many idiots and now she was working late to catch up on her regular work. Running a hand through her thick curly hair, she glanced over at the framed photo on her desk, one of the last ones taken with the whole family.

She reached out and picked it up, her thumb tracing around the smiling face of Marina, holding wee Henry in her arms, Shayne standing behind her on one side, Frank and Buzz smiling on the other. Lillian had sent the picture to her, taken just before she had decided to move back to town.

How deep was Marina already in it by this time?

"Oh, baby girl. What were you thinking, hm?" Eleni shook her head.

"It's not like you were here to find out." Marina's bitter and angry voice echoed in the dark recesses of her mind. Eleni's stomach churned with guilt and she put her picture frame back down on the desk top. Frank wasn't the only one struggling with guilt.

Eleni jumped as her cell phone vibrated in her pocket. Pulling it out, she cocked an eyebrow, pleasantly surprised to hear from Frank.

'I need to run something past you. Meet me for a coffee at Lillian and Pops place? FCooper
6:37 pm'

Eleni glanced up at the smiling face of the photo of her ex-husband and sometimes lover, and sighed sadly. She prayed that one day she'd see him happy again. She could certainly do with a hit of caffeine right about now, if only to get her mind off of things herself. Her thumbs danced across the phone keyboard as she made up her mind and finalized the details.

"So I spoke with my lawyer this afternoon and he thought I had a good case to get custody of Francesca," Frank said excitedly, not noticing the looks being exchanged between Buzz, Lillian and Eleni around the kitchen table.

"Are you sure that's wise, Frank?" Lillian said gently, glancing at Buzz to try to gauge his reaction. The vein ticking in his forehead was warning enough that he was not pleased.

"Yes, I've seen Natalia with Emma and she's...well...it was hard to describe. She's changed since we were together, and I blame Olivia for that, twisting that sweet gentleness out of her." Frank's eyebrows descended; old wounds still sore. He looked up into Eleni's concerned blue eyes, frowning at him and waved away his thoughts with his hand. "And then there was the whole Rafe debacle, putting Natalia's mothering into question. Throw in raising Francesca in that unnatural environment out at the farmhouse, well...." Frank smirked and glanced around the table. "The lawyer thinks that I should have a case. I could even get Father Ray to..."

Eleni couldn't stop the sound of disgust that escaped from her lips. Buzz stood, his chair scraping loud along the wood floor and start to pace around his kitchen. And Lillian just glanced down at the tabletop, not sure what to say.

"What the hell are you thinking, Frank?" Buzz finally blew up, throwing his hands up into the air in frustration. "They will eat you alive. Olivia just needs a reason to rip you apart and you will end up being scraped off her stilettos."

"That's uncalled for, Pop." Frank's eyes darkened in anger. This had nothing to do with Olivia stealing Natalia from him, and everything with the care of his baby girl. How could they not see this?

"Frank," Eleni started, trying to come up with the words to steer this back to common sense. "After everything you've been through, it's understandable you want to have your child with you, but..."

"And how would you know, you abandoned your daughter, and look where that got us." Frank spat, the anger inside eating him up. It wasn't until he met her eyes, saw the depth of pain his words caused reflected there for all to see, that he realized what he had said. "Eleni, I'm sorry, I didn't..."

His words were too late. Eleni blinked away the tears and stood, grabbing her winter jacket from the coat rack and disappearing into the night, closing the kitchen door with a quiet click.

"Damn." Frank sighed, running a hand through his thick dark hair.

"You know you have nothing to be proud of yourself, Frank." Buzz ground out. Leaning forward on the table he came to the point. "Clearly you went wrong somewhere with Marina, do you really want to take that chance with raising Francesca too?"

"Buzz!" Lillian gasped, shocked at how hard his words were, unsure of how true they might be.

"Someone needs to say it." Buzz glanced over at his wife as Frank stood, clearly offended.

"I thought you'd be with me. Especially after all but abandoning your own family," Frank sneered back. "I'm out of here too." Frank grabbed his winter jacket and left his father's home in a huff.

Buzz just watched him go, not sure who his son even was anymore.

Olivia snapped her book closed as she heard a car pull up the driveway. Sliding from their bed, she peeked out the window and watched Natalia make her way safely up the walkway. She was a little worried as the night wore on, but she knew that her lover needed the space to work through what was bothering her. Like Brooke had said, she couldn't fix this for Natalia; she could just support her as best as possible.

There were footsteps making their way upstairs, pausing to check in the various bedrooms of their girls. Olivia smiled softly, even when she was upset and angry Natalia wanted to make sure her babies were safe and sound.

Olivia had spoken with Emma over dinner finally and had heard the whole sordid story, cute boy and all, and then had grounded the girl to within an inch of her life. Emma took it well, considering, and then went off to her room. Francesca had been fed and changed and put down for the night as well. And Leyla was still out on an early Valentine's date with Jonathan. Popping into their on suite bathroom, Olivia freshened up and then heard their bedroom door open.

"Hey, you're home," Olivia called out softly, smiling at her refection and hoping for the best, before flicking the light out. She would listen and be supportive and not combative. It was time to let Natalia figure things out for herself. Confident she was good to go, Olivia straightened her shoulders and moved into the bedroom, finding Natalia leaning with her back against the wooden door, staring at her with dark, wild eyes, needing something.

Needing her.

The woman nodded, her thick hair falling across her face, adding to the smouldering look being sent Olivia's way. A thump of desire pulsed through Olivia's veins, settling low in her guts. Well, so much for talking things out tonight. Olivia licked her suddenly dry lips and felt her heart beat faster.

Damn, Natalia was hot like this.

Olivia swallowed hard as Natalia raised her hand and crooked her finger, indicating for her to come closer. She didn't need to be invited twice. She reached her partner quickly, reaching out to brush the strand of hair back behind Natalia's ear, feeling the chill from the woman's skin. Running a thumb along the flushed cheek, she realized her lover had been crying.

"Are you okay?" Olivia husked softly. Natalia simply shrugged a shoulder and stared up at her, hunger oozing from every pore. Olivia nodded, not wanting to push it, content to wait until the other woman wanted to share. They just stared intently at each other for a heartbeat or two.

"I want you." Natalia breathed, before moving forward quickly, turning them so that Olivia was pressed up against the door. She slid a strong thigh between Olivia's legs and leaned in. She needed this, something solid and sure, needing to take and be taken. She wanted even more when Olivia gasped at her smooth move, taking control of the moment as her hot lips suddenly explored down her partner's neck and into her cleavage.

"Natalia..." Olivia murmured, more than slightly turned on by this more aggressive side of her lover. Her lips were captured in a crushing kiss, forcing her to be silent. Finally breaking for air, she panted as Natalia once again nipped and bit her way along her neck.

Natalia slid her hands along Olivia's arms, taking her hands and forcing them up against the door, pinning her there and limiting any movement. A tendril of old emotions slithered along Olivia's spine, and she shook her head trying to focus on good feelings instead of the cold dread in her chest. She felt Natalia shift more of her weight against her, pressing her a little harder against the door. Inside old demons began their familiar dance, screaming at her to run, to push away, to try to stop.

Olivia's heart started to race as a panic attack loomed on the edges of her mind. She needed to somehow make this stop. This needed to stop.

Now.

"Stop," Olivia gasped, pushing back against Natalia's strong grip on her wrists. The words hadn't registered as Natalia felt the thrill of power and control wash over her, unconsciously pushing back and moving back up her body. Olivia's heart started to race, anxiety washing over her, starting to flash back to being held down in a bed, Jeffrey's body too heavy to move in her drunken state.

"What part of I want you, don't you get?" Natalia growled playfully, sucking hard on a tender earlobe. She failed to notice Olivia's change of mood in her haste to have her way with her gorgeous lover. Hot desire pushed away the more troubling thoughts she'd been warring with all night. She just wanted to get lost in pleasure, find some peace, a feeling of control, somewhere in her life. And Olivia was her safe place, where better to let herself go?

"Natalia!" Olivia said, her voice rising anxiously, finally breaking into Natalia's thoughts. "I said, STOP."

Natalia immediately froze, her plan to forget everything in the arms of her lover disappearing with the anguished tones of Olivia's voice. She moved away as if struck, a hand covering her mouth in embarrassment as she realized her lover was not on the same page with her at the moment. Not at all.

"Olivia, baby, I'm so sorry," Natalia said, feeling horrible as Olivia bent over, hands on her knees, struggling to get herself under control again. She carefully moved forward, tentatively putting a hand on Olivia's back and massaging the tense muscles there, trying to get her to relax.

"No, I'm sorry," Olivia hung her head, frustrated with herself. "I just freaked out a little there." She looked up and met concerned dark eyes. Eyes that she remembered seeing before this whole kidnapping thing had taken her Natalia away. A spark of hope flared in Olivia's chest that maybe her old Natalia was still inside, struggling to return to her soon. "I guess with that Howard case in all the newspapers, it kind of brings up old stuff for me."

"I didn't think, querida," Natalia murmured softly, her heart breaking at her thoughtlessness, gladly moving into a warm embrace as Olivia held her close. She snuffled along the collar of Olivia's sleep shirt, breathing the clean scent of her lover in, settling her spinning mind. Olivia pressed into Natalia's hair, doing the same and dropping soft kisses to her head.

"Could we move this to the bed?" Olivia asked hesitantly after a while, not wanting to be far from Natalia's warmth. She hated feeling so fragile, and yet she trusted Natalia to be there for her, to not ridicule or reject her. "Maybe we could just snuggle together for a bit?"

"Of course," Natalia leaned back, meeting troubled green eyes. She reached up and caressed the soft cheek, smiling softly. "I'd really like that."

Natalia quickly changed into her night clothes, flicked the lights off and together they slid under the covers, instinctively making their way to the center of the bed. They wrapped around each other, arms and legs tangled together, providing much needed comfort. Focusing on the other's breathing in the darkness, time passed as the familiarity and love calmed them down like nothing else ever could.

"We're so messed up," Natalia eventually whispered against Olivia's shoulder, not even sure she was awake anymore until she felt a soft kiss dropped on her head.

"At least we're messed up together," Olivia murmured sleepily near her lover's ear. Natalia smiled and snuggled closer.

At least they had that.

Act III

Bright and early Tuesday morning, Leyla shuffled bleary eyed through the farmhouse living room, making her way to the coffee maker, desperately needing something to bring her back to the living. It had been a late night, with Jonathan taking her out for an early Valentine's Day dinner and dancing as she would be working Tuesday night with the Beacon overnight camp. Yawning, she ran her hand into her long dark hair, scratching at the back of her skull where a headache was still throbbing. Glancing up, she nearly jumped out of her skin at the sudden movement of an intruder.

"Aaahh!!" Leyla yelled, pulling up short as she realized it was just Ava sitting at the kitchen table, quietly tapping away on her laptop.

"Jesus, wake the whole house, why don't you?" Ava frowned up at the dishevelled woman, shaking her head. Shadow looked up from her feet before standing and coming over to greet her, sniffing at Leyla's pink fuzzy slippers.

"What the hell are you doing here? You scared the crap out of me." Leyla felt her heart beat slowly returning to normal, her headache returning with a vengeance. Shooing the dog out of her way impatiently, Leyla made her way to the freshly brewed coffee. As much as Ava irritated her, she was extremely grateful that the bane of her existence had at least made a pot.

"I'm picking the munchkin up and taking her to school. Mom called me last night and said that Em might need someone to bitch to and she knew that you would be super busy today getting ready for this Valentine's thing you've got going. So here I am at the crack of dawn."

Ava grinned, watching as the other woman stirred the coffee in her mug before shuffling over to the table and plopping down onto the chair beside her.

"Oh, that was nice of her," Leyla sipped her coffee, enjoying the warmth of the liquid as it slid down into the pit of her stomach. "You're here awfully early, aren't you?"

"I'm just a morning person I guess." Ava stood, evading the question somewhat and poured herself more coffee, carefully adding some sugar and cream. She didn't want to admit that she hadn't been sleeping very well lately and figured she should do something useful with her time, instead of just staring up at the ceiling of her Beacon suite from her bed. She turned back to find Leyla checking out what site she had been looking at on the laptop.

"Hey, did I say you could look at that?"

"The Springfield Rainbow Connection?" Leyla snorted as Ava quickly yanked the computer back towards her side of the table. "Getting really desperate there, Peralta?"

"Shut up. What do you know about it anyway?" Ava grumbled and started to click away from the site. She didn't really want to broadcast that she was registering herself, and her father, for this service. Besides, who knew what might turn up out of this little adventure? Instead, she glared harder at the chuckling woman next to her.

"I know that I would not let Greg play fairy godmother with my love life, that's what." Leyla smirked, getting up to make some toast, waking up a little more every second with this opportunity to torment the other woman.

"It's scientifically sorted and matched with people who have similar interests to your own," Ava growled back as Leyla snorted into her drink in disbelief.

"Right. Scientific," Leyla grinned back, enjoying this more and more. "Greg and his boyfriend sit in their apartment and mix and match profiles while watching the *Big Bang Theory*. That's scientific, isn't it?" Leyla teased, rolling her eyes at the increasingly annoyed woman beside her. "Did you have to include a picture? I hear Greg in the staff room complaining that there are no pretty people left in Springfield."

"You know what? Just shut up." Ava frowned at that last comment, biting her bottom lip. Maybe this wasn't such a good plan after all. Too late now though, as she'd already set up her and her father's online profiles and would just need to wait for matches to start rolling in. Ava glanced up as she heard approaching footsteps.

"Ah, good. I thought I heard World War Three going on down here," Olivia said, tightening the tie on her robe and yawning as she came into the kitchen. She went over and dropped a kiss to the top of Ava's head. "Good morning, Trouble junior." She smiled down at the two young women before heading towards the coffee maker. "Thank you for doing this for me, sweetie, I'm sure Jellybean will have lots to talk about on the way to school, especially how mean and heartless I am."

"That's just your natural charm, my dear," Natalia said coming in from the living room with a squirming Francesca in her arms. "Good morning, ladies. It seems all our girls are up early today." Ava and Leyla just grinned at her as Francesca started to make a fuss as she was slipped into her high chair.

"You just need some coffee in that sippy cup, kid, trust me." Olivia came over, handing a steaming mug to Natalia with a quick kiss and then running her fingers through Francesca's dark curls, the motion soothing the child. She glanced over at the computer screen to see what all the grumping had been about. "Ava, is that a computer dating site?"

"It's Greg's new business. He's been trying to get all the maids to sign up the last few weeks. I think he's doing okay with it actually," Leyla said, before Ava could respond. "And Ava is the latest sucker ... er ... recruit."

"I wish you would mind your own fu..." Ava glared at Leyla, watching her language as she noticed Emma making her way into the kitchen. "Um...business."

"Are you two fighting again?" Emma asked, rubbing at some sleep in her eye and yawning. Seeing Natalia standing by the fridge, the girl made an abrupt turn and went to sit down at the kitchen table next to Ava, her eyebrows descending like a thundercloud. Natalia sighed and glanced over at Olivia sadly. This needed to be resolved, and soon.

"I could ask you the same thing, sleepyhead," Ava said, smiling at her little sister. Emma chanced a glance over at both her moms and then back up to Ava hesitantly.

"I don't want to talk about it right now," Emma said quietly. She knew she'd hurt Natalia's feelings but she didn't know how to make things better. She expected her Mom to be upset about cutting class with Kevin but it was the lecture about showing Natalia some respect that had really hit home. "I'll fill you in later."

"Okay," Olivia said clapping her hands together and making her way towards the stove. "In honor of Valentine's Day, I think we all need a little of my world famous heart-shaped blueberry pancakes with maple syrup and strawberries on top. Who wants some?"

Ava, Leyla and Emma all put up their hands immediately, with Francesca banging her spoon on the high chair tray in total agreement with her big sisters. Natalia kissed her partner on the shoulder and nodded her head too.

"Unanimous vote," Olivia grinned, reaching for a bowl to start mixing ingredients. "Just the way I like to run my boardroom and my kitchen."

With Olivia manning the stove making breakfast before everyone headed out for their respective days, Natalia quickly dressed and escaped to get the mail. She carefully made her way down the lane, her boots squeaking in the freshly fallen snow, the cool winter air refreshing after all that hot air in the house. She shook her head, not knowing how to get Leyla and Ava to stop trying to kill each other. If she didn't know better she'd think they were attracted to each other.

Natalia ground to a halt, the thought taking root in her mind.

"No way..." A car passed on the road, shaking Natalia from her fanciful thoughts. She cocked her head and glanced back at the house, watching as Leyla came bounding out of the house towards her little car. Surely Leyla would have said something to her if she leaned that way, wouldn't she?

Frowning, she decided to think about this more later, and turned back to the task at hand, crossing the road to the mailbox. The small red flag creaked back down into place with a flick of her wrist, and she bent over to yank the *Springfield Journal* out of its separate delivery box, tucking it securely under her arm.

Turning, Natalia glanced up as Leyla's car pulled up at the end of the lane, the girl grinning wildly and waving at her before turning left and heading into town. Waving back at the departing vehicle, Natalia started back down the lane to the farmhouse, following the tire tracks as she started rifling through the mail.

"Bills, bills, junk mail, flyer about a shoe sale," Natalia crumpled that one up and tucked it into her pocket. Better safe than sorry. There was no need to tempt Olivia into buying yet another pair of shoes. She paused as she came across an envelope with very familiar handwriting. Natalia's eyes widened.

Dear God, it couldn't be, could it?

"Mama?" Natalia flipped the envelope over and, sure enough, the return address was that of her parents. She and the girls had made Valentine's cards and mailed them out over a week ago. She never expected a response and as she ripped open the envelope and tugged out the letter, she still couldn't quite believe it.

In the neat, slanting handwriting that she remembered so well, "Grandma" Rivera thanked Emma and Francesca for the beautiful card and fridge art they had sent. Natalia smiled softly, thinking back to the old kitchen she grew up in, the smell of baking bread and flour in the air, her mother putting up her artwork fresh from school, proudly displayed on the fridge. Knowing that Emma and Francesca's paintings would be displayed there now too, just as proudly, warmed her heart.

Her mother had included a paragraph at the bottom meant for her, noting that as soon as Leyla had called to tell them about her having gone missing, she had lit candles and prayed to God every day that He would bring her home safe and sound. She couldn't express how happy she was to have her prayers answered. It ended signed with love and an invitation to come visit them in Chicago, or if more convenient, they would come to her.

Natalia could tell by the smudged ink and small stains on the fine paper that her mother had been crying as she wrote the last part, and her heart nearly melted then and there.

God, she missed her mother.

Looking up, Natalia suddenly realized she was standing on the porch. The back door opened, with Olivia popping her head out to find her staring at the letter.

"Everything all right?" Olivia asked, concerned at the tears welling in her lover's eyes. Natalia just offered a watery smile and nodded, handing over the letter as she came in out of the cold. Shutting the door, Olivia quickly scanned the letter, her eyebrows rising higher on her forehead with each word.

"Or come visit us?" Olivia said reaching the bottom of the letter. "Ok, who is this and what happened to that old lady who sent you packing from her home?" She glanced up as Natalia sank down onto the kitchen chair, still slightly in shock.

"I don't know," Natalia said softly, a quiet joy radiating from her. "But I'm sure glad this new Carmen Rivera has decided to become a part of my family again."

It was a typical Tuesday in Chicago, the city busy and boisterous, downtown traffic moving slowly and everyone honking their displeasure, while people walked with purpose down the sidewalks, ignoring the dropping temperatures biting at them as they scurried to their destinations. Inside a trendy little bistro, Brooke sat looking over the lunch menu waiting patiently for her friend to arrive.

"Hey sexy, want some company?" A deep voice said from behind Brooke, but she easily recognized it. Turning she grinned, knowing she was right.

"Michael Thorne, you know I'm not your type." Brooke stood and wrapped her arms around the very handsome man. Quickly returning the hug with a warm laugh, the tall man moved back, took his designer sunglasses off and tucked them into his jacket pocket as he sat in the chair opposite her.

"That's never stopped me from trying, doc," Michael flashed a wide grin and leaned back in his chair. "You are looking fantastic, my dear. Getting rid of Nikki was the best medicine for you."

"God, I don't even want to talk about her anymore, I've spent too much time and energy on it all," Brooke rolled her eyes and took a sip of her cappuccino. "Both houses are on the market now and once they're sold, I'll be leaving the city for good, I think."

"Oh, really? Where are you headed to?" Michael asked, catching the eye of their server now headed towards them.

"The same place you are, if the rumor mill is correct, Chief Thorne." Brooke grinned at her friend, who just laughed back at her.

"Busted," Michael nodded though, confirming the scuttlebutt. "I start in a few weeks, once I've finalized a few cases I've got in the works." They paused to order their food from the

thin young man who appeared at their table to take their order. Finally disappearing, their conversation picked up again.

"Breeona is going to love it in Springfield," Brooke said softly, knowing the man's adopted daughter needed a little stability in her life. Rescuing the child from the crazy life of his crack addicted cousin had been an act of mercy not many single men would have stepped up for. Michael's eyes shone with love and pride at the mere mention of his little girl.

"That was part of the reason I wanted to get out of the city. Settle into a regular routine with her, a safer community and a slower lifestyle. With this new job, I can be home for dinner every night." Michael said with a sigh. It had been a tough haul the last year or so, both of them adjusting to each other and their new family unit. Brooke had been so helpful, giving him good advice about how to deal with Bree's outbursts and tantrums. For a five-year-old the girl had a lot of anger in her. Not that he could blame her.

"Well, that's worth it right there," Brooke said gently. "Oh, before I forget..." She bent and grabbed her small bag, rooting through it to find a business card. Smiling, she slid it across the tabletop to her friend. "Here's a local real estate agent. Doris swears by her, but then it's her girlfriend so she would."

Michael laughed but tucked the card into his pocket. He wasn't sure how long the interim Chief of Police gig would last, but what he'd seen of Springfield he had liked a lot. And if Brooke moved there too, he already had a friendly face to hang with. This new adventure was shaping up to be one of the best decisions he'd made in a very long time.

"I hear they've hired the new interim Chief," Eleni said dropping into the chair across from Anna Li, sliding a paper cup of coffee across the detective's desk. Remy Boudreaux glanced up from the report he was working on, and stood abruptly when Anna gave him the evil eye and casually disappeared from the shared office space.

"Yeah," Anna smiled at Eleni, grateful for the break, and more than willing to gossip a little with her friend now that they were relatively alone. "He's a hot shot detective from Chicago PD clearly making his move up the ladder. Mike Thorne knows his stuff though. He's a smart cop, and I think it's a good move for the department." Anna's eyes narrowed, noticing that Eleni was looking tired. Something seemed off with the woman, and it didn't seem like just the usual stress of her job. More likely it had something to do with that idiot ex-husband of hers again. The woman could do so much better than Frank Cooper, it amazed her that Eleni

still seemed to want the bumbling fool after all these years. Wasn't love grand? "Hey, what's going on with you? You seem a little worn around the edges and distracted."

"It's Frank," Eleni sighed and shook her head, her long curls swaying around her shoulders. It seemed like that was all she worried about these days, and she wasn't sure that it was very healthy for her to do so.

"God, I'm going to need something a lot stronger than coffee for this, aren't I?" Anna teased, pleased with the look Eleni shot back at her. Apparently she was not in a teasing mood about it yet. Anna shifted in her chair and refocused. "Sorry, go on."

"He's thinking of trying to get full custody of Francesca. Apparently some lawyer has told him he has a shot at it too," Eleni finally blurted out, frustrated by the man's lack of foresight. "Not a good plan, especially as things are running so smoothly between them. This will blow it all out of the water and Frank will be left crying in the dust."

"It would get pretty messy, all right." Anna shook her head in disbelief. She knew the Chief was hurting because of Marina, but he was a fool to try to attack that family. Olivia would destroy him, gladly, and Anna didn't think very many people would stop it, except perhaps the woman sitting across from her.

"The other thing is I'm starting to get the feeling that Frank is still hung up a little on Natalia," Eleni sighed and glanced down at her coffee cup, swirling the liquid inside a little. Jealousy was not a pretty emotion, but she couldn't help it. "Some of the things he says, his anger at Olivia 'stealing' Natalia away from him, and well, it's beginning to piss me off."

"Aw, sweetie, you have nothing to worry about there," Anna said gently, leaning forward to make her point. "Frank is all talk; in fact he probably doesn't even realize half the stuff he says is hurting you." Anna was encouraged as Eleni cocked her head to the side, listening and wanting to believe. "You need to talk to Frank, make him see reason. You should tell him how you feel and that this Natalia thing is starting to bother you. After all, does he want you in his future or not? If he does, then it's time for him to let those old wounds heal and move on to a new beginning with you."

Eleni glanced back up at her friend, suddenly feeling a lot better, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Instead of reacting to Frank and his moods, she would take a stand. Anna made sense; she needed to tell Frank what she thought and felt about this all too. He'd been wallowing in self pity long enough and it was time that he realized that there were other people hurting here too.

Straightening her shoulders, Eleni decided to call Frank when she returned to her office and hopefully they could meet up to talk. It was time to get all their lives back on the right path again.

Buzz stood behind the counter at Company, wiping a damp cloth along the already clean surface as his thoughts churned and swirled around his mind. What was Frank thinking, going after Natalia for custody of Francesca?

The little bell above the front door chimed and Buzz glanced up, surprised to see the subject of his thoughts walking into the restaurant. Frank rubbed at the stubble on his chin, and slowly made his way towards the counter, before sliding onto a stool.

"Hey, Pop," Frank said quietly, not sure of his feelings right now, just knowing that they needed to talk this out before it got really blown out of proportion.

"I didn't think you were coming in for your shift, after everything last night." Buzz continued to wipe and clean the spotless counter top, avoiding Frank's eyes.

"Are you kidding? I feel useful when I'm here helping out." Frank unzipped his winter jacket and slipped it off his shoulders. His voice dropped slightly, growing softer. "I feel closer to Marina here."

Buzz glanced up at that admission, his eyes locking with Frank's. He felt the same way, like any second Marina would come bustling in, complaining about something unimportant, but it was always just a random movement he noticed out of the corner of his eye.

"I do too, Frank." Buzz ran a hand through his thinning hair and sighed. "I'm sorry I blew up at you last night, Frank. I think part of it was my grief talking."

"Your grief?" Frank frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I guess I was afraid you were trying to replace Marina with Francesca, and that's not fair. Marina was..." Buzz paused, looking for the right word.

"A pain in the ass," Frank grinned as Buzz chuckled and nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, she was that. But she was our pain in the ass, y'know?" Buzz leaned against the counter and squinted at Frank, hoping he could find the right words. "And I know you think getting full custody of Francesca will fill that gaping wound in your heart, but son, let me tell you, nothing ever fills that hole. It's never the same, and it never will be."

They stared at each other for a few moments, understanding and pain flowing between them. Frank's eyes grew dark and sad, tears starting to well.

"How do I get past it, Pop? It's not natural for a parent to outlive their child, and then to be the one responsible for..." Frank glanced away, wiping at his eyes with his sleeve, the pain too hard to continue. Buzz reached out across the counter, squeezing his son's hand.

"I can't know how you feel, Frank, but I do know that eventually you will move on with your life. And while you still have that Marina shaped wound where your heart used to be, you will move on. You will build your life around the hole, and while it's never the same, it will be okay." Buzz's eyes welled with tears, life having taught him tough lessons over time too. "I promise."

Frank nodded, putting his other hand over his father's and squeezing back. He prayed his father was right.

"I regret my hard words last night. You're my son; I only want what's best for you," Buzz cocked his head to the side, hoping that Frank understood. "And I'm sorry if I hurt you."

Frank sighed and stood, coming back behind the counter, and wrapped his arms around the old man.

"We're family, Pops," Frank hugged his father closer. "It's what we do. Look out for each other, and tell each other the truth, even when it hurts. I love you."

"I love you too, son," Buzz said, his voice thick with emotion. The two men stayed like that for a moment longer before slapping each other heartily on the back and shifting apart.

"Well, that's not whose arms I figured you would be in on Valentine's Day, Buzz," Eleni said from the other side of the counter, tugging off her leather gloves, her heart aching to see both men so tender with each other. Buzz just waved his hand at her, and grumbled something gruffly under his breath as he headed towards the kitchen, surreptitiously swiping at his eyes.

Frank shook his head and pulled off his jacket, going to hang it up on the wall before making his way back to the counter.

"Listen about last night," Frank started before Eleni could say anything. "I was thinking, I was being an ass, and I wanted to say sorry, to Pop, and to you too. I was so glad you called and wanted to talk." He watched carefully, trying to gauge her emotions as Eleni glanced down and then back up, meeting his eyes with a steady calm gaze.

"So you're not going to proceed with taking custody from Natalia?" Eleni asked softly, relieved when Frank shook his head and rubbed at his neck.

"I think that lawyer was just trying to get me to spend a bunch of money I don't have, on a case that I don't know I can win. I'm so sorry for what I said last night too. You didn't abandon anyone. Marina was the one with a chip on her shoulder where you were concerned. " Frank grabbed the damp cloth from the counter top and continued wiping the smooth surface, instinctively needing to do something with his hands. "Besides, who am I kidding with that lame custody battle idea? Natalia is a great mother; I've seen it for myself, time and time again. I never would have won and I only would have screwed up the good relationship we have now. I guess I was just hoping that I could prove that I was a good father and that I didn't screw Marina up by trying to raise Francesca as the perfect daughter. That's not fair to anyone."

"Frank, you already are a good father; you don't need to prove anything." Eleni leaned closer, reaching out to still his cold hand, and squeezing tight. "I'm sorry too. Not just for our words last night, but for everything. I'm sorry for hurting you all those years ago and disappearing out of your lives, leaving you as a single father to finish raising our girl." Eleni shifted slightly in her stool, knowing that she needed to continue, if they were going to have any chance together again. "I am a little concerned about your attitude towards Natalia."

"What about Natalia?" Frank frowned suddenly, not sure what his ex was talking about.

"It's as if you're still..." Eleni squirmed a little, searching for the right words. "I don't know. I guess you seem still hung up on her. Like Olivia stole her away and you want to get her back somehow. Like she's still yours, or that you still want to be with Natalia that way, in a relationship. I hate to break it to you, but that ship has sailed, honey, and you need to get over that and start to focus on what is right here on the horizon."

Frank swallowed hard, going over the various conversations he'd had lately. It was the last thing he wanted to alienate Eleni. He truly hoped they could get back on track, now that his world was calming back down to some semblance of normalcy.

"Eleni, I don't love Natalia, and I know there is no future with her. She was an ideal, a crazy perfect wife that never existed anywhere but in my mind," Frank said slowly, making sure that Eleni heard every word. "I know deep down that I have no one to blame but myself for that delusion."

"Well, some of that can be put on Natalia too, for not coming clean about her true feelings," Eleni added, not wanting Frank to shoulder all the blame, especially if Natalia had been confused about what she really wanted and used him as a cover until she figured herself out and who she really wanted.

"True." Frank snorted at that, pleased that someone was on his side for a change. He felt better knowing that they had cleared the air. "I'm sorry if I made you feel like you weren't important to me, because you are, Eleni."

They smiled at each other a moment longer, before Eleni stood.

"I've got to go. I've a meeting at two that I can't miss," Eleni said, regret coloring her voice. "I'll call you later, okay?" She grinned as Frank nodded, wiping at the counter again with his cloth. Dashing to the door, she stepped out into the cold February afternoon, pleased with how things had been left.

It was turning into a good day after all.

Natalia tapped on Olivia's office door, pushing it open a little to see if she was there. Sitting behind her desk, Olivia glanced up and smiled, waving her in as she continued her conversation on the phone.

"Now don't you feel better about the whole thing, Doris? Less pressure on yourself is a good thing." Olivia's eyes met Natalia's as she came into the room and slid into the nearest chair.

Running a hand through her thick dark hair, Natalia felt regret wash over her, at how insensitive she had been with her lover. She should have thought before she acted. A ball of

fear sat in her stomach, that she had hurt the woman she so dearly loved with her thoughtless actions.

"Okay, have fun tonight, Wolfe. Don't do anything I wouldn't." Olivia smirked and then hung up her phone, still chuckling to herself. She stood and made her way out from behind her desk, pulling Natalia out of her chair and into her arms.

"Hi beautiful," Olivia murmured, before capturing the full lips that had been tempting her since Natalia had entered the room. Natalia melted into her, not deepening the kiss, but clearly needing to feel their love and connection as much as she did. Reluctantly they pulled apart, Olivia pressing her forehead to Natalia's, enjoying the old familiar gesture of affection. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Oh, not much," Natalia sighed happily, running her hand along the older woman's back, feeling the warmth of her lover beneath her fingertips. "I was just about to head out and pick up the girls and get them ready for their overnight camp and wanted to say goodbye."

Olivia smiled tenderly, bringing a hand up to gently brush a dark strand from Natalia's forehead. Last night had been just one of those nights, tough on both of them, but in the bright light of a new day, everything seemed okay again. She wanted to check in with her lover though, making sure that Natalia was on the same page.

"Are we okay?" Olivia asked softly, her eyes locking and holding the dark chocolate ones before her. She watched as Natalia swallowed hard and nodded in response.

"I think we are. I didn't mean to-" Natalia fidgeted, worried about Olivia's reaction last night.

"I know you didn't, I just..." Olivia blew out a long frustrated breath, running a hand into her hair and moving to sit on the edge of her desk. Natalia followed her, stepping between her legs, not wanting to give up the warmth of her embrace. Olivia glanced up and smiled at Natalia's intense stare, obviously concerned. "It just triggered something; it's not that it was bad. I was pretty turned on at first actually. Make up sex with you is always good and you are pretty hot when you know what you want and go for it. But something just reminded me of..." She struggled for her words for a moment. "Everything that happened back then with Jeffrey."

Natalia clenched her jaw not trusting herself to speak. Instead she leaned in and dropped a sweet kiss to Olivia's lips. Those demons would never truly be exorcised from Olivia's mind, but she would do her best to help her through those moments. Just like she knew Olivia

would be there for her, when she struggled with her kidnapping too. Pulling apart, Natalia held her close a moment longer.

"I love you, no matter what. So yes, we are definitely okay, if you're okay," Natalia murmured into the honey blonde hair, sighing happily as Olivia snuggled closer and squeezed her tight.

"Good," Olivia said, smiling as Natalia stepped out of her embrace.

"I'll see you at home later, I've got to get going or I'll be late," Natalia said, quickly checking her watch. School would be out soon and she didn't want to annoy Emma even more. Making her way across the office, she turned and sent a cute little wave over her shoulder to Olivia before heading out the door.

"Spencer, you are one lucky, lucky woman." Olivia said, tucking her hands into her pants pockets, enjoying the swaying backside of her lover disappearing from her view. Maybe she could sneak home a little early herself...

Emma opened the fridge door and looked for the carton of milk. Pulling it out she reached up into the nearest cupboard and pulled out her favorite mug, a white one with Mickey Mouse on the front. Grandpa Alan had brought it back from that last trip he had taken to Florida. Lizzie had said that she was glad now that they had been able to spend time together. Emma sighed and poured the milk into the mug. She missed the old man, not that she could really say that to anyone. She found a bag of cookies and trudged into the living room, just as Natalia came down the stairs.

"Hey, there you are," Natalia said warmly. Their short trip from school had been in silence, only Francesca's sweet babbling from her car seat filling the air. "Only a couple cookies, you don't want to ruin your appetite, okay?"

Emma nodded, and dropped down onto the couch. Natalia glanced down at her feet, trying to figure out what to say next, to work their way back to each other.

"Ma?" Emma said quietly, picking up the remote to drop the television volume down. "That letter from Grandma Rivera, it made you cry this morning. Why?"

Natalia's eyebrows rose, but she came over and sat next to the girl.

"Well, my Mama and I have been upset and angry with each other for a very long time. We didn't talk for years, which hurt both of us badly." Natalia paused looking for the best way to explain. She looked into the little earnest face beside her and opted for the plain truth.

"When I-I was kidnapped, I think she realized all that we've missed over the years, Jellybean. We got lost in our crazy argument and forgot the most important thing, that we love each other. And that is all that matters in the end."

Emma dipped her cookie into her milk and then chewed thoughtfully.

"I guess I feel like I'm being pulled in so many different directions lately and I don't know what to think or feel. There are all these new things I want to explore, cute boys I want to talk to," Emma blushed a little, smiling as Natalia started to rub her back, calming her with the slow movement. "I feel lost sometimes too."

"I know, baby," Natalia sighed and pulled Emma closer, hugging her narrow little shoulders. It was too much for one girl to figure out by herself. "You know I feel that way sometimes too and it's okay to feel like that. You just need to remember that we're all your family and you can talk to us anytime about what's bugging you."

Emma nodded, pulling two cookies from the bag and handing one to Natalia, both of them dipping them into the mug of milk and giggling together.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings with what I said at Company." Emma said sadly, the look on Natalia's face still haunting her. She never wanted to see her Ma that sad and hurt again by anything she said or did. Natalia just smiled down at her and bumped her with her elbow.

"You know what? No matter what you say or do, I will *always* be there for you." Natalia leaned back on the couch, pulling Emma to her and pulling the blanket down and tucking it around them. "I love you like you were my very own baby. And don't you ever forget it."

Emma shook her head, tears falling as she snuggled closer as Natalia dropped a kiss on the girl's head. She played with Emma's hair a little and they just held each other tight, staying like that for a long time.

In the kitchen, Olivia wiped away her tears, very glad she had decided to sneak home early from work.

Phillip looked into the rear-view mirror of his SUV and met the happy eyes of Emma twinkling back at him.

"Ok girls, the Space Shuttle Spaulding is now taking off for Planet Beacon. Fasten your seatbelts and keep your arms inside the vehicle at all times. I don't need to explain how you were abducted by aliens to your parents," Phillip announced as he put the car in gear and pulled down the driveway of the farmhouse. Emma giggled and pressed her nose against the window, waving goodbye to her moms standing on the porch. Francesca sat in her car seat, happily watching Emma waving. Peyton sat on the other side of her playing with her Barbie dolls.

Phillip grinned and pulled out onto the road heading back into town. He had left Beth scurrying around like a mad woman, preparing a special meal for just the two of them tonight.

"Daddy?" Emma piped up from the back seat.

"Yes Jellybean?" Phillip glanced back at his daughter.

"Do you miss Grandpa Alan?" Emma was looking out the window, her eyes watching the fence posts streaming past as they drove. Phillip swallowed hard and cleared his throat thinking of what to say.

"Yes, sweetie, I miss your grandfather very much." Phillip sighed, wondering what was bothering his daughter. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Well..." Emma sighed, not sure if she really felt like it or not, but Natalia had said that she should tell her family what she was feeling, even if it seemed bad. "It's just, I miss Grandpa and sometimes I really miss Jane. And when Natalia was gone, I was afraid I'd never see her again. And now that she's back, I feel happy but also sad and angry and just...confused."

"It's okay to have feelings like that," Phillip nodded, slowing the car down a little to give them more time to talk. "I miss Grandpa Alan too but I learned a very important thing from him before he left us."

"What?" Emma turned to look up at her father in the mirror, their eyes locking.

"That your family is everything," Phillip said softly, knowing that at least the sometimes bitter grasping man had been right about that. "I know that I would do anything in my power to protect my daughters. Anything."

Phillip's mind flashed to another time, a time when things were dark and confusing for him, and yet he had clung to the idea that family was everything, and that he needed to protect his family at all cost. He was already heading down that slippery slope, his judgement in question. He didn't care though; he would take care of Lizzie one way or another. If Grady Foley wouldn't see reason one way, there were other solutions.

More...permanent solutions.

The wind whipped around them as they stood arguing, Grady not willing to listen, threatening to hurt Lizzie. It happened so quickly, shockingly so. He didn't even see what happened to the body, after he had pushed Grady over the edge, only registering the crack of underbrush breaking, rocks tumbling down the cliff and the sound of his own heart thundering in his chest.

Phillip blinked and quickly jerked the SUV back into the right lane, a car honking angrily in the oncoming lane.

"Daddy!" Emma gasped, scared by the close call.

"Sorry, baby. I just didn't see that car. Hang on girls, we're almost at the Beacon now." Phillip said quickly, trying to calm the girls. Emma stared up at him in the mirror like he had two heads as they pulled up to a stoplight and waited for it to change.

A part of him could understand his father's obsession with family. Phillip knew that he would still do anything for his children, protecting them at all costs, regardless of his own personal safety.

Maybe he was still that monster from not that long ago.

He didn't want to dwell on it right now. Not with his gorgeous, brilliant wife waiting for him at home, and his kids about to spend the night out of the house. Pulling into the Beacon parking lot, Phillip dropped the children off, kissing Emma and Peyton and making sure Leyla had Francesca, her staff ushering them inside, double checking that they had their backpacks for the night. Pulling back out into traffic, he sighed, trying to shake the dark turn his thoughts had taken.

Phillip would be damned if he let past regrets haunt him now. After all Valentine's Day was a time for love and passion, not anger and death.

Wasn't it?

Anna stirred her pot of soup carefully, adding a cup of barley to the simmering broth. There was nothing like homemade soup in the cold months of the year to warm the soul. Humming softly to the romantic song playing on her stereo she almost missed the sound of something crashing and falling outside her place. Putting the lid on her pot, she made her way towards the window and looked out, not able to see anything but the slowly lengthening shadows of late afternoon.

"Damn it, is Mr. Fluffybottom at it again?" Anna grumbled. Her neighbor's cat was infamous for getting into all sorts of trouble, not the least was knocking over garbage cans with his fuzzy bulk. Frowning, the cop in her wouldn't let it be. Anna shook her head and grabbed a running shoe, ready to toss it at that pesky cat and chasing him from her bins.

She yanked open the door to her home and froze, looking down.

It was a man, laying there in a heap. Kneeling down, she rolled the dark form over, the man's arm falling to one side to reveal his face, dark eyes staring up at her, lifeless. Anna gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. She would recognize the crazy bastard anywhere.

Edmund Winslow was dead.

Act IV

The police cruiser pulled up outside the apartment building, Eleni barely waiting for the car to stop before leaping out. Grabbing her black case, she hustled down the small alleyway to Anna's door. She'd been here on more than one occasion, for a chick-flick night just after Thanksgiving being the most recent time she could recall. Ducking under the yellow police tape, she determinedly headed straight for the huddle of cops.

When Eleni finally stopped, she stared down at the cold body sprawled on the ground, in the slush and debris, like so much garbage.

Edmund Winslow didn't seem so big and scary now.

"Clear some space, boys. I need to secure the scene for evidence," Eleni called out, the big lumbering cops shuffling reluctantly out of the way. She focused on her work, doing a thorough investigation, her work methodical and precise, by the book. Eleni was determined not to miss a thing. She stood and stretched taking a look around the alley, several crime scene investigators working near her, collecting anything that might lead to their killer.

And then Eleni finally saw her, standing off to the side, arms wrapped around her thin body as if hugging herself, comforting herself, when no one else could. Anna turned, as if sensing her gaze, their eyes locking.

This was not over for Anna.

It fact, it had only just begun, and Eleni knew it, from the dark look in the detective's eyes. She watched as Anna nodded to the young cop who had been taking her statement, and made her way over towards her.

"Well, it's not a bouquet of roses, but it's not a bad Valentine's Day present," Anna smirked and looked at her before glancing down at Winslow laying there. "Jeffrey O'Neill was pretty damn pleased about it too, when I called him."

"Do you know who did this?" Eleni asked, pulling her latex glove off with a snap. Anna leaned against the brick wall, and looked away, not wanting to actually admit anything. "I told them what happened," Anna said softly, jerking her chin towards the group of cops behind them. Eleni shook her head, not having any patience for games today. She placed her hand up on the wall next to Anna and leaned in.

"That's not what I asked you." Eleni stared hard into her friend's eyes, looking for the truth hidden there.

Anna blinked first.

"It's times like this I wished I smoked." Anna sighed and stared down at her feet, before glancing back up to meet Eleni's concerned gaze. "I know who did this. The weapon used was a garrotte, we found it stuffed in Winslow's pocket, and if I'm right it is most likely

made from the string of a cello, with a loop tied on each end." Anna pushed away from the wall, stuffing her hands deep into her leather jacket pocket, the cold seeming to seep into her very bones and out her dark eyes. "Y'know, my mother used to play the cello, on San Cristobel, before she..." Anna grew silent, disappearing into her memories, of a happier time filled with love, laughter and music. Shaking herself out of it and back into the here and now, she became the hardened cop once again. "The garrotte was my father's preferred method of assassination, silent and deadly. I just don't know if I can prove he did this." Eleni stared at her a moment longer, before she shook her head and moved away. What a fucked up mess. Her heart went out to her friend, but she wasn't sure what to say that would help. She pulled off the other latex glove and tossed them into her black case, not wanting to contaminate the crime scene.

"I've got to get the body down to the morgue and schedule a full autopsy for the morning," Eleni said finally, glancing down at the deceased. Hard to believe the damage this one man had caused for so many. Hopefully his death would bring peace to a lot of good people, one way or another. The trail of emotional wreckage the man had caused was far and wide and she for one was glad the bastard was dead.

"I think you'll find his neck was snapped, his larynx crushed by with the garrotte. It's what he does." Anna said slipping her sunglasses out of her inner pocket and putting them on, hiding her eyes from Eleni's knowing gaze and shielding them from the setting sun. She'd revealed more than enough to the woman already. Eleni reached out and patted her on the shoulder, both women understanding the other more than they realized.

"I'll let you know the results as soon as I have them." Eleni moved away, eager to pick up her bags of evidence and samples.

"Thanks." Anna said softly, knowing that this was her responsibility now, that her life had come full circle and it was time to clean up the mess.

Eleni nodded and made her way back to the cruiser. Her team had at least another hour worth of work, combing the scene for any further evidence. From all indications though, the murderer was a pro who dumped the body. Whether it was Hung Li though, was yet to be determined.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, a part of Eleni was very glad the man who helped corrupt her daughter had met his end. It still didn't bring Marina back though. Nothing ever would.

Wiping quickly at the tears that welled in her eyes, Eleni sighed and checked her watch as an idea started to take hold.

Pulling out her cell phone, she scrolled through her contacts, looking for a number that was becoming more and more familiar. She wondered if all their salvation would be found in the eyes of a certain little girl. She smiled as the other line picked up.

"Hi, is Natalia there?"

Frank sat a little stunned, staring at the television set with the breaking news of the death of Edmund Winslow splashed across the screen. There had been archive footage of the shooting spree from the summer, bodies everywhere and his stomach churned. Another thing he had failed at, protecting the innocent from that madman Winslow.

How the hell could he protect the average citizen when his own daughter had been duped by the bastard? Frank just sat shaking his head. Someone had done everyone a huge favor.

The doorbell chimed, taking him by surprise.

"Who could that be now?" Frank grumbled, and for a moment he actually considered ignoring it. Sighing, he ran a hand through his dark hair and made his way to the door. It rang again just as his hand hit the door knob.

"Hold your horses, I'm coming," Frank growled, swinging the door open with a whoosh. He froze mid-rant, as he realized that he very much wanted to see these visitors.

"Dada!" Francesca squeaked from her vantage point in Eleni's arms, looking every inch like a pink Michelin Man in her winter clothes.

"Baby!" Frank's eyes lit up, his arms reaching out to take his young daughter. "What a fantastic surprise!" His eyes met Eleni's and they smiled at each other. "My two best girls. Come in!"

"Happy Valentine's Day, Frank," Eleni said softly, following the giggling twosome back into the house, shutting the door behind her. "Natalia said we could have her overnight, if that's okay with you?" She slipped the diaper bag from her shoulder and smiled. It seemed like forever since she'd had a little one to look after. The smell of baby powder had brought back

so many memories. She watched Frank taking off the many layers of clothes, finally finding the wriggling child underneath.

"Okay by me? That's more than okay by me." Frank said picking his daughter back up and dropping kisses to Francesca's cool cheek making the small girl giggle in his arms. He smiled wider when Eleni leaned across and straightened the girl's dress, before leaning in to drop a kiss to her dark curls.

"Thank you, for this and for... well, for not giving up on me," Frank said shyly before looking up. "I was an ass and a drunken fool and too many other things to say, over the last little while, but you stuck by me. Thank you."

"Frank, we're family. I'll never give up on you." Eleni murmured, glancing into his dark eyes, meaning every word. Marina was gone and neither of them could bring her back. They would never forget the time they had spent together as a family, but it was time to start making new memories again.

"So what do we want for dinner?" She pulled out a few pans and opened up the fridge. A bottle of ketchup and a furry bowl of what had once possibly been macaroni and cheese greeted her. She quickly shut the door and turned back to look at Frank. "Okay, grocery shopping first and then we'll make something amazing for dinner."

Frank blinked, a little shocked at being told what to do, and yet liking it at the same time. He turned to his daughter wiggling happily in his arms.

"Well, you heard the lady, Princess. We've got some groceries to go shopping for. Let's get you bundled up again and grab Daddy's jacket and wallet and see what we can find." Frank's eyes danced with a quiet joy and for an instant he knew everything would be okay again someday. He leaned over and dropped a gentle kiss to Eleni's cheek.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?" He smiled, watching as Eleni smiled shyly, her eyes welling with unshed tears. "Apparently not, if that's your reaction." Frank grinned as Eleni snorted and swatted his shoulder.

It was just like old times and neither of them could be happier.

"Who was that?" Olivia asked, handing over a glass of red wine.

"Eleni just letting me know that Leyla had been great, getting Sweet Pea's stuff all ready for her and now Francesca is settled in at Frank's place, snug as a bug. I could hear him reading a bedtime story to her in the background." Natalia sighed taking the offered glass. "I hope Eleni's right, that spending some quality time with the baby will help snap him out of it a little more."

Olivia sank down onto the couch beside her lover, running her fingers into the long dark hair. Natalia closed her eyes and relaxed into her touch.

"Well, if anything can help, then being surrounded by those you love definitely will," Olivia said softly, smiling as Natalia's dark eyes blinked open as she listened to her words. "Maybe Frank needs a miracle to get him through all this and Francesca is just the girl for the job. After all, that little girl of ours is a gift from God, and don't you ever forget it."

Natalia stared into her lover's intense green eyes, searching for something intangible there and realized that Olivia meant it. She leaned forward and placed a light kiss to her sweet lips.

"You are my gift from God." Natalia murmured against full lips. For a moment she felt something deep inside stirring again, an abiding faith in something bigger than herself. That maybe God had a reason for everything and whether she liked it or not, His will would be done.

And then Natalia's mind returned to the woman in her arms, as something else began stirring. Olivia deepened their kiss, their tongues tangling and playing. A shiver of desire pulsed through her, but she held back from pushing Olivia for more, not wanting to spook her at all again. She needn't have worried, as their kiss broke and Olivia stared at her with unbridled lust.

"Well, what do you think about unwrapping your gift?" Olivia waggled her eyebrows as Natalia just shook her head. Standing, she took Natalia's hand, and pulled her up, before leading the way up the stairs. Pulling gently, Natalia took the lead, bringing Olivia back around to kiss her softly outside their room.

This time Natalia was determined there would be no rushing, no pushing or angling for control, just the simple give and take of lovers in the night. They made their way into the bedroom, and as Olivia disappeared into the bathroom, Natalia peeled her clothes off, sliding naked under the covers.

Her eyes closed, Natalia felt the mattress dip as Olivia came to bed. She felt Olivia gently kiss her bare shoulder, pulling a low moan from her throat.

Olivia grinned, shifting ever closer, dropping kisses along Natalia's elegant neck, seeking out familiar sensitive spots, thrilling at the sounds her lover made. Deep down, Olivia knew that Natalia needed something more from her. Last night the woman that had her pressed against the door was not the same sweet woman she knew from even a year ago. Natalia had felt safe enough to try to take her, to ravish her and she thrilled to the thought. Instinctively she knew that Natalia needed to be in control tonight, to feel powerful and strong, and truth be told a part of Olivia desperately wanted that too.

Olivia had not doubt of the strength of their love for each other, but there were times that she wanted to feel desired, overwhelmed by a lover's passion. Fucked to an inch of her life and left there spent and exhausted. Hopefully this would be her lucky night.

"Natalia, sweetie," Olivia whispered softly in to the dark hair, her fingers exploring along the soft skin of her lover's arms.

"Mmm, that feels so good," Natalia closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel of Olivia's silk nightshirt against her bare skin. Her partners roving hands began to explore more and more of her naked flesh, causing her to breathe harder, desire sparking to a flame.

"I want you," Olivia murmured, dipping her head to taste the salty tang of Natalia's flesh. "I want you to take me."

Natalia froze a moment, not sure she was hearing what she thought she was hearing.

"Olivia?" Natalia glanced over her shoulder at her smirking lover, wanting to be clear about what was being asked.

"I want you, deep inside, moving and filling me, making me yours and yours alone." Olivia nipped a tender earlobe. Natalia groaned, closing her eyes. "I want you to fuck me." Natalia's breath hitched and Olivia knew she had guessed correctly.

"A-are you sure?" Natalia's eyes were black and large with need, clearly wanting to take their honeymoon toy for a spin, but hadn't been exactly sure how to broach it with her lover.

"Absolutely." Olivia's eyes never wavered as she gently kissed Natalia's full lips. "I want my Valentine's Day surprise and you're just the woman to give it to me."

Natalia smiled seductively, dimples flashing as her heart filled with love. Somehow Olivia knew just how to make everything seem okay. Even her confusing feelings were okay, in the safety of their room, in the arms of her partner.

"Hey, it's just you and me here." Olivia husked, dropping soft kisses along Natalia's neck. "There are so many different ways to love each other and make love with each other, almost too many to count. Most importantly, I just want you to feel good, and if that means you're taking charge, then I want that too." Olivia tilted Natalia's chin higher, their eyes locking, making sure this was really okay with her partner. She had never seen Natalia's eyes so dark with desire. "Okay?"

"Okay," Natalia whispered, before crushing their lips together, rolling Olivia to her back and taking what was being freely offered. Breaking the kiss, Natalia looked down into bright green eyes, love and trust reflected back at her. "I love you, so much."

Olivia's eyes grew hooded as Natalia moved from their bed, walking to the dresser where their toy was kept and taking it out. With one final glance over her shoulder, Natalia disappeared into their bathroom.

"Happy Valentine's Day, my love," Olivia whispered, knowing they were finally on the right path, together.

Natalia tugged the last leather strap tight and secured the buckle before standing and taking a deep breath. The dildo stood proudly from her body and a tremor of excitement shivered down her spine. Glancing into the mirror over the sink Natalia caught sight of someone she wasn't sure she recognized anymore.

And maybe that was a good thing.

Natalia straightened her shoulders and ran a hand through her dark waves of hair. If she couldn't explore this new side of herself in the safety of her home, in the arms of the woman who trusted and believed in her, then where else could she?

Taking a deep breath, she opened the bathroom door and stepped out, her eyes immediately finding Olivia lounging on their bed, waiting for her. Olivia sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, the pink silk nightshirt falling open, revealing tempting curves beneath. She flipped the light off and swallowed hard, slowly advancing on the delightful creature before her, her heart thundering in her chest.

Several candles had been lit around the room, and soft music played in the background. Everything had a soft glow, including the sweet flesh of her lover. Natalia knew that it had been so long, too long, since they had been so vulnerable, so intimate with each other. Between broken ribs, long hours at work, and even longer hours at home, making dinners and changing diapers and a million and one sundry things, they had been lucky to fall into bed together at night, whisper their good nights and fall asleep exhausted in each other's arms. And yet, that was love too. Not the romantic bouquet of roses your partner spends way too much on, or a flashy piece of jewelry or an expensive dinner at a trendy restaurant, although those were nice too. Their love was deeper, shared day in and day out, 365 days a year. It was a lasting love that feeds your mind, body and spirit for years to come.

"Natalia?" Olivia rasped, her voice low and unsure, drawing Natalia's thoughts back to the woman waiting for her, clearly wanting, needing her touch. Natalia stepped across the room, pausing as she came close, moving between her lover's legs, forcing Olivia to spread them wider. She moved closer still and reached out, slowly threading her fingers into the thick honey blonde hair, as Olivia dropped soft kisses to her bare stomach. Her cock pressed up between their bodies and she felt the pressure against her clit, sending a shiver of desire through her. She pulled the oversized silk shirt from Olivia's shoulders, letting it fall in a pink heap behind her on the bed sheets, leaving her lover naked, except for her panties, sitting on their bed, wet and wanting.

"Please..." Olivia murmured against the skin of her twitching belly. Natalia smiled and dipped her head to gently kiss her lover, one hand slipping to cup a lush breast, squeezing and twisting the erect nipple she found there, the other moving lower to tease along the band of her black lace underwear.

"You still have too much on, Trouble." Natalia moaned into the kiss and slipped inside the scant barrier finding Olivia more than ready for her. Olivia gasped and bucked against her fingers, wanting, needing more.

A shiver ran down Natalia's spine as she glanced at Olivia, trust and desire found deep in the depths of her eyes. Natalia could have sworn she felt her cock twitch as she bent over

and quickly claimed her partner's full lips, her hand stroking through the wet heat of her lover.

"On your back," Natalia grinned as Olivia raised an eyebrow, and lay back. Hooking her thumbs into the band of the underwear, Natalia pulled the thin scrap of lace down long legs and stripped it from her lover's body. Running her hands possessively back up and along the silky smooth skin of Olivia's thighs, she moved her fingertips along the flushed flesh, her heart beginning to thunder.

Crawling up onto the bed beside Olivia, Natalia felt the dildo press between their bodies again, a part of her and not. Olivia kissed her, and reached down between them, her hand wrapping around the thick toy, gauging its girth and hardness as she moved it slowly against Natalia's body. Natalia gasped at the sensations this caused, and she knew that she needed to be inside Olivia, moving deep and sure.

"Roll over, onto your knees," Natalia husked, pleased as Olivia did as requested. She moved then too, coming up behind Olivia's body, her fingers tracing along the tender skin of Olivia's back, following the curve of her perfect body down. She listened to her lover's body, which wanted, yearned for more with each passing moment. Slipping along the indents at the base of the spine, her thumbs dipped down into the crack of Olivia's ass as she spread the flushed cheeks ever so slightly. Olivia moaned and rolled her hips beneath her roving hands, needing more.

"Tell me what you want," Natalia's voice was low and breathy as she glanced lower still and noticed just how wet Olivia had become. She wanted to hear her lover say it, to tell her how badly she needed her cock, how desperately she needed to come. She watched as if in a trance as Olivia's head lowered, moaning softly, pressing her forehead down to the mattress, causing her ass to push up and her legs to spread even more.

Natalia's breath caught at the wanton sight before her, her body throbbing with desire. She maneuvered the cock along the inside of Olivia's leg, trailing along the tender skin, making her way oh so slowly to where they both wanted her to be.

"I want you, all of you. Inside. Please..." Olivia gasped, her gravelly voice causing Natalia to swallow hard, turning her on. She needed to be deep inside, now. She teased through Olivia's moist heat with her fingers, thrusting in slightly and pulling out again, finding her and separating her, enjoying the gasp of anticipation this produced from her lover.

A part of Natalia wanted to take Olivia quick and hard, but she held back, denying herself. Her clit throbbed almost painfully, her own need making itself known, desperately wanting to grind away until she had been satisfied as well. She moved away again, resisting the temptation.

"Please Natalia," Olivia moaned, rising back up onto her hands. She didn't know how much more of the teasing she could take. Turning her head, she looked back at her lover, a wave of heat flooding over her at the sight of the woman about to mount her. Olivia whimpered in frustration and bit her lower lip as their eyes met and locked. Their hearts thundered as one.

"You're so beautiful like this, all needy. All mine." Natalia shifted and stroked her fingers through the soaked folds again, this time met with a hard thrust of her lover's hips. Olivia wanted it all right, and badly. "Tell me again, querida. What do you want?"

"I want you to fuck me," Olivia didn't hesitate, knowing it was what she truly wanted and what her partner wanted to hear, needed her to say. Olivia finally looked away, her head falling forward again, her hair falling around her face. She all but panted with need, shivering as Natalia's hands slid along her lower back to grip confidently at her hips. Spreading her legs slightly, Olivia inched backwards, the tip of Natalia's cock sliding back up along her inner thigh, before shifting upwards and bumping against her slick folds once again, finding where she needed her most.

"Oh god, Natalia, please..." Olivia exhaled, her body practically on fire, focused entirely on what Natalia was doing to her, and not doing. It was driving her insane.

And she loved every moment of it.

Natalia refused to tease any longer, needing to give it to her as much as Olivia wanted it. She rolled her hips and leaned forward, pressing the thick cock against her entrance, both women moaning as Natalia finally entered her, adjusting the angle as she sank deeper. Olivia gasped with pleasure as her lover took her, filling and stretching her, deep inside. Natalia bottomed out and then slowly rolled her hips back, pulling almost all the way out before rocking forward again, her hands gripping at Olivia's hips. Slow strokes at first, deep and hard, leaving both women panting and moaning.

"Is that what you needed, me buried deep inside you, fucking you?" Natalia rasped, her body reacting to the sight of her dildo sinking into Olivia, taking her like this. She could

imagine taking Olivia, bending her over and doing as she pleased, forcing her to come or to come herself buried deep inside her lover's stunning body, making her quiver with desire, claiming her, pushing her over the edge. Natalia rocked faster, her body grinding into Olivia, taking them both higher.

"Natalia..." Olivia sighed over and over, her back arching and bucking, needing more contact. Instinctively, Natalia reached around to find her needy clit, stiff and begging for her attention.

"Are you gonna be a good girl and come for me? Mmm?" Natalia teased the clit, stroking her with her thumb as she continued to pound deep into her lover.

Olivia felt the dildo moving slick and hard, deep within, between them, as Natalia fucked her. It was so intense, more intense than with any other lover she could remember. Olivia gasped, her body thrusting back, wanting desperately to come. Natalia's touch and scent surrounded her like normal, but now there was the added element of her lover penetrating her, taking her and stretching her deep and full. She grew more frustrated as Natalia's sure thumb continued to flick insistently on her clit, all of it working together, demanding that she come.

"God, harder." Olivia growled; she was so close. Natalia knew it too, she could tell from the breathy moans and familiar sounds that her lover made before she would come. It pushed Natalia along the razor's edge of her own desire, her body moving faster, harder, wanting just a little bit more.

"Come for me. Now baby, now." Natalia panted, their bodies writhing together. Then she knew her power, Olivia's responding shudder shaking them both. Natalia groaned and thrust again, slick and sure, her body throbbing as she hammered deep. Olivia bucked, calling out suddenly as her body was overwhelmed, coming long and hard, her body gripping Natalia's cock greedily. Natalia gasped, tumbling over the edge with her lover, her cock shivering and jerking deep within her lover as she shattered and came.

Olivia continued to move, rocking with Natalia buried deep within as she sprawled spent across her back. Natalia soon slowed, and started to move away.

"Wait..." Olivia gasped, grabbing weakly at Natalia's hip.

Natalia smiled knowingly, and slid back deeper again, starting back up their rolling motion. Whatever Olivia wanted, Olivia got, even if it killed her.

Olivia froze, her body reacting to the continuing movement deep inside, swirling still and she felt herself rising higher once more, before coming again with a long low guttural groan, the waves of pleasure flowing over her. Falling together to the bed, they landed in an exhausted heap, each savoring the other's touch.

They lay together for a while, Natalia's cock still nestled within her lover's body, still moving ever so slowly until Olivia's breathing evened out, content to just hold the woman she loved in her arms. She dropped tender kisses along Olivia's bare shoulder, nuzzling into the thick honey blonde waves of hair.

"Oh yeah, I needed that..." Olivia sighed happily. Her clit twitched and deep inside she could feel the cock shift. It was perfection.

"Happy Valentine's Day. I guess you liked my gift?" Natalia chuckled softly, nuzzling lazily along the smooth skin.

"Most definitely..." Olivia rolled her hips to emphasize her point, both women enjoying the sensation. Natalia shifted, and started to move away, but Olivia moaned softly and shook her head. "Hey, where are you going? I'm not nearly done with you..."

"It looks like I've created a monster," Natalia nipped at a tender earlobe and slid back deeper again, enjoying the shiver of aftershocks this caused. "Luckily for you, it's a gift that keeps on giving."

Olivia simply laughed, as she rolled her hips and the dance started all over again. After all the night was still young and so many positions yet to explore...

Blake leaned back and admired the roar of the fireplace. Clarissa and the boys would be terrorizing poor Leyla by now. How Olivia had ever been able to convince her that adding a Valentine's overnight camp to the service offered by the Beacon's Little Lights daycare was beyond her. However, it was a stroke of genius, as Valentine's was on a Tuesday night this year. She heard the sound of soft footsteps just before she felt warm arms wrap around her waist and a glass of red wine magically appear.

"Look at you, getting in touch with your butch side." Doris teased gently, dropping a sweet kiss to Blake's exposed neck. Blake had insisted on getting the fireplace set and lit it by herself, going into the basement to bring up a few logs.

"Don't start," Blake swatted her lover's hand and turned slightly, smiling as she was rather pleased with herself. "So what is on the agenda this evening, my love."

Doris grinned and helped Blake up to her feet, tangling their fingers together as she lead them to the couch.

On the coffee table sat several take out containers and a bag from the Quiki Mart. Blake shook her head and sank down onto the plush sofa.

"First, we have some Thai food from your favourite restaurant downtown, followed by a double feature." Doris grinned.

"What are we seeing?" Blake peered into the paper bag, curious.

"Well, I found the last copy of Resident Evil: Resurrection and we can follow that up with Shaun of the Dead." Doris said proudly. "There's nothing like some scary movies to snuggle together with."

Blake just stared at her, and slowly raised her eyebrow. Doris blinked back.

"Oookay, maybe not." Doris grinned again, pulling the rental DVD's from the bag and handing them over to Blake.

"An Affair to Remember and Sleepless in Seattle," Blake's smile widened as she read the titles. "Oh, my God, I love these movies."

"I know," Doris leaned forward and stole a quick kiss from her pleased girlfriend. "There's an extra large box of Kleenex in there too. Just saying."

"Who are you kidding, Doris Wolfe? You are just as romantic at heart as I am," Blake said, nodding happily. "These aren't even rentals are they?"

"Shh," Doris hushed with a finger to her lips, and stood. "You'll ruin the image." Blake swatted her leg and grinned up at her. "I'll go grab us some plates for the food."

Doris disappeared into the kitchen, the sound of cupboards opening and closing and rattling of cutlery filling Blake with a sense of contentment. This was how it should be. The simple things shared together. It was very clearly her second chance at something just wonderful, and Blake was going to grab it with both hands and never let go.

The doorbell chimed suddenly, and Blake stood to answer it.

"Who the hell is that?" Doris' grumble from the kitchen could be clearly heard, echoing Blake's thoughts exactly. Outside the house the storm swirled, snow falling mixed with freezing rain. Thunder even rolled in the distance.

"This had better be good..." grumbled Blake, her hand reaching out to turn the handle on the large oak door. Clutching the neck of her sweater closer, she peered out into the night, "Can I help you?"

The dark shadow of a man stood there, trench coat wrapped tight, a fedora perched on top of his head. Behind him a flash of lightening streaked across the sky, the rumble rolling along.

"Oh, my God," Blake's hand came to her mouth. The silhouette of the man was so familiar, but wasn't possible. Her mind must be playing tricks on her. It couldn't possibly be, could it?

The man stepped closer, into the light falling from the porch light, slowly pulling the fedora from his head, water and snow falling with a dull splat onto the floor. His hair was thinner and more grey, his eyes still sparkled.

Blake shook her head, not fully believing what she was seeing. She gripped her glass of wine tightly, the stem snapping in her fingers. The glass fell, the red liquid bleeding into the slush at the man's feet. She felt dizzy all of a sudden, the world spinning and then growing dark, as she fell forward. The man caught her and held her close, breathing the warmth and scent of her in.

"Well, that went better than I expected." The man murmured softly into Blake's hair.

"Blake, who is it?" Doris stepped out of the kitchen, abruptly stopping as she took in the scene unfolding before her, her heart sinking as she realized just who was at the door. "Oh, my God..."

Ross Marler was alive.

Episode 4: Deja Vu All Over Again



Act I

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And now, on to Episode Four, ***Déjà Vous All Over Again...***

Darkness.

It was a relief really, the void numb and all consuming. No emotions needing to be dealt with, just peace and quiet, with time for thoughts to swirl and settle, like waves lapping at a shoreline. Sounds began to filter through next and the tranquility started to shift and to change. The darkness was becoming heavy, clinging, like being stuck in mud, arms and legs too heavy to move.

And then the emotions started up again. A feeling of great joy and sorrow, and a pesky feeling that there was something that needed to be done. A throbbing pain began behind her eyes, hovering, threatening to take over. Thoughts began to take shape, memories churning and rising to the surface like flotsam and jetsam in turbulent waters.

In an instant Blake Marler remembered everything, and then wished she didn't.

Surely this couldn't be happening, could it?

Shock and disbelief pulsed through Blake's veins as her mind struggled out of the warm dark depths to the surface, trying desperately to catch up, to take it all in. Her heart thundered in her ears, just like it had so many years ago, when it had been shattered by the news, never to be the same again. Now though, it had been pieced back together, rebuilt and stronger than ever, only to be tested again at the limits of belief. It was too much to grasp, too much to comprehend.

It was all just... too much.

Blake's eyes fluttered open, as she finally pulled free of the smothering darkness clawing at her, trying to draw her back into the void. She was in her living room, on her couch and she was safe, but her mind was in the past. She could remember the day it all had happened perfectly, like it had just been yesterday. It was burned into her mind and soul like a brand, a healed over scar that was never to be forgotten. How could she forget?

After all, it was only the day Blake's perfect world had been changed forever.

She had been waiting for Ross in their suite at the Beacon, excitedly going through her closet looking for the perfect outfit. The slinky teal number she finally picked out was low cut and showed off all her best assets. It hugged her curves, caressing Blake's skin like a lover, but she knew it would look even better off of her heated flesh and in a pool at the foot of their king sized bed.

She couldn't wait to see her husband again. She was so eager for him to arrive so she had called him, leaving a voice message on his phone, promising the mother of all welcome homes. He was coming home for the weekend, his flight arriving at 6:15 pm from Washington D.C. A spritz of his favorite perfume at her ears and cleavage for good measure, before slipping in the long dangly diamond earrings Ross had bought her for their second wedding anniversary.

There was a knock at the door and she rushed to open it, thinking Ross had somehow found a flight home early, only to be disappointed and annoyed to find Jeffrey O'Neill standing there. The rest was pretty much a blur after that.

Jeffrey had broken the news to her as gently as he could. A witness saw the plane crash, burst into flames, the plane and all on board burned to ashes. There was nothing left to identify, let alone bury.

No...

Blake couldn't take it in, she didn't want to believe it, wouldn't believe it.

No, no, no...

Desperately she grasped at straws. Jeffrey was lying, up to some trick, it couldn't be true. It wasn't true, Ross' plane was landing at that very moment, she was so sure. Her heart raced in her chest, refusing to believe it. Ross would be walking through that door any second.

Another knock at the door and Blake was sure this would be Ross. She whipped the door open and instead of her husband it was her mother, Holly's eyes big and sad.

No, no, no, no...NNNNOOOOOO!!!

Blake knew from the depths of sorrow in her mother's eyes that it was impossibly, horribly, true.

Ross was dead.

Blake sighed now, her eyes closing briefly before opening to face her new tNatalia. She was laying on the couch, a throw blanket tucked around her with Doris leaning over her, wiping at her forehead with a cool cloth. Their gaze met and locked, Doris' eyes big and sad.

Blake knew then, in the depths of the sorrow in her lover's eyes, that it was true.

Ross was very much alive.

"Blake?" Doris murmured softly, tenderly trailing the back of her fingers across a flushed cheek. "There's my girl, back in the land of the living. Are you okay?"

Blake nodded, bringing her hand up to catch her girlfriend's, holding onto it like a lifeline. She sat up, a little dizzy but nothing she couldn't handle.

"Whoa, go slow, you had a bit of a shock," Doris said gently, smiling as Blake stubbornly swung her feet around and moved to sit beside her, hanging tightly onto her hand.

"Is he...is Ross still...here?" Blake struggled for the right words, fear and hope mingled in the depths of her eyes. Doris nodded and looked up, over her shoulder. Blake could sense movement behind her, as she turned her head. And there he stood.

Ross Marler.

His hair was greyer and a little thinner too. He had put on some weight, but not in a bad way. Most importantly, Ross still had those kind eyes that she knew so well and as Blake turned a little, he flashed that smile of his that had always wrapped around her heart.

"Hi, Blake," Ross took a tentative step closer to the couch, wanting nothing more than to take her into his arms. It had been so damn long. "I'm sorry if I-"

"No, just stop," Blake held up her hand, not anywhere near ready to deal with any of this. She glanced over at Doris for strength, squeezing her hand again for good measure and then stood. Before she even knew it, she threw herself into Ross' arms, holding him tight. She soaked up the strength in his embrace, the warmth of his body pressed against hers, inhaling the plain and simple scent of him. Blake closed her eyes and just let her body remember what it was like to have him in her arms again. Slowly she pulled away from him, her eyes glittering with unshed tears and something else.

Anger.

Blake registered the vibration along her arm first, the smack of her palm striking his cheek ringing loud in her ears as she watched Ross' head snap to the side from the force of her slap. Her hand stung, but damn, it had felt good.

"How DARE you!" Blake growled, pushing away from the stunned man. "How dare you come back now, after all this time? Where the hell have you been all these years?" Blake began to pace, her hands in the air as she vented. She stopped and stared hard at him. "Your friends and family, your children, all of us, we thought you were dead. I visited your grave, for years. YEARS, Ross. And you saunter in here like nothing has happened." Blake's eyes glittered, cold as ice. He was willing to sacrifice their love for what? She needed desperately to know. "You leave the world behind and we all paid the price. You gave us all up for what? You gave *ME* up, for what? Tell me."

"Blake, please, let me explain. What I can of it, anyway," Ross swallowed hard and looked down, his cheeks flushed and not just from the slap. He glanced over at Doris and then back

to Blake, and prayed that they believed him. "I was kidnapped by someone I trusted, a private investigator I had hired--"

"Nikki Landers?" Blake asked hopefully. After all this time she needed to know if there had been another woman in her husband's life. He looked down and nodded. "The woman you were having an affair with."

"What? I was NOT!" Ross looked up sharply at that. He had not been sleeping with the pretty brunette but his eyes widened as he realized how some of his meetings could have been misconstrued. "Dear God, Blake. All these years and you thought..."

"It nearly ripped me apart," Blake's vision blurred with unshed tears. "Loving you, and hating you, all at the same time. Not knowing what I should be feeling, and never knowing for sure." Ross took a step towards her, but she stepped back, not ready to let him in just yet. She felt a strong presence suddenly behind her, knowing instinctively that it was Doris. The warmth coming from her was almost palpable, and Blake leaned back into it, needing the silent strength and support.

Ross' eyes narrowed, taking in the closeness of the two women. Doris' eyes locked with his as she stared back at him defiantly as if daring him to say something, to realize something. He blinked as his mind chewed on the facts before him. There was more going on here than met the eye, he was sure.

"Why don't we sit down," Doris said quietly, pleased when Blake nodded tiredly and made her way back to the couch. This whole ordeal was exhausting for all of them, but it was obviously getting to the petite redhead, and Doris would be damned if her lover would be upset again. She would kick Ross out on his ass before she'd let Blake get hurt any more this evening.

Ross nodded in agreement and followed behind the women, watching carefully as Doris' hand came to rest into the curve of Blake's spine. It was a knowing touch, comforting and yet more, loving and familiar.

Too familiar.

The women sank down onto the plush couch together, Blake reaching to take her friend's hand, holding on for dear life. Doris leaned close, whispering something that made Blake smile and shake her head, a tender look exchanged between them. It was more than just tender, it was almost...intimate.

And then it hit him.

Doris Wolfe was Blake's lover.

Ross ground his teeth as the truth of what he was seeing seemed to tilt his world to the left all of a sudden. He fidgeted slightly, not sure how to deal with this latest wrinkle, hope deflating in his chest as this new revelation sunk in. It seemed like he'd been doing nothing but adjusting his life since he woke up in that damned hospital bed. And now here he was on Valentine's Day intruding on what would have been a romantic evening for them.

"Tell me what happened," Blake finally spoke, her eyes weary but curious. It was the least he could do, she deserved to know the truth, and whether or not they still had a future together. Ross sighed and nodded.

"I had hired Nicole Landers to look for Phillip. I was certain that he was alive and that there was a cover up going on. Apparently I got too close for comfort and while she had discovered photographic evidence of Phillip being alive, she was more cunning than I gave her credit for." Ross leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his short hair. "She double crossed me and made a deal with the devil, Alan Spaulding. Alan decided that it was time for me to disappear, to protect Phillip, so he paid Nikki to make it happen."

"But the plane crashed, there were witnesses, and Rick said that he had someone tamper with it." Blake leaned forward, trying to understand.

"The pilot had caught the tampering on his pre-flight inspection, repairing it before we even took off. Nikki said Alan had the rest of it all under control. A Spaulding Enterprises military contract to build drone planes for the government came in pretty handy," Ross laughed mirthlessly. "A test drone plane flew out and crashed on the original flight path, burning to ashes and making the authorities believe that my plane had been incinerated beyond all hope of finding anyone alive. No other planes were reported missing; Nikki had the pilot register another flight path, taking us north, up into Canada to a small airport in the country. With the drone plane taking the fall, no one even thought to look for us. It was a brilliant plan really."

"How do you know all this?" Doris asked, shocked at the complexity of the plan. She almost wished Alan was still alive to be punished for this whole thing. Ross smiled sadly and shook his head, clearly lost in old memories, at the audacity of his kidnapper.

"Nikki filled me in on the whole plan as we flew towards the border. I sat there, held at gunpoint, duct taped to my seat, helpless to stop her. I never did understand why the bad guy always feels the need to tell their victims the whole dastardly plan before getting rid of them," Ross shook his head, as Doris and Blake snorted in agreement. He looked down at his hands as the next memory was a little harder to take. "The last thing I remember clearly was the syringe of drugs being injected into my arm and her laugh." Ross stood then, the woman's insane laughter still ringing in his nightmares to this day. He paced back and forth, his body needing the movement.

"Dear God," Blake sighed, glancing over at an equally horrified Doris. "All this time Rick thought he'd caused your death, when in fact it was Alan Spaulding and that crazy woman behind it all." She watched as Ross once again stopped pacing and sank down into the chair beside the couch. "When did you wake up again?" She watched as Ross sighed and leaned back into the comfortable armchair, thrilled that he was once again in her home, soaking up his presence. Something she never thought she'd experience again.

"It was about eight months ago, I woke up in a private convalescent hospital outside of Toronto, but I couldn't remember anything and I was a physical mess. No one knew who I was; my file records were false provided by Nikki, my so called daughter and I had amnesia. The local police did as much as they could, with no success, and finally the RCMP were called in to figure out my true identity." Ross sighed and rubbed at his temple with his hand, a headache threatening.

"For all intents and purposes though, I was a dead man and my file didn't come up right away, especially since I was an American citizen. By the time six months had passed and my memory was starting to come back on its own, the Mountie investigators had uncovered that one of the doctors on staff had been keeping me in a drug induced coma for years, paid in very large sums of cash to do it too. When arrested, the doctor said that Nikki had told him that she was my daughter and authorized it all, paid him in cash to keep it quiet. Family issues she had said, and he needed the money so he had done as he was told. And then one day, Nikki didn't show up like usual."

"That must have been after Alan had died," Blake said, exchanging looks with Doris, both coming up with the same thought.

"With no more money coming from Alan to foot the bill for the treatment, Nikki would have nothing to pay the doctor with," Doris said putting two-and-two together.

"Exactly," Ross continued. "The doctor didn't know what else to do, so he stopped the drug treatment and tried to cover his tracks and I eventually woke up on my own. I couldn't remember a thing at first, and then over time, certain events were triggered. I dreamt of you, almost every night, not knowing who you were," Ross smiled softly at his wife, pleased when she seemed to appreciate his words. "And then when I did figure who I was and who you were to me, I couldn't figure out how to tell you."

"The hang up calls," Blake said suddenly figuring it out. "That was you?"

"Guilty as charged," Ross nodded and sighed. "I couldn't leave Canada right away and I kept trying to find the words to tell you over the phone, but eventually I decided that it was something that I needed to tell you, and the rest of my family, in person."

"Oh, God," Blake covered her eyes, all the things that needed to be done yet almost overwhelming her. "The children. We have to tell the kids you're alive." She went to stand, to find a phone, only to get a little dizzy again, falling back down to the couch.

"Whoa, Blake. Take it easy," Doris murmured, slipping her arm around her lover. "You're still a little shaky and you haven't eaten anything yet." Their forgotten Thai food still sat in the kitchen where Doris had been getting it ready before the knock on the door.

Blake froze as she realized how this might look to Ross. Glancing into his eyes, she saw the knowledge there, he had figured it out. He had always known her so well, why would that change now?

"Listen, it's late and I know it's a lot to take in. A shock to your system and your life," Ross said softly, shifting forward to take Blake's hands in his own, his thumb rubbing slow circles against the backs of them. "I just wanted to say that I still love you, and want to rebuild my life with you," He glanced over at Doris, seeing the terror lurking there, feeling it a little himself before turning his attention back to Blake.

"However, I can understand if you've moved on. I hope you could give me a second chance to have the life and love we once shared again, but I know that might take some time," Ross smiled gently, hoping for the best despite the protective arm Doris had wrapped around his wife's tiny frame. "So in the meantime, I'd like to gather Dinah and the kids and together we can explain what's happened. I've lost so much time; I need to get my life jump started again. So I think I should go now and let you regroup."

Ross stood up and headed towards the door. Doris followed him, with Blake tagging along behind her. Ross shrugged on his overcoat and grabbed his damp fedora from the closet. Digging into his coat pocket, he flicked a business card towards Blake.

"Here's where I'm staying," Ross smiled as his wife took the card and carefully slid it into her back pocket. He turned the door handle, swinging it open he turned back to look into her troubled eyes. "Don't worry, I'll be back."

With one last gaze, Ross nodded and disappeared out into the cold night.

Doris quietly shut the door behind him, not sure of Blake's state of mind. She locked everything up tight and then turned off the hall light, before following her lover into the kitchen. They hadn't even made it to the doorway before Blake was in her arms.

"Oh, God, what am I going to do?" Blake sobbed into the soft material of her lover's shirt. She felt warm arms slowly shift and envelope her.

"Hey, we'll figure it out," Doris whispered softly, pulling Blake closer, needing to feel her tucked against her safe and sound. "I promise." They stayed like that for a long moment, just soaking each other in, trying to calm their racing minds. Leaning back, Doris tucked a tuft of hair behind Blake's ear and smiled. "Would you like me to leave too? I'd understand..."

Blake reached out and placed a long finger against Doris' lips, stopping her words with the simple touch. It was the last thing she needed, to lose Doris right now too. Blake shook her head, tears threatening to fall.

"Please don't go," Blake sniffed. "Just hold me and wait for me to figure out what the hell is going on."

She sighed, relieved as she was tugged closer and held tighter still.

"I'm not going anywhere," Doris said, her frown hidden from the woman crying softly in her arms. "I promise."

Act II

The sun had risen hours before, long rays stretching out, across Springfield and its surrounds, out into the countryside, before finally kissing the small farmhouse on the

outskirts of town. Bright sunshine spilled into the quiet master bedroom as time passed, inching across the pile of blankets and quilts, and warming a single foot poking out from one side.

All was calm and peaceful.

Somewhere a cell phone chimed, as a text message arrived for what seemed like the millionth time that morning, its tasteful tones normally not obtrusive or annoying.

The mound of blankets on the bed moved and shifted but no other signs of life appeared. Silence once again descended in the farmhouse master bedroom.

The sounds of birds drifted in from outside, happily chirping and tweeting as they greeted the morning with almost disgusting joy, luxuriating in the start of a new day. From the hallway outside the bedroom, the tippy tap of Shadow's nails on the wide plank floors paced back and forth, as the dog patiently waited for breakfast.

A cell phone on the other side of the bed chimed, yet another text message arriving.

A low moan rumbled, like the voice of the long dead returning. A lone hand emerged, reaching out from under the pile of blankets, stretching up and across to grasp blindly along the nightstand to find the phone. Grabbing it, the offending item was hurled across the room where it landed with a satisfying thud on the floor. The hand disappeared back under the covers, where it was warm and cozy.

A shocked yelp was muffled by the quilts as said cold hand found a place to warm itself, followed by a sleepy giggle and a contented sigh.

Silence descended once more.

From across the room, the disembodied chime of a text message arriving defiantly rang out. Pushing the heavy quilt away from her body, Olivia Spencer's dishevelled head appeared as she sat up, squinting and blinking into the brightness of the room.

"Urgg..." Olivia grumbled, yanking a pillow from behind her and with unerring accuracy, launched it across the room, easily covering the cell phone and muffling any further noise coming from that direction. Olivia smiled which quickly turned into a huge yawn as she rubbed sleepily at her eyes, not sure she'd be able to get back to sleep. She glanced down at

the silky flesh of her adorably tousled bed mate, memories from the night before flashing before her eyes and throbbing through her body.

Sleep was overrated anyway.

Grabbing the edge of the quilt, Olivia smiled mischievously as a plan of attack began to form and she dove back under the blankets. It was a little early for breakfast, but she was sure there was something around here she could find to nibble on.

Another squawk of surprise was muffled by the blankets, followed by naughty giggles and finally low, throaty moans.

So much for peace and quiet, but all was right with the world, in this little corner of it anyway.

Emma hitched her backpack higher up on her shoulder and made her way from the Beacon shuttle bus towards the front door of her school. As much fun as the overnight camp had been, Emma had thought she was getting a bit old for it all and was glad to get back to her normal routine at school.

Dashing towards her home room, Emma skidded to a stop just outside the staff room as she noticed the door was ajar and could clearly make out a very familiar voice. Smiling excitedly, she moved closer to the door, hoping to ask Anna Li about their next martial arts lesson, but she soon realized that Miss Jennings and the good detective were having a very serious discussion.

"I'm sorry, Callie. With my father's potential return, I can't..." Anna said reaching out tentatively to put her hand on the teacher's shoulder, as if somehow the gesture would ease the tension.

"No Anna, I get it," Callie jerked her shoulder away from the tender touch, standing abruptly as she surreptitiously wiped at her eyes. "I've got to get to my class." Turning she headed for the doorway, needing to just get away to collect herself, somehow.

"Wait. Don't you see, it's not safe for you to be with me," Anna ran a hand through her long dark hair in frustration. "If something ever happened to you because of me..."

"Anna, don't you see?" Callie stopped, her head bowed as she struggled for the right words. Glancing back, her eyes filled with unshed tears. "You will never find happiness if you let the 'what ifs' scare you away. I thought you were stronger than that, I thought that we could be stronger than that together. I guess I didn't really know you very well at all, did I?" Callie ducked her head and quickly left before Anna could say anymore.

Anna's head fell forward in defeat and she felt the sting of tears biting at the back of her eyes. Her honor and an innate sense of impending danger wouldn't let those around her come to harm. This was her path to walk alone, and she couldn't allow herself the luxury of letting her guard down for even a minute. Even at the expense of her heart and dreams. So another relationship bites the dust and there is no one to blame but herself this time.

And her father.

Anna raised her head with renewed determination, anger churning fresh in her belly, mixing with the sadness and disappointment already living there. Her father would not take anything else from her, if she had anything to say about it. Tucking her hands into her pockets she headed out of the teacher's staff room, practically running right into Emma on the other side of the door.

"Was Miss Jennings crying?" Emma glanced down the hallway where the woman had disappeared, worried that her former teacher seemed very upset. She looked up into the dark eyes of her instructor and recognized a look she'd seen before, a haunted sadness that stayed in her mother's eyes after Natalia had left them that one summer. A cold shiver ran down Emma's spine and she knew something bad was going on.

"Yeah, she probably was," Ann nodded, digging into her jacket to find her sunglasses. She glanced down at Emma's wide eyes and smiled sadly, reaching out to squeeze the girl's shoulder. "Sometimes kid, love sucks."

Sliding her sunglasses on, Anna calmly walked away down the hall and into the morning sunshine.

Leyla wandered into the Beacon Bistro looking every bit a shell-shocked zombie. Plunking herself down at a small table with a huge sigh, she barely registered when another body dropped into the seat opposite her, sliding a steaming cup of coffee towards her.

"Oh, my God, I think I love you," Leyla said, reaching for the much needed mug and taking a drink.

"Riiiiight, don't let Greg hear you say that or he'll be planning our wedding before you know it," Ava teased, as Leyla snorted and continued to gulp down another swallow of the dark brew. "I was going to make up 'I Survived Valentine's Overnight Camp' t-shirts, but I wasn't sure if you'd actually make it through the night." Leyla levelled a glare at her for that, but Ava merely blinked innocently back before both of them finally broke down and chuckled.

"I almost didn't," Leyla shook her head and sighed. It had been so much more work than she had expected. She'd nearly had a heart attack when she couldn't find Colin O'Neill, visions of Reva Shane tormenting her from here to eternity if anything had happened to the boy. Luckily, Colin had merely been dawdling in the bathroom and all was right with the world again. Still, it was bad enough trying to stay in Olivia's good books, without adding Reva to the juggling act.

"What? Did you have an escapee?" Ava asked, curious as she took a sip of her own coffee.

"Something like that," Leyla smiled and thought about confiding further in Ava, but wasn't sure. After all Colin was her half-brother too. She quickly changed the subject. "Great news about Edmund Winslow, I'm sure everyone is going to sleep just a little more soundly around Springfield."

"I'm just glad it's over. I know my Dad must have been over the moon when he found out," Ava said quietly, a part of her wondering if sacrificing his happiness had been worth it in the end. With Edmund gone maybe Jeffrey could finally settle down and get his life on the right track again. She was pulled from her thoughts as her BlackBerry chimed, reminding her of her next appointment.

"Ah, no rest for the wicked I see," Leyla smirked as Ava sighed and stood.

"That clearly explains why you're so exhausted then," Ava grinned and sassed back, before heading out to her meeting. Leyla smiled and shook her head, grabbing a paper from the table beside her and starting to read up on the day's news.

Olivia shuffled into the kitchen, pausing to admire the view. The woman who had so soundly took her last night in bed and then ravished her again this morning, despite her sneak attack attempts, was now happily humming to herself as she made breakfast.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to be a good girl and grab the newspaper?" Natalia asked, turning to meet her gaze, before dark eyes raked down the curves of Olivia's body possessively.

"Oh, I'll be a good girl and get the paper, my dear," Olivia said sweetly as she moved closer and dropped a quick kiss to Natalia's full lips. "But as you well know, when I'm bad, I'm better." Olivia wagged her eyebrows and pulled away to get the paper from the porch. She squeaked as Natalia swatted her butt and chuckled softly. If she wasn't careful, Natalia would find out just how bad she could be in the kitchen.

Olivia opened the screen door and quickly found the paper sitting in a clear plastic bag to protect it from the snow and slush still lingering on the porch. Tugging the wrapper off, she shivered in the brisk wind and quickly made her way back into the house. The warm sounds of scrambled eggs cooking and coffee perking greeted her as she tossed the wrapper into the garbage and opened the *Springfield Journal* to read the headlines before hunting for her coffee mug.

"Oh my God, Natalia!" Olivia gasped, relief and an odd sense of sadness rushed over her. Natalia put down her wooden spoon to look at her quizzically. Olivia glanced up, their eyes meeting. "It's Edmund Winslow. He's been killed."

"What?" Natalia put a hand to her mouth and leaned heavily against the counter, shocked. "I can't believe it. Is he really gone?" She pulled the *Springfield Journal* nearer, scanning the article underneath the bold headline that screamed 'Monster Found Murdered!'

"That must have been what all those damn texts were about this morning," Olivia handed the paper over to her partner and went to grab their phones from the counter where they had put them when they had come down from upstairs. Giving Natalia her phone, she began to scroll through her own inbox, frowning as the same name kept appearing. "There are a lot here from Doris."

"And I've got some from Blake," Natalia said, chewing on her bottom lip. She had a moment of concern, wondering if perhaps there was a lover's spat going on between the women. Stuffing down her irrational thoughts, she began opening some of the messages. "They all

say the same thing, 'Call me as soon as you get this message'." Natalia glanced up and met Olivia's troubled gaze. "Do you think there's a problem with Blake and Doris?"

"It's probably just the news about Edmund," Olivia sighed, unsure too. As one they both began to dial their respective friends.

"Hi, it's me," Olivia said, getting through first. She frowned as Doris began babbling at her, clearly upset. "Whoa, whoa, slow down."

"Blake, calm down." Natalia murmured, having meanwhile gotten through to Blake, who was weeping inconsolably, making it equally hard to hear her. She turned to look at Olivia, who was struggling herself with Doris.

Something was definitely wrong.

"Start at the beginning," they both said at the same time, smiling at each other.

"Okay, you can skip the part about the line up at the Thai food place," Olivia said, growing more impatient with her friend by the second.

"Shaun of the Dead, that Doris always a kidder," Natalia smiled softly.

"So this has nothing to do with Edmund's death then?" Olivia asked, surprised. "No, I just thought...sorry, you're right. This is your story, go ahead."

"Yeah, I remember those weird hang up calls you've been getting," Natalia nodded, wondering what that had to do with all this.

"For God's sake, would you put me out of my misery, Doris and cut to the chase here," Olivia rolled her eyes and sighed, her patience snapping.

Natalia's mouth dropped open and she glanced over towards her partner, as Olivia's shocked eyes widened and met hers. Together, their next words fell from their lips.

"Ross is alive?"

They were going to need more coffee for this conversation, a lot more.

Anna walked into the small coffee shop on the outskirts of town that afternoon and scanned the small room looking for her old friends. Jeffrey O'Neill was already there, sitting in his expensive suite looking every inch the powerful man he was trying so hard to be. Laughing beside him was Jonathan Randall, his comfortable plaid work shirt with rolled up sleeves and well worn jeans making him seem much more comfortable. Jeffrey waved at her as Anna made her way to their table.

"There she is, we were beginning to think you weren't going to make it," Jeffrey grinned as Anna dropped down into her chair. A coffee was already there waiting for her and she took a much needed sip of the dark brew.

"Sorry, I had some business to take care of first thing this morning," Anna sighed, not wanting to dwell on her love life again. She was already depressed enough.

"Involving the Winslow case?" Jonathan asked, taking a bite of his bagel.

"Kind of related, but not part of the case," Anna shook her head. "Anyway, I asked you both here to discuss our next steps." Jonathan glanced over at Jeffrey, who put his mug of coffee down and leaned forward. "I know my father was behind Edmund's murder, I just can't prove it yet. Eleni and her team will need time to go through the forensics, but I know my father's style and this has all the ear markings."

"That would make sense," Jeffrey leaned back, scratching at his bearded jaw in thought. "Winslow was going off the deep end, Hung was protecting him while watching the whole operation they had spent years building starting to unravel, who knew what happened to piss off your father and then there was the perfect opportunity to remove Edmund and take over the enterprise."

"He dropped the body at my doorstep as a message. Like a dog marking his territory," Anna's eyes darkened with suppressed anger. "Taunting me to do something about it."

Jeffrey sighed. Winslow might be dead but this was far from over. The snake in the grass had just shed its skin; it was still just as dangerous. He looked at Anna and knew this had become personal between her and her father. Just like his battle with Winslow had become personal and had cost him everything in the end.

"So what's next?" Jonathan asked, shifting in his chair.

"I must stand up to my father and clean up this mess that he has brought to our family." Anna straightened her shoulders, a deadly determination settling on her narrow frame. There was only one thing to do, and she must be the one to do it and suffer the consequences. "I might need some help."

Anna stared hard at both the men, Jeffery nodding as Jonathan sighed and ducked his head. She had her answer already.

"Anna, I'm sorry," Jonathan started. "My daughter needs me, and I need to have a normal life. I can't do that if I'm traipsing around the world looking in the shadows for your father."

"I understand," Anna nodded. She did understand and she respected Jonathan for his decision. Family was important and on some level she envied him. She wanted to have a happy normal life too, but it didn't seem to be in her cards. Jeffrey shifted in his seat and drew her attention.

"I'll put a call into some of my old spy buddies and see what I can find out. Maybe they have new information for you," Jeffrey said, pulling out an iPad from his briefcase and tapping in a note to himself. Jonathan smirked and Anna cocked an eyebrow at his new toy. "What? I can't have a few job perks?"

"It makes me wonder where my hard earned tax dollars are going to," Jonathan grinned and stood. "I've got to head back to the work site before Billy has another heart attack or Josh has one trying to keep him under control." With a small squeeze to Anna's shoulder, he left the diner. Anna watched him go, a part of her wishing she could return to a nice normal life.

Whatever that was.

She had made it into Company for the early shift but other than that, Blake had been working in a blur, her mind frazzled. Doris had tried to talk her into taking the day off, but she knew that keeping her hands busy would be the best course of action until her mind settled down. Tears welled in her eyes as she wiped at the counter, at how wonderful Doris was being in all this.

Blake had no idea how this would all work out, but deep down she knew someone would end up getting hurt. There would be no getting around it and that weighed heavily on her

mind. She glanced up as the little bell over the door dinged and a familiar figure made her way into the small restaurant.

"Blake, are you okay?" Natalia asked coming around to the side of the bar and pulling her into a much needed hug. She nodded and slumped into the embrace like a rag doll, soaking up the comfort.

"Yes," Blake murmured into the strong shoulder, then shook her head. "No...maybe?" The redhead sniffed and pulled away, more confused than ever. "I feel like my head's about to explode actually."

Natalia sighed and hung up her coat, before sliding onto a stool at the counter and waited for her friend to continue. Blake paced back and forth behind the counter, as if not knowing what to do next. Natalia was exhausted just looking at her.

"I didn't sleep a wink all night. I tossed and turned and I think I kept Doris awake too. God, poor Doris," Blake poured Natalia a cup of coffee and topped up her own. "She's been a rock for me in all this. The last thing I want to do is hurt her. God, I'm so confused."

"Calm down, it's going to work itself out, I promise," Natalia said, reaching out to cover Blake's hand on the countertop and squeezing it in sympathy. Tears welled in Blake's eyes but she nodded her head, wanting, needing to believe it.

"Ross called me this morning, to hear my voice he said," Blake half smiled at that, remembering the tender tone to his words, something she thought she would never hear again. She pinched the bridge of her nose, the headache growing behind her eyes. "He has to go out of town for a few days, medical tests in New York with a specialist, and has asked me to arrange a family gathering next week."

"That's good," Natalia nodded and smiled encouragingly. "It gives you time to adjust and then together you can tell the rest of the family."

"I know," Blake sighed, sipping her coffee. "There is just so much to deal with, legally, medically, and financially. That doesn't even factor in all the emotions I'm feeling, that Ross is feeling and Doris. It's overwhelming."

"I know," Natalia shook her head, feeling helpless as Blake wiped at her eyes. "Just take things one step at a time, focus on the things you can change or control. Before you know it,

you'll have figured out your path and be with the one you love, the one you can build your life going forward with."

"The thing is I don't want to lose either of them," Blake whispered, the truth in her heart bubbling to the surface, whether she wanted to face it or not. "God help me, Natalia, I love them both."

The offices of Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding, Attorneys at Law, was bustling with activity. Photocopiers were copying and assembling documents, phones were ringing, and clients were laughing and talking in the waiting area. Olivia closed the heavy oak door to the renovated Victorian house and waved at the secretary before making her way up the staircase to the second floor offices.

Taking the familiar walk down the hallway, Olivia paused outside the door to Doris' office, peering in to see if she was free. She found her friend sitting there, staring out the window, lost in her thoughts. Doris' desk was covered in binders and documents, with large volumes full of legal cases and the intricacies of the law strewn about, post it notes sticking out everywhere. Someone had been busy this morning.

"Stop lurking out there like some stalker and get in here, Spencer," Doris said, turning sad eyes to stare at her, catching her peeping into the room. Olivia entered and quietly closed the door, shutting out the noises of the real world outside.

"I brought you some of Natalia's chocolate chip cookies. Emma swears Natalia has a secret ingredient in them that never fails to make her feel better," Olivia said, snagging a cookie before sliding over a baggie stuffed with them across the wide desktop and then flopping down into the comfortable chair across from her friend.

"She does," Doris smiled and pulled out a cookie too, quickly taking a bite. "It's called love."

"Yeah, I guess she does have a special ingredient in there then," Olivia smiled back and they sat in silence a moment, chewing.

"I've looked at all the legal angles I could think of. I've checked case law and spoke to the Canadian police. I don't know what else to do?" Doris stood and made her way over to the window, staring back outside, her arms crossed. Finally the redhead turned to look back at Olivia, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"How do I fight a ghost from her past, Olivia?" Doris' voice cracked and she looked away again.

Olivia was up and at her friend's side in an instant, pulling her into a much needed hug. Doris seemed to break down, falling in on herself, her heart shattering as she wept.

"Shh, it's going to be okay, I promise," Olivia murmured, slowly rocking her friend as she fell apart in her arms. "All you can do is be there for her, and if Blake loves you and it was meant to be, she'll still be there when the dust settles."

"And if she isn't?" Doris asked, her voice small and afraid, muffled against Olivia's shoulder.

"Then I have a bottle of whiskey with your name on it sitting in my cupboard and a safe place for you to fall in our home," Olivia smiled, pleased when Doris choked out a laugh. Olivia pulled back and met Doris' eyes, making sure her next words registered with her friend.

"After all, that's what family is for."

Act III

The rest of the week had passed relatively uneventfully for Springfield, with a snow storm rolling through the countryside over the weekend, forcing most people to stay home, snuggled together indoors. Everyone had pretty much dug themselves out by Monday morning, and life was returning to normal again.

It was business as usual at the Springfield Police Department. After a busy weekend full of traffic accidents and weather related incidents, the police were able to catch their breath to some degree and turn their attention to bigger crimes again. With the news of Edmund Winslow's murder making a natural migration from the front page headlines to a small paragraph on page five of the Springfield Journal that morning had certainly helped everyone calm down.

Eleni Andros preferred it that way. It was a nice change of pace to have not have microphones shoved in her face or have reporters hounding her for a comment on the results of the autopsy. Heaven forbid she give them anything or worse, if details ended up leaking out to the public, they would never leave her alone. And while the citizens of Springfield were settling back into their everyday lives, this was still very much an open investigation.

Eleni left her office in the basement, wove her way through the sea of uniforms milling in the hallways, rounded the corner and made her way into the bullpen, heading straight for Anna's desk. The woman sat hunched over several files oblivious to the world around her, focused on her caseload. Smirking, Eleni dropped a folder at least two inches thick onto the detective's desk with a dull thud, causing the other woman to jump and grab her chest in surprise.

"Dui!" Anna swore, glaring up at her unrepentant and chuckling friend.

"I have no idea what you just said but your tone pretty much said it all," Eleni smirked before sliding into the chair across from the detective's desk. She noticed that Anna looked tired around the eyes, a tendril of concern for her settling in her gut.

"Hm, I guess I'll have to take you out to a decent Chinese restaurant so you can brush up on your Cantonese," Anna grinned as she reached out for the huge file. "Is this the autopsy report?"

"It's just the preliminary findings, actually. This is definitely a homicide; the cause of death was ligature strangulation, which was pretty obvious. The furrow on Winslow's neck matched the cord found on the body; the angle indicates a left handed killer."

"My father is left handed..." Anna murmured, pulling the file closer and starting to flip through the pages of the report.

"Neck was broken as well, so the murderer was pretty strong. And we're still running down the brand of metal string, but certainly those used for cellos are in the top running. We found some fibers and DNA under his fingernails and on his clothes that we are still running down," Eleni stifled a yawn. "And toxicology should be ready hopefully by next week. There's still that back up at the lab."

"Late night, Tiger?" Anna paused in her reading and looked up, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I was at Frank's and we-" Eleni smiled softly at the mention of the man's name. Anna frowned, a little grossed out and not needing to think about them together that way.

"Ah, my virgin ears! Stop it!!" Anna teased, covering her ears and shaking her head. "Oh, great, now I'm getting a mental picture..."

"Shut up," Eleni laughed and tossed a handy pen across the desk at her friend. "Natalia let him have Francesca again for the weekend. I was worried about him, he seems so lost now that he's not working here, but he lights right up when she's there. It does him such good to have that little girl in his world."

"And to have you in his life again, too," Anna said gently, noticing the slight flush on Eleni's cheeks. Ah, love was indeed blind. While she didn't know what Eleni saw in the big dope, she was happy for her friend. There was a stir in the office and they both looked up as Remy Boudreau dashed into the bullpen.

"The new Chief just pulled in," Remy smiled and slid behind his desk, trying to look busy. "I heard he's a real hard-ass."

"What do you know about it, Boudreau? Homer Simpson would be a hard-ass around here," Anna said, rolling her eyes at him and winking at Eleni. Just then the devil himself came through the precinct, a cardboard box in hand, the pretty duty officer escorting the new Chief to his office, busily blushing and talking his ear off.

"Oh, my," Eleni said, her eyes widening just slightly as she took in the fine specimen of a man making his way through the hallway. "He's definitely got a hard ass and other major muscle groups." She glanced over at Anna and smirked.

"If you like that sort of thing, I guess. And would someone call Sergeant Stapleton off before she scares the new Chief away with all that chatter," Anna said loud enough to catch the passing man's attention. The Sergeant frowned at her words, but a huge smile crossed the Michael Thorne's face as he turned to look into the bull pen.

"Mike Thorne, the last time I saw you, you were bleeding all over that gang in the south side like a stuck pig," Anna said, standing and making her way out from behind her desk.

"Dui nei, Li!" Mike said, sliding his box of stuff to his hip and shaking Anna's hand. "I had heard you were hiding here somewhere."

"You know me, always where the action is," Anna grinned. "Mike, this is Eleni Andros, she supervises the CSI team and that's my favorite rookie, Remy Boudreau."

"Nice to meet you all," Thorne smiled and shook hands. Stapleton coughed discreetly from the door and he cocked his head towards her and headed back that way. "I'll be around later and we can catch up, Anna." With that he was gone, trailing after the Sergeant as they headed deeper into the bowels of the precinct.

Anna went back around her desk and dropped back into her chair, smirking as she noticed Eleni's thoughtful face.

"You have a thing for Chief's, don't you?" Anna teased her friend, smiling wider as Eleni looked shocked at her words.

"Please," Eleni shook her head in denial. "Frank is the one for me."

"Well you don't have to keep Mike. You could just use and abuse him a little before settling back down with Frank." Anna took a sip from her coffee mug, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"I think he has enough women throwing themselves at him." Eleni said glancing back in the direction the man and the cute Sergeant had disappeared. "How about you, Remy?"

"Oh, he's not my type. Besides, Cyrus is the one for me." Remy fluttered his eyelashes and then laughed. Eleni snorted as Anna nearly choked on her swallow of coffee.

"I KNEW it," Anna said, ducking as Remy crumpled up a piece of paper and launched it at her head. Eleni stood to get out of the line of fire, making her way toward the doorway.

"I think things are going to get a whole lot more interesting around here," Eleni said, waving as she headed back out to her own office. "A whole lot more."

Company had quieted down, and Frank Cooper was finally able to have a moment to relax and pour himself his second cup of coffee for the day. It was a nice routine he was falling into, working the mornings with his Pop, talking with people, keeping busy. It helped being a part of something good Marina had been involved in, that she helped to rebuild and improve. He felt closer to the good woman he wanted to remember his daughter as.

Sighing, Frank took a drink of his coffee, glancing up as Blake sank down onto the stool across from him at the counter. He took her appearance in, noticing the carefully done

makeup and hair, and what looked like a new dress. More importantly though, he could tell she was upset, her eyes red and a little puffy, something no amount of makeup would be able to cover.

He grabbed the carafe of coffee and poured her a cup full, sliding it across the counter at his ex-girlfriend. Something was up and he wanted to help, if he could. Blake smiled gratefully at his offering and started adding sugar to the mug.

"Thanks, Frank," Blake said. "I'm going to need this."

"Big meeting today or something?" Frank asked as casually as he could, curiosity getting the better of him. He might not officially be a cop anymore, but it was a part of him that would never go away.

"Something like that. I can't talk about it right now, but there is a news conference later today and that should explain what's going on," Blake sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Sorry, it's a long story and I can't get into it at the moment." Frank frowned, but nodded in understanding as she sighed again and looked at her watch. "I should probably go, Doris has a lawyer she wants me to talk to and then I've got to get the kids from school at lunch. God, it's all such a mess..."

Blake's eyes welled with fresh tears and Frank came out from around the counter and pulled her into a big bear hug.

"Hey, it's going to be okay, whatever it is," Frank murmured as Blake sagged against him. "I promise."

"It's just so hard," Blake nodded though and pulled away. She looked up and gave him a watery smile. "Thanks, Frank."

"Any time," he moved away and gently squeezed her arm for more support. "Anything I can do to help?"

"No, but thank you," Blake pulled a tissue from her purse on the counter, shaking her head. Quietly wiping at her eyes and blowing her nose, she slid back onto her stool as Frank walked back around. An idea formed, and she bit her lip before leaning forward against the counter.

"Actually Frank, is it possible for you to get your hands on your sister Harley's file investigating Ross' death?" Blake wasn't sure if it would help her or not but she really needed to see who knew what about the whole thing, and why the investigation hadn't discovered that her husband had been kidnapped.

"Sure, I think so," Frank said. He knew the official case file was still in the police storage, but Harley always kept a back up. There were several boxes up in the attic at Pop's place that she kept full of files. "Let me see what I can find and I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, Frankie," Blake smiled and reached out to squeeze his hand in gratitude. "I knew I could count on you." With that she drained the coffee from her cup, tugged on her long jacket and headed out with a small wave goodbye.

Frank smiled, wiping down the counter. It was good to feel useful again for a change. Maybe things were looking up after all.

Dinah Marler pushed open the door to the meeting room at Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding. It was familiar territory after her own case and she trusted the women at the law firm to be fair and honorable. Mallet followed her in, slipping his big hand around hers, tangling their fingers together. Neither of them were overly sure why they were there, other than Blake had said it had something to do with her father.

"Maybe she found a long lost will or something," Mallet murmured, giving Dinah's hand a quick squeeze before heading over to the table with food and refreshments. "Want anything to snack on?"

Dinah shook her head as she sat down at the long meeting table in the center of the room. At least she'd get a chance to see the kids, it seemed like forever since she'd seen them. She straightened in her chair as the door opened and in Clarissa came, almost diving into her arms.

"Dinah!" Clarissa wrapped her arms around her big sister's neck.

"Hey there, Squirt," Dinah grinned back. "I see your mom sprung you from school early." She smiled wider as her half brothers lumbered in and headed towards the refreshments. "Hi guys!" An intelligible mumbled greeting came back.

"Don't mind them," Clarissa said slipping into the chair beside her sister. "They're just grumpy because Mom wouldn't let them bring in their video games." Dinah nodded knowingly, smirking as Blake and then Doris came into the meeting room.

"If everyone could sit down please," Doris said, checking her watch. "Vanessa said she had an appointment and wouldn't be able to join us, so I guess the gang is all here."

Blake nodded, smiling softly as Doris squeezed her shoulder in silent support. Everyone took a seat and gave Blake their full attention. Doris picked up the receiver of the phone from a side table and punched an extension, speaking softly with reception as Blake began.

"Thanks for coming. I suppose we could have met at my house, but this seemed a little more appropriate somehow," Blake paced a little trying to find the right words. She knew she would have felt too vulnerable to have Ross back there so soon, better to keep this more business like for now, more neutral until she got her head, and her heart, together. Ross had agreed instantly when Doris offered her meeting rooms. Blake glanced down and then back up, meeting Dinah's eyes first and locking.

"I received some startling news that you all need to know," Blake's voice wavered a little, and Dinah knew something important was coming. "News about your father."

"Daddy's in heaven," Clarissa said, clearly confused. "You said he watches over us every day."

"I know, baby," Blake's eyes welled up with tears and she smiled. "But I have some good news. There was a mistake..." The door to the room opened a crack; Doris smiled at the person on the other side, nodding to come in.

Ross stepped inside the room, and took in the stunned faces of his family.

"Oh my God," Dinah said, shattering the silence, shock rushing through her veins and she didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

"Daddy?" Clarissa said, standing and slowly taking one step and then another.

"That's right, sweetheart, it's Daddy," Ross' voice broke as he knelt down to be closer to his youngest daughter's height. Clarissa lunged into his arms, and he held her tight, standing up and taking her with him.

Before Dinah could even move, the boys were wrapped around their father in a group hug, laughing together. Blake stood to one side, smiling and crying, Doris holding her close. She looked over at Mallet, who was smiling at her as it began to really sink in.

Her father was alive!

Dinah stood and took one step and then another towards Ross. Their eyes met and he cocked his head to one side, watching her, his eyes full of tears.

"Daddy?" Dinah whispered, tears biting at the back of her eyes too. Ross nodded at her, Clarissa slipping down from his embrace turning to smile up at her. Somehow Dinah found herself wrapped in Ross' arms, both of them laughing and crying.

"That's right, sweetheart," Ross whispered into her long blonde hair. "I'm home."

Dinah nodded and held on tighter. She knew there would be explanations and more tears to come, but for now it was enough. This moment was enough.

Their father was home.

Tuesday morning arrived bright and early, the usual flurry of meetings and reports happening, business as usual. Natalia leaned back from her computer screen and yawned, stretching a kink out of her neck as her mind whirled at various ways to get her budget figures to work out.

She smiled as she considered an impromptu meeting with Olivia to help her with it, but didn't know if any work would actually get done.

"Someone looks like the cat that ate the canary," Leyla said from her office door.

"Something like that," Natalia smiled up at her sister, all naughty thoughts flying from her mind as she noticed that Francesca was in her sister's arms "Oh my goodness, look who's come to help me in the office." She stood and took her, Francesca giggling as she tickled her tummy.

"I knew you had meetings most of the day but thought you might like a baby break," Leyla smiled, watching as mother and daughter laughed and smiled together. "And I wanted to

bring up the package that was delivered after you and Olivia had left for work this morning."

"Oh, who's it from?" Natalia hadn't even noticed the small parcel that Leyla had in her hand. Sliding back into her office chair with Francesca on her lap, Leyla slid the package to her across the desk.

"I've been sworn to secrecy," Leyla smiled and simply watched as Natalia cocked her head, more curious now than ever.

"Oh, look Francesca, it's beautiful," Natalia gasped, popping the box open and discovering a satiny pink and white dress inside with tiny black patent dress shoes. There was also a folded letter with very familiar handwriting on it. Flipping it open she began to read the chatty letter inside. "It's from your Abuela for Easter."

Natalia felt tears welling. It was such a thoughtful gift and so pretty, Francesca would look darling in the outfit. Deep down though, she wasn't even sure if she would be attending Easter mass this year. She sighed, and ran her fingers through Francesca's dark curls.

"Mom wasn't sure about the size so she sent it early," Leyla grinned, pleased at how touched Natalia was. "We can swap it out for a different size if need be, I have her receipt."

Natalia nodded and just hugged Francesca closer, more confused than ever.

Brooke Tremain slid her sunglasses up into her short messy hair and glanced around Towers. In the corner she saw her friend Doris waving at her, her girlfriend Blake sitting beside her.

"We were beginning to think that you weren't coming," Doris grinned sliding into the booth to make room.

"Traffic was a mess coming out of Chicago this morning," Brooke groaned, before turning her sharp eyes towards the other woman in the booth. "Hi there, you must be Blake."

"Guilty as charged," Blake smiled taking the woman's hand and shaking it. "I have quite a few houses for you to look at today, once we have some lunch." She was quite glad that

Doris had encouraged her friend to call about house hunting. It took her mind off of her personal life.

"That sounds great," Brooke smiled as their server arrived. Quickly scanning the menu they all ordered food and chatted lightly about the weather until their drinks arrived.

"You were saying that your second house finally sold," Doris asked, taking a sip of her white wine as Brooke nodded.

"Yes, finally," Brooke sighed and turned to Blake. "My ex took off out of the blue, clearing out our bank account. I've been able to recoup some from the sale of my two homes, but it just been horrible for me the last few months."

Blake reached out and squeezed the other woman's arm. It was oddly comforting to know that even professional therapists had crazy lives too. Mind you, husband's coming back from the dead was a little unusual, even for Springfield.

"So if you ever come across Nicole in your travels, Doris, run far and fast," Brooke took a much needed sip of her drink. Blake froze, reacting to the name of the other woman's girlfriend.

It couldn't be, could it?

"Maybe she was working on a case?" Doris said, turning to Blake to fill her in a little. "Brooke's girlfriend was a private investigator." Doris frowned as she realized what she said, their eyes meeting, the same thought crossing their minds.

"What was your girlfriend's last name?" Blake asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Lansing. Nicole Lansing," Brooke sighed, oblivious to the sigh of relief across the table. "But she often went by different names depending on the job. Usually Nikki went with Landers when she goes undercover."

Blake grew pale, a wave of nausea coming over her. Doris' mouth opened, but nothing came out.

It was the same woman that had kidnapped Ross.

Across town, Dinah and Ross sat across from each at Company, other just smiling at each other, the pleasure of being together still overwhelming.

"The press conference went well yesterday," Dinah finally spoke again. After spending time with the family, her father had gone public with his return to his life. The police were investigating the whole sordid case and there wasn't much else for anyone to do but wait and to heal.

"Yes, I thought so," Ross cut into his salmon and took a bite. "Now I just need to get my life back on track."

Dinah nodded, knowing it wasn't going to be easy for the man to pick up where he left off. Everything had changed.

"So, you know about Blake and..." Dinah raised her eyebrows, her voice trailing off as she was reluctant to necessarily spill the beans to her father about his wife's love life.

"Doris Wolfe? Yes, I was able to figure that out pretty quickly," Ross sighed, but smiled at Dinah anyway. "I'm sure it will work itself out. I'm not giving up on Blake so easily. What we had together was special, once in a lifetime really."

Dinah took a sip of her drink and nodded, not sure if this was a contest he'd be able to win.

"No I'm more concerned about getting myself back into my life. I've had a long time to brew about everything. I'm thinking politics might be calling my name again, maybe mayor. Or take some time and get back into law," Ross leaned back in his chair, a world of possibilities stretching around him and he definitely wanted to do as much as he could, experience life again to the fullest. Life was too short and he had missed too much already.

"You might want to take a bit of a break and fully recover before you conquer the world again, Dad," Dinah grinned at the man, looking every bit like a kid in a candy store. Ross just laughed with her.

"Okay, good point. There is one thing I do need to take care of," Ross said growing serious again, anger flashing in his normally kind eyes. "Someone needs to be accountable for putting my life into limbo. If not Nikki Lansing herself, then I will see that Phillip Spaulding pays, for his own hand in all of this and for the sins of his father."

Dinah frowned, concerned at what trouble this could bring, but wisely she remained silent.

"We had met while I was still in the military. Don't ask, don't tell was in place but there was a gung-ho homophobic JAG officer who was conducting witch hunts in our base. Nikki had been hired to follow several of us, take any incriminating photos that she could so that we could be dishonourably discharged," Brooke grimaced, taking a drink of her wine. "She wasn't beyond creating incriminating situations, so she hit on me and the rest was history. Somewhere along the line, we fell in love. She confessed it all to me but I didn't care, I loved her. I was eventually kicked out of the military and I moved from California, where I was stationed, and I came to Chicago and we never looked back."

"Nicole had said once that she had family in California, she must have meant you," Blake said, trying to put the puzzle together.

"I had no idea about any of this, I assure you," Brooke said, her mind reeling at the devastation that her lover had caused Blake's family. "I knew Nikki was off on cases every now and then, but she never wanted to talk about them very much. She would regularly drive up to Canada to visit her old bachelor uncle, but I never suspected anything like what you've described was going on with your husband. I'm so sorry."

"Please," Blake shook her head. "It's not your fault. You apparently were manipulated by her as much, if not more, than all of us."

"Last summer things started to go bad between us. Nikki was struggling with a case she said, but I had never seen her so stressed out. I was scared for her and then she started disappearing for long periods of time. I figured she was having an affair but had no proof," Brooke swirled her wine in the glass and took another sip, the pain still fresh in her heart.

It had been a tough time and Brooke still didn't know how she had gotten through it all, other than by throwing herself into her work. So much easier to help people solve their problems than to work on her own.

"In September Nikki broke it off, disappearing to Europe somewhere and clearing out our bank account. I've been a mess ever since," Brooke shook her head, not wanting to dwell on it. "I've finally been able to get things together again, selling the houses to get some funds behind me. I thought moving to Springfield would be good for me, I could rebuild my life completely."

"Springfield is the best place for you, a fresh start," Doris said, reaching out to squeeze her friend's arm.

"When Nikki 'Landers' died in the supposed plane crash, Nikki 'Lansing' would be able to continue living her real life no problem," Blake said, still trying to figure out the timeline. "When Alan died, Nikki would have been pretty desperate. Time ran out and so did she."

The three women sat in silence a moment, shocked how one woman could hurt so many people.

"We need to tell the police all this," Brooke finally said as Blake and Doris nodded in agreement. "So much for house hunting today."

Later that afternoon, Olivia awkwardly pushed the well worn door open to the center, carrying two big bags of donated clothing with her. She wandered down a hallway toward a small office she knew pretty well. Tapping lightly on the door, she smiled as Sister Anne looked up and grinned, waving her in.

"Olivia, how good to see you," Sister Ann stood and took one of the stuffed garbage bags from Olivia's hand.

"We've been doing some early spring cleaning and thought that we'd drop off these old clothes for your next sale." Olivia dropped the other bag on the floor next to where the good sister put her bag. Anne turned and pulled her into a big hug.

"How are you doing, my dear?" Sister Anne pulled away and offered Olivia a seat. "How is Natalia doing? I haven't seen her in weeks. The cookie committee was getting concerned when she missed their monthly meeting for the second time in a row. "

"I'm doing okay, I guess," Olivia sighed and ran a hand through her honey blonde hair. "I've been going to therapy regularly and I think its helping. Natalia though has been avoiding going to church and I'm not sure why exactly, other than she says she's not ready. She's been talking with my shrink but I don't know. I guess it's just going to take some time."

Sister Ann nodded, listening as she pulled some of the donated clothes out and began sorting them into piles. Olivia reached out and started to fold them, happy for something to do with her hands.

"I was wondering if Natalia maybe needed more than just regular counselling," Sister Anne said carefully, trying to gauge Olivia's reaction to her words.

"What do you mean?" Olivia frowned.

"Well, sometimes things happen that make you doubt yourself, doubt who you are and your relationship with God," Anne sighed, realizing that this happened more often than not for many people. "I could see how Natalia could have felt abandoned by God, having been kidnapped and kept in that horrible situation for so long."

Olivia grew still, all of it making more sense. Natalia had lost her way off her path in so many ways. No wonder she was trying to take control of things. She didn't feel like she had her normal support or guidance to help her. Natalia was like a ship without a rudder.

"So what should we do?" Olivia asked, wanting to fix it all for her partner. Sister Anne smiled gently, reaching out to squeeze her arm in sympathy.

"Natalia needs to find her own way, you cannot do it for her, or make it better," Sister Anne went back to her sorting, Olivia shifting beside her to help. "However, I could recommend a good spiritual advisor, someone who is familiar with counselling but who would also be able to help with healing the more spiritual side of her as well."

"I'd like that for her," Olivia said, meeting the kind woman's eyes. "I think Natalia would like that too."

Sister Anne smiled serenely and together they finished folding and sorting in silence.

Farley's was hopping for a Thursday night. The pool tables were busy with quarters lining the rail, various sports events were flashing across the flat screen televisions around the bar and everyone seemed to be laughing and drinking.

Leyla sat watching the bar spin and dance around her, it was good to get out of the house and forget about life for awhile. Just have some fun. A bottle of beer dropped onto the table in front of her, a large burly man standing in front of her.

"Hey there," The man said, his smile revealing at least two teeth missing, if not more. "I thought a pretty lady like you might like a drink."

"Thanks, but I'm just waiting for my friend to arrive," Leyla said politely, hoping the guy would take the hint. No such luck.

"Is she as cute as you?" He winked and sat down in the empty chair opposite her.

"Um, HE is pretty handsome, yes," Leyla slid the bottle back across the table to the crestfallen man. "Thanks for the offer though."

"I can't leave you alone for a minute," A familiar voice said from behind her. Leyla grinned as the big man looked up and frowned, finally getting the hint.

"Can't blame a guy for tryin'," The man got up and left, taking his drink with him. Jonathan sat down in his place and grinned as Leyla sighed with relief.

"I could have taken him, you know," Leyla said as Jonathan flagged the server and indicated two drinks for them.

"Oh, I know. That huge guy wouldn't have known what hit him," Jonathan said, shaking his head. "You would have gone all south side on his head." They both laughed as their drinks arrived.

"Ava's been driving everyone nuts again at work," Leyla grumbled. "I swear she does it on purpose to make us all miserable."

"I thought you two were getting along a bit better," Jonathan sighed. He was getting fed up with hearing about the two of them bickering and arguing all the time. In fact he wasn't sure that he wanted Sarah around that as much as she had been lately.

"We are and then something happens and we go off again," Leyla took a swig of her beer, glancing up at the game playing on the television. She didn't really want to go into it again with Jonathan, he always took Ava's side and it was starting to really annoy her. Leyla decide to stuff the anger back down, ignore it like usual to keep the peace. "Let's not talk about it."

Jonathan glanced away. This wasn't working, it hadn't been for awhile.

"Leyla, I think maybe we should take a break from seeing each other," Jonathan said quietly, cringing inwardly as her dark eyes bore down on him.

"What?" Leyla ground out.

Jonathan looked down at his hands, fiddling with the label on his beer bottle, trying to find the right words. Leyla didn't give him the opportunity.

"You know what? You're right," Leyla spat before the man could get another word out. She stood, her chair scraping the floor, her temper rising quickly to the surface, masking the hurt eating at her gut. They had family in common, so this couldn't turn ugly, but she just wanted to get out of the loud bar. Right now. "A break might be just what we need to figure out if this is what we both want."

"Leyla-" Jonathan began, feeling bad, seeing the hurt in her eyes.

"No, don't," Leyla said, cutting him off and shaking her head in disbelief. "I'll see you around." She dug into her pocket and found some money, tossing it to the table to cover the cost of her drink. She didn't want anything from him right now, not even the beer. She turned and stalked out of the loud bar, the cold night air hitting her as she stepped outside.

Leyla could make her own way, by herself, just like she always did.

Why did she even think that would change now that she was in Springfield?

Towers was busy, the bar area full of young professional types mingling and flirting over martini's. Phillip Spaulding stepped up to the bar, catching the bartender's eye and ordering a drink.

"Hey, buddy," Rick Bauer came up beside him at the bar, slapping him good naturedly on the back. "It's busy in here tonight. I wasn't sure I could make it on time. I had a broken ankle come in at the end of shift in Emergency, but Lillian shoved me out the door before something else kept me there. What a great suggestion coming here."

Phillip's drink arrived and the bartender brought a second one for Rick. Phillip frowned a little confused.

"My suggestion? You are getting forgetful. Your secretary left a message at my office that you wanted to meet," Phillip took a sip of his whiskey.

"No," Rick cocked an eyebrow and shook his head. "I think you have that backwards."

"Actually, I wanted to see the both of you," A quiet voice said behind them. "I hope you don't mind."

Phillip and Rick froze, both of them recognizing Ross Marler's voice anywhere. Slowly they turned to face the man they thought had been dead all these years. Until the news conference had blown that assumption out of the water and sent the stunning news rippling through Springfield like a shockwave.

"Oh, my God," Rick finally found his voice first. "Ross, I'm so sorry..."

"Save it, Rick. I don't want to hear it," Ross smiled, his eyes cold as ice. "It breaks my heart that either of you could have done that to me. And your father, Alan Spaulding, may he rot in hell as far as I'm concerned."

Phillip glanced down, silent as death. What could he say anyway that would make this better for any of them?

"I swear," Ross all but growled as he leaned closer, anger pouring off of him in waves. "I will do everything in my power to make you both pay for screwing up my life." He glared at both men, his point crystal clear.

Stepping back, Ross tugged at his suit jacket and straightened his tie, before nodding and disappearing from their sight.

Phillip sighed and glanced at a disheartened Rick and then waved at the bartender, ordering another round of drinks. He had a feeling they were going to need it.

It had been a long week, Friday taking longer to get there than Olivia had realized. It was almost a relief to walk the flight of stairs up to Dr. Tremain's office. Glancing at her watch she knew she was a bit early for her regular appointment, but it she was more than happy to wait. She didn't have to head back to work afterwards, only a quick drink with Doris at Towers planned before heading home for the weekend.

Dr. Tremain's office door was open and there were voices inside, Brooke clearly finishing up with her client. A younger girl sat on the floor, leaning on the wall outside the door,

patiently waiting. She glanced up as Olivia drew near, and then she recognized her, it was the little girl from the Howard murder case. Doris hadn't really said but Olivia had figured that Michael Howard had abused both mother and daughter.

The bastard.

"Hi, I'm Olivia. Do you mind if I wait with you?" Olivia smiled at the girl and came to sit beside her, wrapping her arms around her knees as she settled on the floor. They sat quietly for awhile before Olivia spoke again. "What's your name?"

"Dani," The girl said shyly, smiling. "It's short for Danica." Olivia nodded and put out her hand to shake the girl's. Dani giggled but took it, shaking it vigorously.

"That's a great name. Nice to meet you," Olivia leaned her head back against the wall, her legs starting to ache so she stretched them out in front of her. Dani copied her movements, grinning up at her. "I think you know my friend Doris Wolfe, right?"

"Sure," Dani nodded. "She's nice but a little grumpy." Olivia snorted, the girl capturing Doris' personality fairly accurately. "She made my Mom angry once, made her cry and so I had to be strong and tell her..."

"Tell her your secret?" Olivia asked quietly. Danica glanced up at her with sad eyes and nodded. "That was really brave of you. Can I tell you a secret?" Dani nodded so seriously it nearly broke Olivia's heart. "When I was a little bit older than you, I was hurt by someone I liked too. I liked him a lot."

"You were?" Dani asked, a little shocked.

"Yep," Olivia nodded. "It was somebody I thought was nice and who I could trust. He did things to me that I didn't want to do and even though I said no, he still hurt me." Olivia paused, the old pain and anguish washing over her. "Afterwards I felt so angry and sad; I thought I had done something so bad that nobody would ever love me again."

"Really?" Dani's eyes started to tear up and she wiped at them with the sleeves of her shirt, clearly feeling something similar herself. Olivia nodded, tears building up in her own eyes. She swallowed hard and tried to find her words.

"Really," Olivia whispered. "But you know what? I got through it and I met the most amazing friends and people who love me. And I realized that I didn't do anything bad at all, it was

the man I trusted who did the bad things." She reached out and tapped Danica on the shoulder with a finger. "You didn't do anything bad either. Your mom loves you and your friends do too, and so does Dr. Tremain. You are so strong and brave and good, more than you even know. You'll get through all this too," Olivia leaned in, her eyes locking with Dani's. "I promise."

"Thank you," Danica sniffed and gave Olivia a big hug.

"You're welcome, sweetie," Olivia whispered back.

From the doorway came a discreet cough and they both looked up to find Brooke and Kathryn Howard smiling down at them.

"Time to go, Dani," Kathryn dabbed at her eyes a little with a tissue. Dani quickly scrambled to her feet, Olivia a little more slowly followed suit. Kathryn nodded to Olivia and then Dani waved goodbye, the two of them heading down the hall and disappearing down the stairs.

"Natalia's right, you are a big old softie inside," Brooke grinned, opening her office door wider.

"Tell anyone and I'll have to kill you," Olivia smirked, wiping the tears from her eyes as she wandered inside.

"Your secret is safe with me," Brooke chuckled and closed the door behind them.

Leyla sat in the small bistro at the Beacon, drowning her sorrows in her mocha cappuccino. Glancing up she saw Ava talking with Greg before smiling and making her way inside.

"Hi there," Ava dropped down into the chair and cocked her head. "You seem down today."

"Yeah," Leyla took her spoon and stirred the dark drink a little, not really interested in drinking it. Not really interested in much of anything actually. "Jonathan and I had a fight and we've decided to take a break."

"Oh," Ava's eyebrows raised in surprise. "I'm sorry. The two of you seemed good together."

Leyla just shrugged a little, and sighed.

"I know a good online dating service," Ava smirked, poking Leyla with her foot under the table. Leyla snorted and shook her head. "Come on; think of how much fun we could have double dating." Leyla chuckled and tossed a napkin at her.

"Get serious, I'm not that desperate," Leyla teased back.

"Hey!" Ava frowned, but soon smiled back.

"It's probably for the best. There wasn't any spark really, you know what I mean? He was sweet, but there was something missing." Leyla sighed, taking a sip of her drink. "And to make things worse, I was hoping Jonathan could help with my plans to expand the daycare."

"What plan?" Ava asked leaning forward. "Mom didn't mention any plan to me."

"Oh, well, I hadn't broached it with her yet," Leyla shifted in her seat. "I was going talk to Lewis Construction and a few other places."

"Whoa, you can't just go hiring people without passing that on to Olivia," Ava said, her voice rising slightly. "There's a chain of command around here, y'know."

"I know that, I was just trying to show initiative," Leyla sat straighter, getting defensive. "And I wasn't hiring anybody."

"Yet," Ava shook her head and standing abruptly. "You can not follow the rules at all, can you?"

"And you're so by the book, you can't see past the end of your nose," Leyla snapped back. They glared at each other a moment longer before Ava finally snapped.

"Fine. I try to be friendly and you get all huffy," Ava shook her head. "I don't know why I even bother."

Ava turned on her heel and stalked out of the bistro. Leyla shook her head and leaned back in her chair.

"Neither do I," Leyla sighed. "Neither do I."

"Olivia, over here!" Doris stood and waved over several heads to get her attention.

Weaving her way through the crowd gathered at Towers for after work drinks, Olivia smiled and waved at several familiar faces in passing before finally arriving at the table. She smiled as she recognized the handsome man seated across from Doris, who stood and pulled out a chair for her.

"Olivia Spencer, I'd like you to meet our new Police Chief, Mike Thorne." Doris grinned as Olivia nodded and had a seat.

"Nice to meet you, Chief." Olivia said.

"The pleasure is all mine. And call me Mike." Thorne slid back into his chair.

"Okay, Mike it is." Olivia glanced at her watch. "I can't stay long; Natalia is meeting me here after she drops Francesca and Emma with their dads."

"Good thing I already ordered you a martini then," Doris smirked as the server arrived with Olivia's drink.

"Mike was just telling me how his first week has gone so far."

"Have you settled in all right?" Olivia asked.

"It was a little hectic, with the Winslow case still fresh and trying to find my feet. Nothing that I can't handle though," Mike leaned forward, his arm sliding along the back of Olivia's chair.

"I bet," Olivia all but purred, taking a sip of her martini.

They made a striking couple actually as they teased and bantered. Doris wondered if either of them even realized that they were flirting. It seemed to come naturally to both of them, like breathing. And then almost in slow motion, the crowd seemed to almost part. Doris noticed her first, as Natalia stood watching them from across the room. She tapped Olivia with her foot to get her attention, but she was laughing at something and completely ignored the warning as Natalia approached.

Finally Mike glanced up, smiling charmingly at the petite woman glaring down at them. He shifted back in his chair, his arm moving away from the back of Olivia's.

"Natalia!" Doris said awkwardly, as Olivia turned and smiled up at her girlfriend.

"Hey, you're early," Olivia smiled completely oblivious to the annoyed look she was getting. "This is Mike, the new police chief we've heard so much about."

"Hi," Mike stood, offering his hand to her.

"Seriously? I don't think so, Mike," Natalia just stared at it and then glared at Olivia.

"What?" Olivia asked, recognizing the look and not sure what she had done this time. Mike frowned and sat back down, unsure what was going on. Doris glanced away, trying to give them some privacy. Olivia stood, moving closer to her partner, her own anger flaring. "What did I do now?"

Natalia looked up at her partner and shook her head.

"You know what, I'm just going home. If you can tear yourself away from your new friend you'll know where to find me," Natalia's voice was dangerously low. She nodded to the two others at the table and abruptly left.

Olivia ground her teeth and sank back down into her chair, silently counting to ten. This was so not her fault, she was just talking to him.

"Listen, it was nice to meet you but I need to go. Long drive back to Chicago yet tonight, and I need to pick up my daughter from her grandmother's" Mike smiled and stood. "House hunting next week, oh boy!"

Doris and Olivia chuckled and with that Mike headed out of Towers. Doris turned back to face her friend, the only indication she could see that Olivia was upset was the vein ticking in her forehead.

"I wasn't doing anything wrong," Olivia said, taking a gulp of her martini. "He was nice and funny and sweet."

"You are absolutely right," Doris agreed, nodding and sipping at her drink.

"I know I am," Olivia grumbled. "I was just talking to him, not trying to get him into bed with me."

"Right, I mean, look at him," Doris swirled the wine in her glass. "He's gorgeous, funny, and intelligent. I bet he has a big gun and knows how to use it. Why wouldn't you want to bed him?"

"Right...wait, What?" Olivia was getting confused now too, her words getting twisted.

"I mean, think about it, Spencer," Doris leaned forward, shaking her head at her friend. "Natalia probably thinks she is nothing but an emotional wreck, more trouble than she's worth, crying one minute yelling at you the next. You're stuck raising her child with that idiot Frank, and you've been doing nothing but arguing with her since she's come back. And so when she finds you here going all cougar vixen over that stunning powerful man, how do you think she'll compare herself to that?"

"That's not what..." Olivia said, her mind reeling. "Dear God, is that what this looked like?"

Doris just sipped her wine and blinked at Olivia, the answer obvious.

"I am an ass." Olivia groaned and slapped her forehead.

"Yep, pretty much an ass," Doris grinned at her friend. "But you are her piece of ass, and don't you forget it." She grinned wider at Olivia's offended expression, before nudging her towards the door. "You're welcome, now go home."

Olivia stood and shook her head. Old habits still came back to bite her even after all this time. Waving over her shoulder, she disappeared into the crowd.

"Job well done, Wolfe," Doris toasted herself with her wineglass and then took a much deserved sip. "Now if only your own love life was so easy to solve."

Act IV

Natalia had just arrived home, having driven around a bit to cool down. She stood now on the porch of the farmhouse, staring out across the fields, before hunting for her keys to go inside and get dinner started. On the highway she noticed a familiar white Nissan slow down and then pulled in, parking in its usual spot on the driveway. Olivia emerged from the car and made her way up the walkway. Short black leather jacket, clinging white tank top, well-fitting blue jeans and her natural swagger, it took Natalia's breath away and she forgot for a moment how pissed she was with the woman. Olivia stepped onto the old porch as

their eyes met, her green ones troubled, sad. Natalia couldn't help being a little pleased that she seemed to be suffering too.

"You just gonna stand there freezing to death or are you coming in?" Olivia asked and waited for Natalia to move toward the screen door. Unlocking the door, she flicked on the light and shrugged out of her jacket, dropping her keys and cell phone by the door, cautiously watching as Natalia did the same.

"I don't know about you, but I need a drink," Not waiting for a response, Olivia wandered over to where the good bottle of whiskey was hidden, in the cupboard over the fridge and pulled out a couple of glasses, tossing some ice in for good measure.

It had been a long day and she had been enjoying herself, not even thinking about what it might look like. There was a gorgeous man giving her his undivided attention and she was just teasing and joking with him. Nothing more, simply passing the time until the main event arrived.

Natalia.

All Olivia could think of the entire time was Natalia, even when she was talking with Mike. But the wounded look in Natalia's eyes today haunted her, helpless as she watched them welling with tears before she turned to leave Towers. It cut a strip from her heart knowing that she had been the cause.

Olivia sighed and poured out two glasses and turned to find Natalia silently watching her with those fathomless dark eyes. Reminding herself to breathe, she handed a glass to Natalia, their fingers touching, sliding against each other, before she pulled herself away.

"Olivia, we need to talk," Natalia knew she had to speak her mind, talk about what was bothering her, how jealous it made her to see Olivia flirting with that man. This was too important for her to just let slip through her fingers.

"About this afternoon..." Olivia looked down and swirled her whiskey over the ice in her glass. She wished she could be frozen too, so she wouldn't feel this pain.

"No, let me rephrase that. I need to talk and you need to listen." Natalia took a gulp of whiskey, enjoying the feel of it scorch its way down her throat, the burn warming her gut.

Taking Olivia's drink from her hand she placed both glasses carefully on the countertop, before turning and stepping forward quickly.

Olivia didn't expect the move and suddenly found herself backed up against the counter, her body pressed between it and the seductive curves of one angry brunette. She couldn't ignore the energy sparking between them, nor the rush of desire coursing through her veins.

"Natalia, what are you doing?" Olivia gasped as the lithe brunette moved impossibly closer, slowly tilting her head and tasting her soft lips. Long moments passed, tongues sliding against each other, slick and wet. Pausing for much needed breath, they separated, eyes locked.

"Look at me and tell me that you don't feel the way I do. Tell me that you don't want my hands on your body right now, my lips on your skin, my voice in your ear moaning your name. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me, that you don't love me." Natalia growled, wanting more, needing to hear Olivia say the words, claiming what was hers and hers alone.

Their bodies were pressed so tightly together Natalia could feel toned abs moving against her own with each breath as Olivia panted, thinking hard, trying to focus. She could see the flux of emotions flowing behind the green eyes and then she saw it. Saw the moment the walls fell, watched as Olivia broke open, surrendering and letting Natalia in.

"Please, I love you, so much, querida," Olivia whispered, unable to stop the flood of emotions. She had tried to stay indignant, upset, but Doris' words rang in her ears and she knew Natalia didn't deserve a moment of doubt. "God, Natalia you're all I think about, night and day. I can't make it stop and honestly, I don't want to make it stop. You are everything to me, our family is everything to me. When I almost lost you..."

Tears welled and slowly trickled down Olivia's flushed cheeks, and she looked away, the pain naked in her eyes.

"It fucking scared me, ok? It scared the hell out of me. And now you think that I would throw this all away for meaningless sex with some strange man? We were just talking and laughing, I didn't mean anything and I'm sorry if I hurt you." Olivia's eyes snapped back, locking with Natalia's sad dark eyes.

"Don't you trust me?"

"Oh, baby. Of course I trust you," Natalia swallowed hard and realized how hurt Olivia was too. How damaged they both were. Wiping the tears away with her thumb, her heart melted at her lover's words. She pulled Olivia into a tight embrace, the pain and anger that had been crushing her soul since she had walked into Towers was washed away with Olivia's tears.

"Nothing worth having ever comes easy, I get that. As long as we have each other, we can work through everything else together. I promise," Olivia stroked her hand through the thick dark hair, staring hard into serious eyes. "You never have to worry about whose bed I'm going to be in at night. It's yours, now and forever."

Natalia closed her eyes and nodded, soaking in Olivia's words, believing every one of them. "I'm sorry I was jealous. With everything going on, I just was afraid you didn't ... I don't know. Want me or maybe had enough of all the drama. I'm sorry, forgive me?" Natalia smiled as Olivia silently nodded before pulling her close once again, clinging to each other for a time, needing the physical connection with each other. Nuzzling softly in the honey-blond hair, Natalia suddenly could smell cologne on Olivia and she growled softly.

"What?" Olivia registered how still Natalia had become in her arms.

"Your clothes, they smell like him," Embarrassed by the jealousy that still burned through her veins like some chemical residue she couldn't wash off, Natalia paused and tried to move away. Olivia pulled her back, their eyes meeting, challenging.

"Then take them off me," Olivia rasped, watching a hunger grow in Natalia's dark eyes. And then before she knew it, Natalia's mouth was against her own, taking what belonged to her alone. Long fingers teased down her body, finding the hem of her white tank top before pulling it up over her head in one fell swoop, leaving her in just her silky bra.

"I want you, now, Olivia," Natalia panted, staring down at Olivia's half naked body, running her fingertips along twitching abs. She desperately wanted to pop open the jeans and keep exploring but she wanted to be very clear that this was what Olivia truly wanted or if they still needed to talk.

"Good," Olivia husked, putting her hand over Natalia's and moving it to cover her scantily clad breast with both their hands. "Now take what's yours."

Natalia's heart soared with the whispered plea, and took what was being freely given. She thrilled at the needy moan falling from Olivia's lips as she started to move along the woman's tempting body. She knew it wouldn't be the last one she'd hear from Olivia Spencer tonight and was cocky enough to think a scream or two could even be coaxed out.

Natalia sent a silent prayer of thanks skyward and then lost herself in Olivia.

"Natalia," Olivia's voice, low and hot against her neck, brought Natalia back to the here and now, stopping her in her tracks. She leaned back to find her lover watching her intently, licking her lips. Olivia smirked and moved to a clear spot on the counter, and hopped up, getting comfortable. "That's better. Now come here."

Natalia walked over to the woman patiently waiting for her. Stopping before the long legs, she put her hands on Olivia's knees and gently nudged them wider apart. Moving between her legs, Natalia tasted Olivia's moist lips and slowly pulled her closer, their bodies pressing tight together once more. Olivia's needy whimper hit her hard, her lower muscles clenching with desire. She sank deeper into Olivia's mouth, tongues tangling with each other. Long fingers ran through her dark hair, gently tugging Natalia's head back so Olivia could kiss a trail to her tender earlobe. She felt Olivia take it lightly between her teeth, gently sucking, nibbling then letting go.

"Something is going to boil over in here, really soon," Natalia panted hotly, her body flooding with desire, desperately needing more contact.

"Good," Olivia smirked and roughly tugged her lover's shirt from her pants, sliding warm hands along the toned belly she found underneath. Moving up her body, Natalia twitched and arched closer. Olivia cupped full breasts and circled stiff nipples through the thin bra fabric with her thumbs. "I like things hot and spicy."

Olivia was distracted by Natalia's playful chuckle for a moment. She felt as her lover's strong hands grab her leather belt and flick it open, twisting the button of her jeans and lower the zip. Leaning back slightly, she watched Natalia's finger trail seductively along the waistband of her panties, enjoying the shiver of anticipation it caused tickling across her sensitive the skin below.

Natalia paused, catching Olivia's eyes, suddenly serious.

"Don't mess up my kitchen."

Olivia lifted an eyebrow and just smirked. Natalia's eyes narrowed and raked possessively down her body. God, she wanted her.

"I've been thinking," Natalia paused, distracted as her hands moved up her partner's torso, unhooking Olivia's bra and tossing it over her shoulder.

"Always a dangerous thing," Olivia murmured along the brunette's neck, following the strong cord down to the hollow of her collarbone, licking. Natalia laughed and twisted a stiff nipple in response, much to Olivia's delight.

"I do enjoy playing in the kitchen, I think we may need to do this more often," Natalia squeezed her hand slowly down inside Olivia's underwear, the jeans adding extra pressure.

"Don't you?"

"God, yes," Olivia sighed, rolling her hips, silently begging for more. The angle was a bit awkward, but Natalia was managing it quite nicely, her fingers teasing her aching clit before slipping along Olivia's wet center and filling her completely. Olivia bit her lower lip and threw her head back, moaning her approval.

"I thought you might like that plan," Natalia mumbled against full lush breasts, sucking at her erect nipples as she started rocking against Olivia, pressing deeper with each passing moment.

"I like how you think..." Olivia gasped before losing all ability to form words. Arching her back, she pushed herself wantonly against Natalia's thrusting fingers. Her body responded to her intimate touch, greedily clutching, building deep inside her, harder, faster. Natalia looked up and watched as she drove her lover to the brink. Olivia moaned loudly, before bucking hard once and again, and then coming hard.

"Shh...I've got you now," Removing her hand gently, Natalia held Olivia as she slid limp off the counter and into her arms. Leaning against Natalia, Olivia snuffled in the soft dark hair as she caught her breath.

"Bedroom?" She had felt more than heard Natalia's soft suggestion. Nodding lazily, Olivia smiled as Natalia's hand went to her fly, zipping her back up.

Bending quickly, Natalia grabbed their discarded clothes from the floor and tangled her fingers with her lover. Olivia pulled their joined hands up and kissed the back of Natalia's, following her as they headed upstairs.

"God, I love a woman who knows her way around a kitchen."

The wind blew cold and blustery in the old Springfield cemetery, the naked tree branches jutted skyward, like boney hands clawing at the clouds. Ross stood staring down at his headstone, black as death itself. Behind him he heard footsteps approaching, the snow crunching and squeaking beneath the person's feet.

"The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Ross smiled at his bad joke and turned to see Jeffrey O'Neill's smiling face.

"That happens around here," Jeffrey smirked, his own faked death had happened not all that long ago. Ross nodded and the old friends began to walk along the snowy pathway.

"I have something you might be very interested in," Ross said, capturing Jeffrey's attention. "Phillip has everyone fooled, but I can feel it in my bones that he is still a danger to Springfield."

"Phillip?" Jeffrey shook his head in disbelief. "The madman you once knew has returned as a saint. He's even won over Olivia, which is not an easy feat, let me tell you." He ran a hand through his hair and glanced back at Ross, concerned that the man was a little obsessed with getting revenge. Not that he could blame him.

"I will find out what is going on beneath our noses and expose him for who he really is," Ross said quietly, anger flashing in his eyes. "I will see him behind bars before it's too late for all of us."

"What did you have in mind?" Jeffrey blinked, not sure he had ever seen Ross Marler so cold and dark before. Things really do change, and not always for the better.

"You'll be the first to know when all my information has come in," Ross smiled mirthlessly and continued walking down the frozen pathway.

The wind picked up again, and this time no one even noticed.

Blake sat in her kitchen, watching the clock on the wall slowly tick down as she waited for Doris to arrive. It had been inevitable really, since Ross had appeared on her doorstep. As much as she loved being with Doris, and the woman had been like a rock, standing by her side as she and their family adjusted to Ross' return, she needed to make some tough decisions.

And this was going to be the hardest.

The doorbell rang, and Blake flashed back to the night her world had changed. She retraced her steps and opened the front door, smiling up at her lover, as Doris came in and dropped a tender kiss to her lips.

"Hi sweetheart," Doris said shrugging her coat off and quickly hanging it up in the closet.

Blake watched her with a breaking heart. Doris felt so at home here, like she was part of the family. And in truth she was. She nodded and led the way back into the kitchen, and poured them each a hot cup of tea.

"You're quiet tonight," Doris said, taking the hot cup and warming her hands.

"Lots going on in my head, I guess," Blake said sadly, taking a quick sip of her tea.

"So you wanted to talk. Is there news?" Doris asked, a tendril of fear coiling in her belly. Blake was quiet, too quiet and warning bells were ringing like church bells in her mind.

"Doris, you know I love you," Blake looked down at her hands, feeling the weight of her wedding ring back on her finger. She'd only just put it on for the first time in years that morning. Now it felt heavy.

"I feel a 'but' coming on," Doris said softly, glancing down and noticing the wedding ring for the first time herself, as Blake twisted it around and around. The tendril of fear was turning into nausea and her heart was suddenly in her throat. "Say what you need to say, Blake."

"I love you more than I can say, but I need some time now to be alone and think," Blake blurted it out all at once, tears threatening to overwhelm her, but she needed to finish her

thought. "I'm your lover, but I am Ross' wife. I need time to see if there is anything left between us, for the kid's sake, for everyone's sake. This isn't a goodbye, it's just a wait and see. I don't know what else to do."

Doris nodded, her heart shattering. Just once she'd like someone to pick her, who wanted to be with her, to love her forever, instead of the other guy. Doris thought this time would be different, she should have known better. Straight girls always break your heart.

Every. Single. Time.

"I need to go." She stood and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Tears were threatening but Doris refused to cry in front of Blake, refused to fall apart in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Doris," Blake's voice broke, tears falling freely down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

"I know you are," Doris looked down at her beautiful girlfriend's face, and leaned forward, stealing one last kiss. Slowly pulling away, she smiled gently, devastated inside. "Goodbye, Blake."

Blake wept, listening as Doris' footsteps echoed in the foyer as she gathered her belongings and then the quiet click of the door closed behind her.

It had been the hardest thing she had ever done, not to run after her.

Sunday morning arrived bright and early, the sun shining brightly and a warm breeze blowing across the parking lot of the small Catholic church. It wasn't so hard to believe that spring was just around the corner on a morning like this. The parking lot was full as the white Nissan pulled in and circled a moment, before finding a space near the street.

Olivia glanced at her lover, a slight frown clouding Natalia's face. They had spent a good hour the night before discussing this, that maybe they could attend the service as a family, if that was helpful. Natalia had quietly snuggled close, seeming to be at peace about the whole thing. Now however she seemed to be having her doubts again. In the backseat Emma had already unbuckled her belt and had popped the door open, ready to go, while Francesca burbled happily in her booster seat patiently waiting.

"Come on, beautiful, before lightning strikes us," Olivia grinned, pleased to see a matching one appear on Natalia's face, dimples at full force. Olivia busied herself with getting Francesca out of the back, as Emma grabbed Natalia's hand and pulled her towards the stairs.

"I'm not sure..." Natalia hesitated as they all reached the top of the stairs, pausing at the large oak doors. Olivia moved closer looking into the troubled eyes of her lover.

"Trust me then. You can do this." Olivia smiled softly, shifting Francesca to her other hip before reaching out to take Natalia's hand, squeezing it gently. Emma came around on the other side and smiled up at Natalia, taking her other hand. "Have faith in you and me, in the strength of our family. We can do this."

"Come on, Ma," Emma reached out with her other hand and turned the handle, pushing the oak door open, the sound of the organ playing inside growing louder. She glanced up at Natalia and smiled. "Together we can do anything."

Out of the mouths of babes.

Natalia's eyes welled with unshed tears. Taking a great shuddering breath, she nodded and followed her family inside.

Ready or not, it was time to come home.

Episode 5: All Out of Fight



Act I

The winds continued to howl outside and the cold draft that seeped through under the door caused her to shiver as she tried to keep warm despite the meager blankets covering her. The persistent coughing made her chest ache, the increased wheezing worrying her. Sometimes, she wondered, if it was better when she was left alone in the darkened room, left to the machinations of her dreams and hallucinations, or when her kidnapper reappeared to provide her with food and the occasional beating. When the door swung open, the figure briskly moved toward her, grabbing her arm until she staggered to a standing position.

"Move!"

"Where are you taking me?" Natalia croaked out.

"What does it matter? You won't be around long enough to enjoy it," the voice replied, as she harshly pushed her captor in front of her.

Reaching the top of the lighthouse, Marina shoved her through the hatch causing her balance to be off and she caught her wrist on the steel rail.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Natalia asked as she cradled her wrist against her chest.

"Paybacks are a bitch. Or maybe that's just me," Marina responded, thrusting the other woman forward. "You destroyed my family, so now it's time for you and Olivia to pay." Looking down, she could see the police and fire rescue vehicles approaching. "They're too late," Marina yelled over the winds as she pushed Natalia over the side of the building.

"Nooooooo!" Natalia woke with a scream, jolted awake from a free-fall. She was hyperventilating and sweat covered her body. She didn't know if it was better or worse now that she knew Marina had been the one to kidnap and torture her; at least when the nightmares came now she could identify the perpetrator, but it never made them easier to deal with. She thought she'd been doing better in that the nightmares weren't as frequent, and most of them didn't result in her waking from them. As far as she knew, she'd been able to keep them to herself without worrying Olivia about them.

"Natalia?" Olivia inquired and sighed as she put a gentle hand on her partner's arm. "Cariño, another nightmare?"

"Yeah," Natalia replied. She hated waking Olivia up, especially when there was nothing her partner could really do to help, but now that she was, Natalia laid her hand on Olivia's and pulled it around her. Looking over at the clock, she saw that it was still early morning, so there was still lots of time for sleep, if only she could settle long enough without sliding back into the nightmare. She had to do something, talk to someone, to get these nightmares to stop. Sighing, she lay her head back on the pillow and snuggled back against her partner, taking comfort in the familiar loving presence. Some days she felt like she didn't deserve to be loved, and it scared her. But this time, she wasn't running away. She wanted to face it, fight against it. She just didn't know how to fight against the demons that plagued her sleep.

When the morning finally dawned, Natalia had still not slept much, but she had coped enough in her life with less sleep when Rafe was sick; she could get by...with plenty of caffeine. Sliding herself out of the bed without disturbing Olivia, she headed to the bathroom to get ready for the day. When she emerged a short time later, she quickly got dressed and went downstairs to start breakfast; first order of business was to get the coffee pot started. Firing up the laptop that had been left on the kitchen table, she opened up the calendar for herself and Olivia. She got the bowls, plates and cutlery ready then went up to dress Francesca, and then wake up Emma and Olivia.

As she headed into the master bedroom, she smiled noting that Olivia was in much the same position in the bed as her daughter had been - sprawled across the center on her belly, arms splayed outward from her body. However, unlike her morning kiss to Emma on the forehead to get her awake and moving, her wake up call for Olivia, once she was able to get her to roll over, was a solid kiss to the older woman's mouth.

"Mmmmm. Good morning?" Olivia asked, sedation still adding a coarseness to her speech.

"That it is." Natalia smiled and kissed her again. With everything else in her universe still feeling unstable, the comfort and familiarity of being with Olivia gave her some semblance of order.

Taking a deep breath, Olivia smiled. "You started the coffee. I think I love you."

"You think?" Natalia laughed. Somethings never changed. Olivia's need of the dark brew first thing in the morning was one of them. "I might have to go turn it off until you know for sure."

Reaching an arm out, Olivia swatted Natalia on the rear end as she passed her on the way to the bathroom. With a mock glare, she responded, "Don't you dare."

"See you downstairs," Natalia called out as she headed back to the kitchen, by way of checking on Emma again to make sure she was up.

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"What's on the agenda for today?" Olivia asked as she was fully dressed and carrying Francesca on her hip. She placed their youngest in her booster seat and pushed the chair closer to the table before heading to the counter to get her coffee. Looking behind her, she noticed a still drowsy but fully dressed Emma entering the room.

"You have an appointment with Leyla at 10 o'clock about the day care. She'd like to expand it if possible because they're getting a lot of local regulars, in addition to accommodating Beacon guest requirements. At noon there are a few potential vendors coming in to compete for the wine supplier tender we put in the paper last week. I've got a meeting with General Staff this morning at 11. With spring arriving and the upcoming summer season, I want to get employee vacation times sorted, address sick time, and some health and safety stuff that has come up in my absence."

Olivia smiled, impressed with how much her partner was delving back into work, but at the same time she worried about Natalia pushing herself too hard. She tread carefully in asking, "Has Ava sent you the up-to-date paperwork on the Health and Safety Committee? I know she met with them a couple weeks ago."

Natalia took a deep breath as she focused on putting Francesca's cereal in front of her, and getting Emma's breakfast ready. She knew Olivia meant well with her easing back into work, but she was more than capable of taking back all of her responsibilities at the hotel. It was still occasionally a sticking point, though. "Yes. She sent me an email with the issues they addressed."

"Mom, can I go play with Clarissa after school today? Mrs. Marler said it would be fine."

"I'll check with Blake, but that should be fine," Olivia mentioned, but realized the other woman probably needed the normality of two preteen girls compared to the craziness of having her husband come back from the supposed dead.

They finished their breakfast and got Emma sorted on the bus to school before getting themselves to the Beacon to start their day.

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"Nooo!" Beth woke with a scream, her heart racing as she fought her way back from a nightmare of Bradley Raines raping her. She thought she had put all that behind her more than twenty years ago, but their recent case involving a young woman who'd been raped by her husband had brought the memories back in startling clarity. Beth lay back in the bed and cuddled into Phillip, who just wrapped his arms around her. Once she settled comfortably, she remembered doing much the same thing after the rape when she and Phillip had fled Springfield and headed to New York City.

Her husband had always had a huge protective instinct when it came to his family and those he loved. While his actions weren't exactly good, or even legal at times, his intent to protect was strong. She placed a kiss on his chest. She could understand Kathryn wanting to protect her daughter no matter the costs, from her husband, and she could only hope that those costs would not involve a prison term.

Sensing his wife's slowed breathing and settling, he knew that the nightmares had resurfaced. He also knew she sometimes found it hard to talk to him about it. Placing a kiss against her temple, he whispered, "Why don't you call your mother when you wake up in the morning?"

Beth nodded and curled in to him tighter to try and get a couple more hours of sleep as it would probably be another very long day ahead of her.

\*\*\*\*

Lillian sat in her kitchen, drinking a cup of tea. She picked up the *Springfield Journal* to browse through the morning news before she had to go into work for a day shift. Her heart sunk as she read in the top news article that the jury for the Kathryn Howard case would be chosen today. It all seemed so wrong. How could this woman seriously be charged with murder when she was defending herself and her daughter?

She could remember vividly the night the young woman came into the emergency department, clothes looking very worn and nearly hanging off her small frame. She looked so young to see and be part of such horrifying acts of violence. Unfortunately, in her job, she had seen victims of domestic violence on more than one occasion. More times than she would ever be comfortable with. It never made it any easier. She sighed. She knew this case was affecting Beth because Bradley had raped her. While she had initially denied it and

lashed out at her daughter, she found she could never really forgive herself for letting him hurt Beth.

With a heavy heart, Lillian put the paper down, no longer interested in reading any further. Then she put away her breakfast dishes and headed back upstairs to get ready for the day. She'd call Beth later.

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Mornings at Company were always busy with pre-work folks coming in to get their caffeine and breakfast, or those taking a break from work and retirees. Frank had come in to help since one of the usual staff had taken a sick day to care for a family member. The regular breakfast crowd had just settled their bills and were taking off for the day, when Blake Marler arrived with Ross in tow.

"Morning, Frankie," Blake called over to her friend. She headed for a booth and tossed her coat on the bench.

"Morning Blake, Ross," Frank responded, bringing over a pot of coffee. "You folks want anything more?"

"I need it black and coming frequently," Blake replied as Frank poured the coffee into a mug."

"That kind of day?" he asked as he took in Ross's assessment of him. He'd frequently had to work with the other man when he'd been a detective and Ross the DA. How times had changed.

"You have no idea." Blake left the comment as is. She couldn't believe how turned inside out her life was. She noted Frank's acknowledging her need for privacy and his retreat to the counter, though she could see his furtive glances their way on occasion.

"You actually dated him, Blake?" Ross asked, somewhat amused. "A second time?"

"He's a friend. We thought we might make it work, but it wasn't really going anywhere," Blake responded, her unease growing. As much as having Ross back in her life was beyond her wildest dreams, the reality was much different. They were both different from where they had been. He had been the love of her life, and father of her children. But there were things she could tell he was keeping secret from her.

Looking at his wife over the rim of his glasses, he commented with some derision, "So now you're batting for the other team? Doris Wolfe?" He'd fought in court with the woman on many occasions, and didn't really think much of her. "Do you screw her, too? Or does she take the reigns?"

"Do you have to be so crude?" Blake asked, annoyed. "We became friends as we were both friends of Olivia and Natalia. That gradually developed into something more as we got closer. We fell in love with each other." Blake sighed. Right now, she was missing Doris's quiet comfort and support. "What is it you want, Ross?"

"I want my family back, intact," Ross responded, blithely. "The kids are happy I'm back. Why can't you be?"

"Don't lay that responsibility on me." Blake started. "You disappeared for a few years, making me believe that you were dead. Did you really think that I would just welcome you back with open arms just because you're not? You didn't think that life would go on or that I'd rather go through life mourning you forever, without someone to share my life with?" Blake moved to stand up. "Because if you did think that, then you never really knew me." Blake grabbed her purse and coat and turned to leave when she felt a hand on her arm. She turned back and leveled a glare at Ross. "I have to go to work."

Blake was ready to storm out of Company when Doris arrived, travel coffee mug in hand. Nearly bumping into the other woman, Blake stopped suddenly and sighed, clearly needing a comforting hug, but not feeling right about asking for one from the other woman since she had told her she needed space to figure out what she wanted.

Disregarding her own feelings as she saw how upset the other woman was, Doris put her mug on the counter and wrapped her arms around Blake, taking whatever comfort she could, and providing that for the redhead. In her peripheral vision, she spotted Ross looking over at them, and she took the opportunity to hold Blake just a little bit longer, pressing a kiss against her temple as she pulled back.

"Are you okay?" Doris asked gently, as she brushed Blake's cheek with her thumb.

"Not really." Blake paused. Then looking into Doris's eyes, she smiled. "Can we talk later? I've got to get to work."

"Sure. Give me a call or a text when you want to meet. I have to be in court most of today because of jury selection. If I'm not available, just leave me a message."

Pulling Doris back into a hug, Blake whispered, "Thank you," before she headed out the door.

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The brisk morning air was pleasant as the new Springfield police chief, Michael Thorne took a run around the small lake, stretching out his muscles as he did so. The area was pretty, he noticed, picking up his pace. Certainly a nice place he could raise his daughter out of the crime-ridden area of Chicago he was coming from. As he finished his second round about the lake, he headed back up the road toward Company.

Coming to a stop in front of the restaurant, he took a few good, deep breaths and stretches to lower his heart rate. And, to his amusement, he noticed a few good glances at his physique from passing customers. The day was unseasonably warmer than usual, and he'd taken advantage of that by going with a fit pair of running shorts and a tank top with a light sleeveless hooded sweatshirt over it. With a final stretch, he turned towards the restaurant door and opened it. The small family-run restaurant was well run and clean, and that impressed the chief as he headed to the counter, where he spotted the mayor.

"Good morning, Madame Mayor," Mike smiled and reached out a hand.

"Coming in to charm the natives?" Doris returned the smile as she spotted a few heads turn in his direction as he entered.

"Is it working?" Mike asked, tongue in cheek, as he laughed.

"Perhaps," Doris responded with a smirk at noticing Dinah Marler's prolonged glance.

"There are certainly a number of women and probably a couple of men who'd be interested."

Mike Thorne outright laughed at the Mayor's comment. He was certainly secure enough in his own identity to not be put off by the suggestion of men being interested in him. He was certainly aware of attracting the women, but for the time being his focus was on his job and taking care of his daughter. Any hint of a romance were nowhere on his radar. From the looks of things, there were quite a few management issues he was going to have to address first at work, so he needed to head off soon. "I just came in to get a bottle of water...or two."

"You don't keep one with you when you run?" Doris asked amusedly.

Putting his arms out from his side, he quipped with a grin, "Where would I put it?"

Responding to his charm, Doris laughed. "Okay, there is that. Anyway, I just came in for coffee and then I'm back to the office briefly and then to the courts. See you later, Chief Thorne." Holding up her refilled travel mug, she got off her chair and headed out the door.

The kitchen door opened and Buzz Cooper came out with a couple of orders in his hands. He smiled as he saw the new police chief. He thought he might feel a bit of resentment since Frank had been put on administrative leave, but he realized that Frank's concentration hadn't been on his job for some time, and his son needed a break from the police department. And he had to admit the new police chief was a nice guy who was coming to a new town to do a job. He had a family to care of just like many people here did, and deserved a chance to prove himself like anyone else.

Depositing the orders with the customers in the corner booth, he turned back to the Chief as he returned to the bar. "How are you, Chief Thorne? Can I get you anything?"

"Just call me Michael, or Mike. I don't stand on ceremony if I'm not on duty. Can I get a couple bottles of water?"

"Sure thing." Buzz turned to grab the bottles from the fridge unit under the bar. "On the house," he added as he noticed Michael pull out a couple bills from his sweatshirt. He noticed the chief's hesitation. "Really. Good will."

"Thank you," Michael held out a hand. "Anyway, I've got to get going. See you later, Mr. Cooper." He took the three single bills he was going to use to pay for the water and put them into the tip bowl and smiled.

"Buzz," the older man responded, grasping the Chief's hand. "Have a good day."

After the chief left, an irritated Frank returned to the bar from the back of the restaurant. "Did you have to be so nice to him, Pop?"

"What, Frank?" Buzz asked, askance at Frank's apparent attitude.

"He's taken my job at the police department and you're being all chummy with him."

Buzz just shook his head. Some days Frank was like his old self, charming and pleasant to be around. Other days, the slightest thing set him off. "Frank, just let it go. He has a job to do, just like most people in this town."

"I just don't get why you have to be so nice to him." Frank was sulking at the bar, taking a drink of coffee.

"In case you've forgotten, this is a restaurant and we're in the hospitality business. You'd do well to remember that it pays to be nice to the customers. It keeps them coming back."

"Fine. But did you have to give him freebies?"

"Frank, if you're going to be like this, just go take a walk. Come back when you're a little more pleasant to be around." Buzz looked around the restaurant at the few customers that remained that were already served. He could manage for a little while.

"Fine. Later, Pop." Frank grabbed his jacket and left through the rear door.

Buzz let out a sigh and slumped down on one of the stools. He looked up as he saw a figure standing on the other side of the bar.

"You need a hand?" Dinah asked, taking pity on the older man, seeing how much of a jerk Frank had been.

"You?" Buzz asked surprised. "Not that I'm complaining, but hasn't it been a while since you did any waitressing? Besides, don't you have to work for WSPR?"

"Buzz, really?" Dinah looked amused rather than insulted. "Mom's got that all looked after for today."

"All right. But just until Frank gets back and Lynn can come in," Buzz said as he headed back into the kitchen to prepare for the lunchtime rush. The soups and chili had been cooking for much of the morning.

Dinah's voice stopped him. "Buzz. You really need to hire some more staff. Do you want me to keep an ear out for potentials, unofficially?"

"Sure. Something needs to happen." Truthfully, business had been hurting again, despite many of his regulars still coming in, and he had been reluctant to hire any more staff, with

Frank taking on more responsibilities at the restaurant. But even that had been sporadic. With Lynn and Blake taking on a few extra shifts, it had helped, but he needed more back ups. Grateful that Dinah was temporarily filling in until Frank returned, he smiled. "Meals on the house today for you."

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The Beacon day care center, Little Lights, was at full capacity today with many of the usual children, and five children from parents staying at the hotel. It had reached the point where Leyla had had to turn a couple of customers away and direct them to another business, which she was loathe to do because sometimes it was hard to get them back. However, it did lend credence to the expansion plan she had developed for the center. She'd also investigated other space in the hotel on the lower levels, unused boardrooms that could be converted to meet her needs. She'd taught herself some basic design techniques to draw up blueprints as part of her business plan and Jonathan had given her some idea of labor and construction costs. She had even prepared a projected income expenses statement. Overall, she thought her plan was solid.

Nervously, Leyla fidgeted with her coffee mug as her meeting with Olivia was in half an hour. As solid as her plan was, Olivia was very protective of her hotel, and very diligent. So, her plan had to be very comprehensive for Olivia to agree to it. It hadn't helped matters that Ava since hearing about the venture, had been attempting to sabotage her confidence. Some days she and Ava had been on good terms, almost like sisters, but other days were just maddening. Realistically though, Ava didn't have any strong objections where Leyla couldn't argue her point. When the other woman had blasted her the previous week for contacting Jonathan about contracting costs, it had been just one more annoyance.

Stuck in her own thoughts, Leyla hadn't realized that Sarah had come up to her and tugged on her sleeve. Distracted as she was, she spilt her coffee on some of her presentation paperwork. Inwardly cursing that she'd have to go print it off again, she turned to the young girl. "Hey, Sarah, what can I do for you?"

"Can you help me with my puzzle?" Sarah asked, holding up her puzzle block with missing pieces.

"Okay. Can you just give me a minute? I have to go print something off, then I'll be right back." When Sarah nodded, Leyla directed the girl back to the table where she had been playing. Turning her attention back to her laptop, she pulled up the file she needed and



requested a couple copies, one in the main office and another to Natalia's printer. She'd pick them up on the way to her meeting with Olivia. Moving over to Sarah, she figured she'd help the girl to take her mind off her own nervousness. Two puzzles done, she looked up to find Ava standing in the doorway with one of the copies of the paperwork she had printed off.

"Needing these?" Ava handed them over to Leyla, watching as the other woman raised her eyebrows at the red marks and notations in the margins. "I made a few adjustments."

Leyla counted to ten so she wouldn't say something she'd regret. "Gee, thanks. Oh, by the way, Katie just went out for half an hour up to the office supply store. While I'm meeting with Olivia, you're in charge of Little Lights. Try not to screw it up and lose someone." Leyla smiled at Ava before heading towards the elevator banks.

While she waited for Olivia to see her, she took a glance at the notations Ava made and quirked her head. She hated to admit it, but Ava had made a couple valid suggestions that would save some funding. When Olivia opened the door, Leyla took a deep breath and entered the older woman's office.

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Smiling, Leyla returned to Little Lights, pleased with how well her presentation went with Olivia. The older woman had been receptive to the ideas she proposed.

"Did you bring up my suggestions?" Ava asked curiously.

"Yes, I did. And I credited them to you." Leyla headed over to her coffee maker in the corner of her office area. Gesturing to the unit, she asked Ava if she wanted some coffee but then put the carafe back, wincing at the burned smell of the coffee. "On second thought, you might want to hold off on the coffee. You made some valid points regarding the funding sources."

"I picked up a lot of things working with Mom the past few years."

"Really?" Leyla said, with an amused deadpan response. "That might be interesting."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ava asked, not sure how to take the comment.

"It's nothing," Leyla said. "All I meant was that you had some good ideas with regarding the business plan. Just curious to know what else you picked up from your mother."

"Her sarcastic wit and her ability to detect bullshit a mile away," Ava quipped.

"Not bad. Must come in handy in this line of work."

"You have no idea the kinds of crap some of the guests try to pull to save a few dollars. They sometimes forget we have imprints of their credit cards; we get them in the end." Ava smiled.

"You're a devious woman, Ava Peralta."

"Why thank you." Ava picked up her purse and turned to leave. "Call me later and we'll go for coffee. I've got a few more ideas for you."

"Thanks," Leyla responded a little surprised. She was never quite sure how to take Ava sometimes; one moment she was friendly with her and at other times antagonistic. But if she was willing to put in some ideas for the day care center that would help, Leyla wasn't going to toss that resource away. Shaking her head in bemusement as Ava headed out of the center, Leyla went back to the paperwork in front of her on the desk, and her charges in the care of one of her employees.

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Getting in her car, Ava had planned to make a run over to Towers to meet with a potential vendor when she flicked on the local news on the radio.

"In other news, District Attorney Jeffrey O'Neill is confident when the jury is selected today that he will be able to proceed in obtaining a conviction in the wrongful death of Michael Howard, stating the physical evidence is strong enough to have charged his wife, Kathryn, of second degree murder."

Ava flicked the switch on the stereo, looking for anything other than a local radio station. The less she had to hear of her father's involvement in that case, the better. Given his own history, she figured he'd want to stay well away from cases that involved rape, lest that history become public knowledge, but she wouldn't wish that on her mother. It was hard enough on Olivia when she had had to divulge that information to a select few a couple of years ago when Edmund had been threatening the family. Even Reva kept quiet on that information.

Distracted and frustrated, she hadn't realized she had been speeding until a police cruiser pulled came up alongside her to get her to pull over. Great, just what I needed right now. Sighing, Ava pulled along the curb and retrieved her license and registration; no need to make this longer than it had to be.

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On her way over to Towers to meet with Margie, Anna sighed, wondering what kind of evening this was going to be. The profiles on Greg's Rainbow Connections dating service were fairly detailed, and the woman seemed pretty intelligent, teaching economics and business administration at the local community college. Another teacher. She regretted dumping Callie, a woman she had grown to really like, but she didn't want to be responsible for the other woman being hurt by Hung Li. She loved Callie's quiet humor, her laugh and her gentle nature. Shaking her head, Anna realized that going into a relatively blind date with another woman while thinking of her most recent girlfriend was probably not the best idea.

Pulling into the parking lot, she got out and smoothed down her deep blue shirt, making sure everything was tucked in where it should be. With a here-goes-nothing attitude, Anna entered the restaurant and spotted her date sitting at the bar.

Extending her hand, she introduced herself, "Hi, Margie, I'm Anna Li."

The other woman smiled at her and took her hand. "Why don't we go get our seats and we can talk for a bit."

"Sounds good," Anna said and caught the glance of a waiter, who guided them to a table.

"Can I get you ladies something to drink first?" the young man asked them.

"I'd like a glass of the Australian Shiraz, please?" Anna asked, thinking if she was going to have alcohol, it better be a good red wine. The least it would do would take care of the nerves and slight unease she seemed to be having.

"I'll have another gin and tonic," Margie responded to the waiter with a smile.

"The chef's special tonight is the mushroom stuffed veal loin, which comes with steamed vegetables and butternut squash, and the soup is a minestrone. I'll be right back with your drinks, ladies, and to take your food orders."

"Mmm. That sounds good," Anna said, suddenly realizing she hadn't eaten much that day, aside from a regular ingestion of coffee and a sandwich from the vending machine at the office. The appetizing aromas of food made her stomach grumble loudly and she looked down then back at her date with an enigmatic grin.

They chatted about various goings on about Springfield, movies and television shows and preferred music as their drinks had been served and they ordered their meals and Anna was actually pleasantly surprised that she was having a good time. They'd been conversing about Margie's work at the community college when the other woman asked about her job.

"I'm a detective with the Springfield Police Department," Anna replied, though that information had been in her profile.

"That sounds interesting, especially in this town," Margie responded, with a wry grin. For a relatively medium sized town, Springfield did seem to have its share of criminal activity.

"Definitely. Keeps us busy at any rate." Anna took a sip of her wine and shook her head. She'd only been in Springfield a couple of years, but it seemed much longer. When she looked back at her date she paused, unsure of the near leering smile on the other woman's face as she looked her over.

Leaning forward, Margie questioned with an amused grin, "So, have you had to handcuff anyone lately, in a less than professional manner?"

Anna almost dropped her glass of wine on the table as the shock registered inwardly, though her professional mask kept it from showing on her face. Making sure that she hadn't spilled the wine, Anna rested the glass back on the table. A long ingrained sense of manners kept her calm as she replied, "Excuse me?"

"Don't pretend you haven't thought handcuffing a woman hasn't turned you on, just a little," Margie continued, not realizing that she'd pushed her limits too far. "Or a lot."

Taking a deep breath, and placing her napkin back up on the table, Anna stood up and politely smiled at the other woman. "This date is over. Have a good night." She turned and headed in the direction of their waiter and caught his attention. A few short words later wherein she paid for her meal to take with her, and she stood at the bar waiting for the take-away container. She sighed, wondering what the hell had happened. The date had actually been going fairly well, and then from out of nowhere the inappropriate comments on handcuffs; it seemed like such a B-movie cliché.

Taking her phone out of her jacket pocket, she turned it back on and noticed a few messages. A few were about work but they could be answered later. And one from Doris: *How's the date?* Anna smirked. When the waiter returned with her food order, she asked him for a bottle of the Shiraz she'd ordered earlier and a second order of the special. She didn't mind waiting for the extra meal to share with a friend. Smiling, Anna looked back to her phone and quickly typed in: *Tell you in a few minutes. Bringing wine & food. Home or office?*

It didn't take long for Doris's response: *20 minutes. My place. Dish, and not just the food.*

Anna laughed. She'd been happy that she and Doris had managed to stay friends, especially as they shared some friends and occasionally had to work together. Though it had been rather awkward at first, they'd managed to forge a good friendship out of the deal. Looking back at the table she'd come from, she noticed the other woman had left the restaurant. Inwardly she realized she was probably not the dating service type of client; she much preferred to meet women face to face through friends or networking of the old fashioned way.

*Done. See you soon.*

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More than ready to let off some steam, Doris had been glad when Anna had texted with the offer of food and wine. She loved Blake but with Ross back, she'd said she'd give the woman some space to figure out what she wanted. It hurt like a son of a bitch; she'd been down this road before and had been heartbroken. It had been fine...*well, no, it hadn't*...this morning when she'd seen Blake and Ross at Company, but when she'd seen that Blake was upset, her first instinct had been to give her a comforting hug, Ross be damned.

Following that had been the jury selection for the Kathryn Howard trial. She and Mel had had to deal with Jeffrey's grandstanding with regard to more than half of their approvals. Damn bastard was trying to drag this out at least until tomorrow afternoon. They'd successfully won most of the challenges, but there were still a few more jurors to choose.

Doris was at the door when the bell rang, welcoming Anna in. Giving the other woman a kiss to her cheek, she directed Anna into the kitchen.

"Are you okay?" Anna asked, seeing the worn out look on her friend's face.

"It's just been a shit kind of day." Heading over to the cup board, Doris pulled down a couple wine glasses and some plates. "Grab some knives and forks. I'll heat this up and take it into the living room."

"Got it." Retrieving the items in question and a corkscrew, Anna turned and opened the bottle of wine while they waited for the food to heat. "Anything you can talk about?"

"I saw Blake and Ross this morning at Company," Doris said, sighing as she put the food in the microwave to heat up.

"Ouch. Sorry."

"No, it wasn't as bad as that. He must have said something to piss her off, as she was about ready to tear out of there and ran right into me. God, I just didn't want to let go once I hugged her. What am I doing, Anna?" Doris picked up her wine glass and took a long swallow of the red wine, not bothering to let the beverage breathe as she normally would.

"Trying to protect your heart; I get that. But it hurts when you love someone that much." Anna placed a hand on Doris's arm. "You'll just have to trust whatever happens, you have friends around you to help you. You aren't alone."

"Thanks." Doris smiled though she still had a hard time believing it at that moment.

"Besides," Anna added. "It certainly has to be better than my night. Blind date set up through Greg's dating service."

"Oh, no." Doris tried not to smirk. "You signed up for that?"

"I figured, what the hell. I'm not looking for anything long term at this point, especially with my father in the wind. Edmund is dead, but I don't trust my father not to screw up my life and that of my friends, so..."

"So that was the reason for the break up with Callie?" Doris inquired, curious as she hadn't seen them around together lately.

"Yeah. Damn, it hurt doing that to her. I really liked Callie."

"So, back to this date disaster - start talking," Doris quipped, ready for anything other than thinking about Blake, Ross, or the upcoming trial. She grabbed the heated food and brought it into the living room, laying it on the coffee table.

Anna smiled following her. "That is going to take a fair bit more wine."

"Oh, I have plenty if we run out of this." Doris started digging into her food, not realizing how hungry she had been. "Start talking, Li."

"Well, it started off pretty decently; she was pretty easy to talk to. And then the inevitable questions came up about what we did for work. Get this, she's another teacher. Anyway, once she found out I was a cop, she got this lascivious smirk on her face that creeped me out." Anna gave an involuntary shiver at the memory of the evening. "She actually asked if I enjoyed handcuffing other women."

"Yikes." Doris smiled, then curiously asked, "So, what did you say?"

"Date's over. Then I texted you and here I am."

"Well, kick back and relax. Time spent with friends." Doris picked up the remote for the stereo and put it on shuffle. As the evening grew late, the food dispersed and plates put away, she and Anna had finished the bottle of wine. The conversation was comfortable and not under any pressure or anticipation and Doris realized that she was perhaps more at ease and comfortable with Anna than she should have any right to be.

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## **Act II**

As she pulled up to Brooke's office, Olivia sat in the car thinking about the morning. Their usual routine was relatively quiet as Olivia and Natalia had prepared for the day. Emma got herself ready for school and Natalia got Francesca ready for Little Lights. She'd actually had a decent sleep as Natalia's nightmares hadn't bothered her to the extent that they woke her or disturbed her. When she'd asked Natalia about the nightmares, the younger woman had replied that she'd been so tired that she hadn't dreamt much. Olivia hated to press her on the issue as Natalia had occasionally snapped at her that she could deal with it on her own. She wanted to be able to help her and solve the problem for her, but as Brooke and Sister Anne had suggested, she needed to allow Natalia to deal with it on her own timetable; not to rush it. It went against Olivia's own tendency to bulldoze through problems. Meet them head on was her mantra.

Up until recent years, Olivia wasn't particularly fond of cognitive therapy, occasionally... *Okay, sometimes more than just occasionally if I'm truly honest...* she used alcohol as a way of not dealing with the pain. She was sure at times she could have been borderline alcoholic, and it scared her. Thinking back to when Natalia had disappeared without word a couple years earlier, she couldn't imagine that she would have ever gotten behind the wheel, intoxicated, with Emma in the car. Thankfully, Christina had stopped her from driving like that. They'd tried to go to Dr. Boudreau after Jane had been killed with mixed results. It had helped Olivia and to some degree with Natalia, but hadn't really worked for Emma. Emma didn't find it of any use, so Olivia had been glad that Anna had stepped in to provide an outlet for her anger and confusion.

Taking a deep breath, Olivia exited the car and headed into Brooke's office. The outer office area was lined with shelves of books and magazines, and a wraparound desk wherein Brooke's office manager sat. Olivia acknowledged the older woman's nod and she took a seat waiting for her appointment. It wasn't long before Brooke's office door opened and Olivia looked up to see Kathryn Howard emerge.

"Hello, Kathryn."

"Hello, Ms. Spencer," the younger woman replied a little shyly.

"Olivia, please," she responded, holding her hand out. "How are you doing?"

"Better, I guess. Nervous. The trial starts this week. Ms. Wolfe says they're supposed to finish the jury selection today."

"That's good. I know your lawyers. They're damn good at what they do," Olivia said with a smile.

Rubbing her hands up and down on her arms to ward off the chill of the room, Kathryn said wearily, "I hope so. I just don't want anything bad to happen to Dani because of me."

"I know. If anything happened to my girls, I would fight like hell to protect them as best as I can." Olivia smiled at her to try to provide some reassurance. "Dani's in the third grade now?" When she noted the young woman's nod, Olivia continued, "Is she involved in anything after school?"



"No, she usually just comes right home on the bus after school. I can't afford to put her into any activities right now, especially since I'm not working at the moment." Kathryn sighed, shrugging. "People don't exactly want to hire someone who is facing a criminal trial for manslaughter."

Olivia sighed. Kathryn had been lucky enough that Mel and Doris had fought hard for their client to be released with an ankle monitor so that she could look after her daughter. "Are you okay for housing?" Olivia asked. If necessary, she was prepared to pay Buzz to put her up in the boarding house. It would give Buzz some extra income and would save Kathryn and her daughter some money. She felt connected to this young woman in a way that she rarely did. Kathryn seemed quite bright but probably hadn't been given much opportunity to thrive. There but for the grace of God, that may well have been her as a young woman had she not fought for everything she could. It could have been Natalia. It was giving her some ideas, which she'd run through with Brooke in a few minutes.

Brooke came out of her office and placed her hand gently on the young woman's arm. "Kathryn, you can make another appointment with me once you know what timetable you have with the trial. I have Wednesday afternoons open and Friday mornings. Otherwise I'm in my office or covering for Dr. Boudreau at Cedars. Just let me know, okay?"

"Thank you, Doctor," Kathryn spoke quietly.

"Kathryn, are you free for lunch?" Olivia asked, not wanting to be presumptuous. Just because Kathryn wasn't working didn't mean that hadn't had planned.

"Not like I have much I can do right now," she said defeatedly and shrugged. "I have to meet with my lawyers this afternoon, but that's it."

"Okay. Would you mind if I treated you to lunch at Company?" Olivia asked her.

"I can pay for my own," Kathryn responded defensively.

"I know you can. That's not the point. This is someone offering without expectations."

After several moments, Kathryn nodded. "Okay."

Olivia nodded and pulled out a pen and paper from her purse. After writing for a second, she handed Kathryn the slip of paper. "This is my cell number. I'll be here an hour, but after that I'll be at The Beacon. Call me."

"Thank you, Ms. Spencer...Olivia." Kathryn picked up her purse and left the office.

Looking up at Brooke, Olivia grinned wryly. "Guess it's my turn now." Waiting for Brooke to step aside, she entered ahead of the psychologist and took her usual seat.

"That was nice of you," Brooke started with her head tilted toward the outer office.

"You know, any one of us could be in her shoes at any given time, given the circumstances. God help Phillip if he had hurt Emma when he took her all those years ago, I could have and may well have killed him to protect her. It was only Natalia stopping me a couple years ago that I didn't go after him with a gun when he first returned to Springfield. I was so terrified he'd hurt her again or take her away from us." Olivia sighed deeply and ran a somewhat shaky hand through her hair.

"That's true. Life is full of opportunities but sometimes you've got to be the one to open the door or kick it down in order to take advantage of it."

Olivia smirked. "That sounds an awful lot like something Sister Anne told me a couple of years ago, *'When God closes one door, he sometimes shuts it on your foot, to get your attention.'*"

Brooke laughed. "That sounds about right. Smart woman."

"She is. She continues to surprise me. She's definitely not what I expected for a nun." Olivia pursed her lips a moment. "I think Natalia is going to be seeing her some more for counseling sessions. We went to church for Easter Sunday Mass. She was nervous, but I think it gave her more comfort than she was expecting it to at this point."

"You know, Natalia will figure out what direction and help she needs, whether that's me, Sister Anne, or someone else. We can help support her and that's what's important - that she feel comfortable in her search for peace of mind." Brooke opened up a notebook to jot something down before looking back at Olivia. "How are you doing, Olivia?"

"Good days, bad days. More or less the same. Emma's been acting out more, being a little more snappy. Frankly, she's turning more into a mini-me than I'm comfortable with," Olivia said on a sigh. "I guess it's part of being a preteen, wanting to grow up faster, pushing the limits. I remember doing the same thing with my own mother. And it's sort of fine with me; I just remind her of the limitations and consequences. But it hurts me when she fights with Natalia, especially when I know it's not out of malice or spite."

"Olivia, your whole family has been through the damn ringer for the past couple of years. Being a preteen can be chaotic at the best of times. She's not a little girl anymore but not quite grown up yet either. Throw in the threats your family has faced and it's not surprising. But how she deals with it is what's important." Remembering that the young girl had been seeing Detective Li for t'ai chi as a life focus and the process working for Emma, she continued, "Is Emma still going to see Anna for t'ai chi?"

"Yes, she's going this afternoon." Olivia was reminded of her schedule, and realizing that she needed to ask Natalia if she could pick Emma up after her session with Anna. Looking over at Brooke, she got thinking again about her idea of helping Kathryn. Sighing, she asked, "I know you can't give me any information with regards to what you've said to Kathryn Howard, but I was wondering if you thought my helping her would do her any good." "What exactly are you thinking about?" Brooke asked a little apprehensively, as the young woman was in a delicate predicament.

"I get the feeling from what she said this morning, that she's probably close to being evicted, especially since she doesn't have any income. That puts her and Dani in an even worse situation with the risk of Child Protective Services taking Dani out of the home; it's got to terrify her." Olivia sighed. "You've gotten to know me since we started these sessions and I'd like to fix things if I can. I have the means in which to help, no strings attached."

"Why do you want to?" Brooke asked, trying to see the reasons behind the Olivia's gesture.

"Sort of what we'd discussed earlier - that it could have been any one of us. Like her, I know who raped me. I was a lot younger than she is now when it happened. I know what it's like raising a daughter as a single mother; trying to do everything in my power to protect my family." Olivia put her head down for a moment, to gather her thoughts. "I was just thinking that I could find out from Buzz Cooper if the boarding house has a room or two that Kathryn and her daughter could stay in. I'll pick up the tab for the time being until she can get her feet back on the ground. She could use the money that she would spend on rent and use it for Dani if she won't use it on herself."

Brooke sat for a few moments thinking about the options Olivia presented. "Look, it can't hurt to find out the information. Just keep it quiet for the time being. I'd like to address it with her at the next session and see how comfortable she is with that option. I know you want to help, but like with Natalia, sometimes people need to feel like their lives are in their own hands. Despite being married, Kathryn's primarily raised Dani on her own, especially the past few years. In an abusive situation. That gives her perhaps more of a need to be in control of her life and that of her daughter."

"I get that. I do." Taking a deep breath, Olivia realized that her desire to help would have to be temporarily postponed. But she could find out the information. Looking down at her watch, she realized that she had a little bit of time before her next appointment at The Beacon. She'd make a run to Company before meeting with Kathryn there, and she'd broach the topic with Buzz. "Okay, saving the world is on hold...for now." Before long, Olivia's session with Brooke was done for the day and she booked an appointment for the following week.

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As Natalia rounded the hallways of St. Margaret's Mission, she could hear the loud haunting sound of Adele's "Turning Tables" coming from one of the offices. Figuring it was one of the young women that often came by to help sort the donated clothing, she missed seeing the nun's head as it popped over the top of the desk, soon to be followed by a thump of a box being tossed on to said desk.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where Sister Anne is?" Natalia asked after a rap on the door frame failed to catch the woman's attention.

"Oh, sorry," Sister Anne said as she stood up and quickly moved to the stereo to turn down the volume. "Hey, Natalia. I got caught up in spring cleaning my office and I forgot you were coming by."

"No worries," Natalia responded with a smile as she pointed to a mark on the Sister's face. "Ummm, you've got a black smudge of ink on your cheek."

"Do I? Oh crap. Sharpie. I was labeling boxes when some hair strands fell out of the ponytail. Didn't put the marker down as I pushed the hair back."

"It looks kind of adorable on you," Natalia said before she thought about it, then blushed furiously, and apologized profusely.

Trying not to laugh at the other woman's sudden discomfiture, Sister Anne waved her off that it didn't bother her. "How bad is it? The mark that is?"

"Just a small one on your cheek."

"Ah well. I'll just have to remember to wash it off before the soup kitchen opens." Sister Anne looked around her office. "Um, do you mind giving me a hand as we talk? Trying to pack up this office as I'm moving to another bigger office and this one will be used for additional storage for donated items. I've got to get some office supply containers to put the clothing in by sizes to make them easier to find."

"Sure, not a problem." Natalia took off her sweater and draped it on Sister Anne's coat hook as she prepared to dig into the packing. "Any specific order you want this stuff in?"

"I don't really know. I was just kind of packing the books by category, but beyond that, no, no order," Sister Anne said, lightly biting down on her lip. They continued working together for several minutes with the stereo playing.

"I didn't figure you for an Adele fan," Natalia grinned.

"It's cathartic," Sister Anne replied. Thinking about seeing Natalia at the Easter Mass, she smiled. "I see you joined us for the Mass. Will you be returning regularly again?"

Putting her head down, Natalia sighed. "I don't know, to be honest. It was nice to be there, the familiarity of the ritual. Having my family with me. It reminded me of when I was a girl going to Easter Mass with my parents." Natalia smiled at the recent reconnection with her mother and realized that she hadn't yet mentioned it to Sister Anne. "My Mom has been back in touch with me again. Since..."

"Since the kidnapping," Sister Anne gave voice to Natalia's horrifying experience. She noticed the other woman nodding, barely managing to keep from crying. Quietly, she reached over and pulled her friend into a hug. As she pulled back, she noticed the tiredness in Natalia's face that the other woman tried to mask. "How are you sleeping?"

"Not well. The nightmares keep coming. I thought they'd start to go away after a while as I started to deal with it." Natalia wiped the tears that slipped down her cheeks.

"Are you? Dealing with it?" Sister Anne asked her directly.

Sighing, Natalia said, "I don't know. I try, I guess. I mostly try to keep my head down and work."

"Do you think that maybe that's avoidance you're working on?" the nun asked. "It's not really working for you though, is it?"

Natalia shook her head. A buzz of her cell phone surprised her and she picked it out of her pocket and found a text from Olivia: "Can you pick Emma up from Anna's? She's got her t'ai chi session after school today." Typing a quick response, she looked back up at Sister Anne and the boxes that had already been filled.

Seeing that Natalia still looked a little troubled, Sister Anne said, "Look, I'm pretty busy today getting this sorted out, but I should be free tomorrow morning if you want to come by. Nothing on the agenda tomorrow, so we'll have plenty of time to talk."

"Thank you, Anne," Natalia responded, holding out her hand. "I'll bring some tea for us to share."

"Sounds like a plan. Take care, Natalia, and say hello to Olivia and the girls for me."

"Don't forget the ink smudge," Natalia quipped playfully, her earlier discomfiture forgotten.

"Go on." Sister Anne said, laughing as she pivoted to turn up the volume dial on the stereo in her office.

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Entering the diner, Olivia was startled to see Dinah serving coffee at Company as she looked around for Buzz.

"Hiya, Ollie, whatchya lookin for?" Dinah responded cheerfully as she came up behind Olivia with a carafe in her hand.

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"Hiya, Ollie, whatchya lookin for?" Dinah responded cheerfully as she came up behind Olivia with a carafe in her hand.

Opening up her coffee mug and sniffing the interior, Olivia wondered if someone had slipped her some interesting drugs by mistake as she looked back up at Dinah. Shaking her head, she decided she wasn't hallucinating. "Dinah Marler, what exactly are you doing working here?"

Heading behind the bar, Dinah picked up a towel and wiped down the counter. "Buzz needed some help. I didn't have anything specific on the agenda for today. Plus, there's the free food and all."

"I didn't think Buzz was that desperate." Olivia handed over her coffee mug for a full cup of the steaming beverage. "Speaking of, is he around?"

"Ha ha. He's in the kitchen, to answer your question," Dinah responded. "Aside from the coffee and the acerbic wit, what else do you need?"

"I'm meeting Kathryn Howard here for lunch, but I wanted to check on a few things with Buzz first."

"Sounds interesting. He should be finished doing the prep work on lunch meals so just go on in," Dinah said to her before turning her attention to the mayor who had just walked in the door.

"What the hell?" Doris commented on seeing Dinah behind the bar.

"Do I have something stuck in my teeth or what? No, you are not hallucinating; I am actually here serving customers," Dinah said, somewhat exasperated.

"Hey, Olivia, check to see if there's anyone been poisoned yet," Doris called out to her friend before the other woman headed into the kitchen.

Olivia's laugh carried back through the doors.

"Now that's a sound I like to hear," Buzz said as he turned away from the large pot on the stove.

"Hey, Buzz," Olivia responded, giving the older man a kiss on the cheek. "I have a question or two for you."

"Go on."

"Do you have a room or two available up in the boarding house?" Olivia inquired.

"Yeah, actually, we don't have anyone there at the moment. Have anyone in mind?"

"Would you be okay with having a woman and her daughter stay there...on my bill?" Olivia asked tentatively.

"Yes, that's not a problem."

"You haven't asked who it is yet," Olivia added. "Kathryn Howard and her eight-year old daughter, Dani. I'm thinking she might be close to an eviction from her apartment, and she will need somewhere to live." Sighing. "It's not definite and I have to talk it over with her lawyers and her counselor before we approach her, and even then it's up to her. But I wanted to get some leg work done here."

"And what nice legs they are," Buzz joked. "But in all seriousness, yes. That's not a problem. If it all works out for her, too, with the trial, she's got employment here if she wants it. It will be near full time hours, since Blake is mostly occupied with other work and we're down a couple of staff. Thankfully, Dinah is picking up the slack."

"About that? What a shock to the system to come in to see her playing waitress. Any poisonings yet?" Olivia grinned.

"Nope, but tips are up," Buzz smirked. "Pays to have a pretty face at the bar instead of this bearded mug."

Olivia laughed. "Still as handsome as ever."

"You might want to think about wearing your glasses more often."

"Look, I'm treating Kathryn to lunch here today. Don't mention anything just yet, please," Olivia added then laughed as Buzz mimicked drawing a zipper across his mouth. "Thanks for the coffee. I'll be back in an hour or so."



"Later," Buzz turned and picked up the long wooden spoon to stir the chili as Olivia headed back into the main part of the restaurant.

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As she walked back into Company an hour later, Olivia felt lighter with a renewed sense of purpose and mused to herself with a grin. If anyone would have told her a few years ago that she'd be helping people - other than family - for altruistic reasons, she would have laughed. Loving Natalia changed her in the best kind of way.

There were a few projects at the Beacon to keep her busy. She was pleasantly surprised by the detail that Leyla had put into her plan for expanding the day care, and it would certainly provide some additional revenue to offset the expansion costs. The conference planning and group bookings were starting to come in for the summer months and business was looking good.

Coming up to the bar, she ordered a cup of coffee as she waited for Kathryn to arrive. The minutes seemed to stretch on but she took her newly acquired iPad out of her purse to peruse some emails and some news articles she bookmarked to read later, and with a smile checking her Twitterfeed, both personal and business feeds. Initially, she'd been surprised by putting the Beacon on Twitter, but after the first couple times she'd offered room deals via the service, she'd had repeat customers since; so once a week, the hotel's marketing division began to offer a room special, or specific services at deals and it had started to become a success. She'd gotten so distracted that she hadn't noticed Kathryn's arrival.

"Sorry, I'm late," Kathryn apologized.

Olivia smiled. "Not a problem. Just checking a few things to pass the time." Standing up, Olivia directed them to a booth along one side of the restaurant that had been cleared for them. Putting the device away, she motioned for Kathryn to take the seat opposite her as she sat down. "Why don't you take a look at the menu and decide. Anything you want."

Kathryn hesitated, conflicted. From her experience, most people didn't offer something unless they had expectations of some kind of repayment, usually something that cost her dearly. Looking up at the woman in front of her with a mixture of curiosity and nervousness, she said, "To be fair, Ms. Spencer, I don't really know you. Why are you doing this for me?"

Olivia nodded. "That's a fair question. One which I'll answer once we have our meals," Olivia smiled genuinely. "By the way, Buzz makes an awesome shepherd's pie."

Kathryn looked at her curiously. "Buzz?"

"Buzz Cooper, owner of this fine establishment and chief cook," Olivia smiled. "Lovely man. He makes all the meals from scratch."

When Dinah passed behind them with a tray of food, Kathryn could smell the scents of the food and she smiled. "Well, if it tastes as good as that smells, it would be fabulous."

The woman in question returned to their table to take their orders. "What can I get you ladies?" Dinah asked.

"Could I get a glass of lemonade and some of whatever you just brought to that table over?"

Grinning, Dinah said, "That would be the homemade minestrone soup and toasted garlic bread."

"That sounds great, thank you," Kathryn responded.

"Olivia?" Dinah prompted.

"Can I have the shepherd's pie and some more coffee?" Olivia smiled up at her old friend.

"Sure thing. I'll be right back with your drinks." Dinah headed off to the kitchen with the orders, then returned to the bar to pour the drinks.

Looking over at Ms. Spencer, Kathryn nodded in Dinah's direction. "Uhhmm, isn't she a reporter with WSPR?" The woman looked familiar to Kathryn, inasmuch as she'd occasionally seen her on the local station's news.

Olivia laughed. "That she is. A woman of multiple talents."

"You seem to know a lot of people in this town," Kathryn commented.

"I've lived here for about 14 years, give or take. I own the Beacon Hotel, so I've housed quite a few locals in the hotel over the years," Olivia said with an amused smile, thinking of some of her more memorable guests and long-term 'residents'.

"Do you have family here?" Kathryn asked out of curiosity. If she was going to let this woman pay for her meal, she wanted to know a bit more about her.

Smiling, Olivia nodded. "My partner, Natalia, and our children. Three daughters and a son. Though Rafe is currently in the Army." Olivia noticed Kathryn's surprise at her comment. "Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem," Kathryn quickly responded. "Just not something I expected."

"Which? The fact that my partner is a woman, or that between the two of us we have four children?"

"The former, I guess," Kathryn responded. "I don't know why, though."

"That's okay. It took Natalia and I a while to get used to being together once we figured out what we were feeling for each other. Trust me, half the town was surprised when the two of us got together."

"You weren't always...?" Kathryn enquired curiously.

"No." Olivia smiled. "Natalia is the first woman I've loved." Sighing, Olivia realized that she wouldn't normally go through her personal life with an almost complete stranger, however, she had the sense from the other woman that she didn't trust easily. Looking up at Kathryn she continued, "You asked me why I offered to take you to lunch. I don't know if Dani mentioned to you after she and I had talked outside the therapist's office a couple weeks ago, but there was something bad that happened to me as a teenager. We spoke about being hurt by people we knew."

"Ms. Spencer?"

"This is something I don't share with many people. In fact there are only a handful of people who know. When I was sixteen years old, I left my house against my mother's adamant wishes and went to a party at a diplomat's residence. The drinks were spiked with alcohol and I was dancing with this older boy. When I was feeling the effects of the alcohol, he led me upstairs to one of the bedrooms. And he raped me, as I could not give any consent in the intoxicated state I was in." Olivia stopped as she heard the soft gasp of her dinner companion. "A few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant. Though I ended up giving Ava up for adoption at the time, that night forever changed my life."

"How...how did you cope?" Kathryn asked quietly after taking a large gulp of air. Her hands shook mildly against the table.

"I did because I had to. My mother died around the same time, so I was responsible for raising my siblings. I couldn't look after a baby, too." Olivia closed her eyes as a wash of memories flooded her thoughts and nearly threatened to overwhelm her. So quiet for several minutes that she barely registered Kathryn's hand upon her arm.

"I'm sorry," Kathryn replied softly, starting to understand a little about why Olivia offered her lunch, even though their circumstances were quite different. She shivered. The other woman's violent act had been a one-time only event, though by no means would that lessen the after effects, but her own violent history had been through much of the duration of her marriage.

"Thanks. But I'm okay now, mostly. That was nearly thirty years ago," Olivia said, somewhat surprised by that admission. "My daughter, Ava, is now twenty-eight."

"You're in touch with her?" Kathryn asked curiously.

"Oh, yes. Long story short, she came to Springfield several years ago. After a misunderstanding, I realized that she was my daughter." *Misunderstanding, my ass. Damn near almost had her killed before I found out Ava was my daughter.* "I look at her now and I realize that something good came out of something bad, and I can't regret having her. She's a part of me, like Emma. And my extended family of Natalia, Rafe, and Francesca. I'd protect them all with everything I have."

Olivia looked over and noticed the tears forming along Kathryn's eyelids, spilling over onto her cheeks. She noted the brusqueness with which the younger woman tried to brush the tears away and suddenly Olivia had the overwhelming need to give the younger woman a hug. Sliding off her own bench seat, she maneuvered herself over to wrap her arms around Kathryn, allowing the other woman to cry as much as she needed. *Thank you, Natalia*, Olivia whispered in appreciation for her partner's gentle influence on her life.

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When the doorbell of Anna's apartment rang, the detective had just finished talking with Emma about some new techniques to practice, slowly going through the manoeuvres and stretches with her.

"I'll get it; it'll be Ma picking me up," Emma said as she quickly headed to the door. She'd been pleased with the progress she'd made with Anna in the past week, as the moves were getting more detailed, and it took her some more effort. She wanted to be able to do some more but the detective had told her there would be lots of time to practice and get used to these moves first. "Hey, Emma," Natalia said, as the girl opened the door. "Everything all set?"

"Yep. Learned some new stuff today," Emma replied happily. "I just need to get my backpack."

"Okay, go on." Natalia smiled at her daughter. There was so much going on with Emma these days, with school, activities, and some new school friends that she and Olivia didn't know all that well. The latter worried her, though she'd talk with Olivia about it later.

"Oh, hey, Natalia," Anna said as she came into the living room of her apartment. "How are you doing?"

"Good as can be expected, I guess." Natalia shrugged.

Noting the tension in the other woman's shoulders and her overall tiredness, Anna worried about her friend; her observation skills came into effect off the job as well. Taking a quick glance back at her workout room to see if Emma was in hearing distance, she quietly asked Natalia if she was still having nightmares.

"How?" Natalia responded, before realizing that Olivia must have said something. Her face darkened, annoyed with Olivia for sharing that information.

"No, not Olivia," Anna responded quickly, correctly surmising that Natalia might think that. "You underwent a horrible situation, Natalia. That has to have turned your world upside down. It's not surprising that you've been having nightmares."

"How come they won't go away?" Natalia asked plaintively.

"They will, gradually." Hearing Emma returning, Anna held up her hand. As the girl entered the room, Anna smiled at her. "You did well today, Emma. Keep up the good work."

Emma beamed at the praise, though she knew something serious had been talked about by the way the adults hushed as she came into the room. "Thank you, Detective Li.

"You're welcome, Emma. Now, I have to get back to the police station and get some work done, so I will see you next week, okay Em?" Anna smiled as the girl nodded her head vigorously. Looking up at Natalia, she spoke. "Call me later, okay?"

"Thanks, Anna," Natalia responded, even though she still felt a little off. She didn't want to worry Olivia or her family, but her nightmares continued, and sometimes just the simplest things in the daytime, a sight or sound put her right back into the frame of mind that she was in the lighthouse. It worried her that she didn't know how to fix her problems; she just wanted it fixed sooner rather than later.

Sitting in the car, waiting for Emma to buckle her seat belt she waited for the inevitable questions from her bright daughter.

"Ma? Are you okay?"

"I'm just tired, Emma. I didn't sleep well last night." Putting the car into drive, she headed home. Remembering her promise to Emma to tell her the truth as much as she could, she added, "I had bad dreams again."

"About the lighthouse?" Emma asked. She hated seeing her Ma sad.

"Yes, sweetie." Natalia hoped Emma would drop the line of questions so she asked her about the new moves that Anna had mentioned. Sensing the girl wouldn't be deterred for long, she kept up the questions until they arrived at the house. After determining that Emma would go up and do her homework, Natalia settled her purse and shoulder pack down on the kitchen table and sat down with a heavy sigh. She'd call Anna as soon as she started getting supper ready.

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### **Act III**

Supper prepared and in the oven, Natalia went up and checked on Emma and she smiled as she noted her working on her math homework. The furrow in Emma's brow deepened as she sought to work out a problem. On the floor next to her, Shadow lay quietly, her head resting on her paws.

Knocking on the doorframe to get the girl's attention, Natalia asked, "Hey, Em, do you need any help?"

"I think I'm okay, for now."

"Well, if you need any help, I'm downstairs, and your Mom will be home in about 45 minutes."

"Thanks, Ma," Emma responded with a smile.

Natalia pulled the door part way and headed back downstairs, thinking about what Anna said. She wondered if the other woman had dealt much with nightmares and what she did that might help to get rid of them. Grabbing the portable phone from its dock, she returned to the kitchen and sat down, her fingers hovering over the buttons for a moment before she dialled the detective's work number.

"Detective Li. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Anna, this is Natalia. I'm sorry to bother you at work, but do you have a few minutes to talk?"

*"Sure. Just a second and I'll close my office door. It's not busy at the moment and I'm just waiting on some paperwork to be delivered."* After a moment, the detective returned to her phone. *"What can I help you with?"*

"I don't really know for sure. You said something when we talked earlier that made me think you've dealt with having recurrent nightmares." Natalia sighed, trying to order her thoughts into words.

*"I have,"* Anna said sighing as she wondered how to best approach her next statement. *"Natalia, what you went through was something extraordinary that no one should have to go through. Have you heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?"*

"Yes, Brooke mentioned that once during one of our sessions." Natalia sunk further down in the chair as she remembered what Brooke had told her. The first time she'd ever thought of PTSD was that it happened to police, firefighters, and soldiers as that was most of what she'd seen reported in the news. *How could that apply to me?* Natalia wondered.

*"You've been having persistent nightmares, correct?"* Anna started, starting a line of questioning to confirm Natalia's experiences. While she was not a medical doctor, she'd seen a few incidences of PTSD in colleagues over the years and in civilians enough to be

able to spot some of the symptoms. *"Recently, you've been having waking 'nightmares' during the daytime, triggered by sounds and smells? Something that will throw you back to seeing and feeling what it was like being held captivity? Your heart starts racing and breathing rate increases?"*

"Yes," Natalia said, relieved as she took a deep breath, realizing the other woman understood where she was coming from. It was one thing to hear it from the psychologist, but perhaps hearing it from a friend somehow made it more real. But at the same time, didn't make it any easier to deal with.

*"Natalia, are these flashbacks giving you panic attacks? Making you avoid certain places or situations? You often find you get angry about things that wouldn't normally bother you?"*

There was quiet for a few moments, so Anna thought perhaps Natalia had been thinking about times when she got anxious or angry without really knowing why she felt that way. She knew her friend needed to see a counsellor as she wasn't trained in this area. It was one thing to be aware of symptoms and the processes of PTSD, but she wasn't trained to treat it from a psychological perspective.

"I guess. I haven't really thought about it too much." Natalia felt distressed.

*"Let me guess, you'd rather it just go away on its own?"* Anna surmised.

"Kinda?" Natalia responded with a half-hearted laugh.

*"Unfortunately, it doesn't quite work that way." Anna sighed. "I'm going to recommend you see a counsellor, whether that be Brooke, Dr. Boudreau, or someone else that's qualified to treat the psychological aspect of it. What I can help you with is finding an outlet for the frustration and anger, much like I have with Emma."*

"I don't know," Natalia said, hesitating. "I've never been much for martial arts and fighting."

*"You do realize that most of what I do with Emma is more training in t'ai chi, a martial art that's primarily used for its physical and mental benefits?"* Anna smiled, knowing that Natalia knew this but understanding that the other woman's hesitation was probably in using it for her own health. With a self-deprecating laugh, she added, *"Though sometimes, a good round with a punching bag can do wonders for frustration."*

"I don't know," Natalia repeated.



*"Look, no promises, but why don't you come over this evening and I'll show you a few things. You can make up your mind after that."*

Looking out the kitchen window, she noted some of the tree leaves still in the early stages of blooming. "Okay, but I'll have to wait until after supper. Olivia should be home soon with Francesca."

*"That's okay. I should be here for another hour anyway before heading home. Give me a call when you're leaving the house."*

"Okay, thank you, Anna." Natalia took a deep breath, feeling oddly lighter for sharing her worries with the other woman, and realized that she should do the same with Olivia, but she was nervous. Maybe she'd wait until after she met with Anna and see what happens, best see if the training ideas that other woman had in mind would work for her before she told her partner. With a new goal in mind, Natalia stood and set up the kitchen table, preparing it for supper and she smiled at the appearance of Shadow in the doorway. For certain the dog could smell the food cooking.

"Hey girl, do you need to go out for a pee?" Natalia asked the dog as she ruffled Shadow's fur on her head, and she grinned as the dog started wagging her tail stronger. Heading out onto the porch she let the dog run in the yard, stretching her legs out.

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Bustling in through Company's doors, Lynn moved to put her purse behind the bar, greeting Dinah and Buzz as she got herself set up for her shift. Profusely apologizing for having to take time off at little notice, she was also setting the coffee pot up for the next brewing. The supper run of customers was starting to pick up and she was soon running off her feet.

At her next break, Dinah sat on one of the stools as Buzz came out of the kitchen. Grinning she turned toward the older man. "Same time tomorrow, Buzz?"

"You're more than welcome, but don't you have another job to do?" Buzz said with a laugh. "Though Frank is supposed to be here in the daytime, so if you need to do something else, that would be the time."

Rolling the bottom edges of her glass along the bar, she smiled. "I like doing this. I get why Blake enjoys it. Stirrs the creative juices and all."

Buzz raised an eyebrow with a smirk. "If you say so."

"No, seriously. With all the comings and goings, and occasional drama that comes in these doors, it's like walking into a real life soap opera sometimes," Dinah grinned.

Buzz laughed. "Look, it's slowing down now. Why don't you head on home? And say hello to that great grandson of mine." Buzz smiled at the mental image of Henry Cooper Lewis, getting bigger every day."

"You sure?" At Buzz's nod, Dinah got down from her stool and was headed for the door when Lillian arrived. Kissing the older woman on the cheek, Dinah then left the restaurant.

"Hey, love," Lillian said, as she rounded the bar and kissed her husband. "Dinah was working here again?"

"Yeah, Frank had an appointment this morning with his therapist, but didn't come in for the rest of the day." Buzz worried for his son. Some days were better than others. He'd thought Frank had started to improve but then he'd go into a funk and didn't emerge from his apartment all day. At least Frank had cut back on the drinking thanks to Eleni's influence. At least by doing that, Frank had been able to see Francesca more often, but Buzz knew there would still be a ways to go yet for Frank's recovery. "Oh, hey, did you talk to Beth?"

"No. I just finished work and I know that she was supposed to be doing some follow-up work on the case she's on. I'll give her a call in a little while." Truthfully, Lillian found it hard to talk to Beth about the memories that Howard case evoked in both of them. Her regret that she hadn't done more to help her daughter at the time still haunted her.

"Oh, hey, there might be something we can do for Ms. Howard," Buzz said quietly, looking forward to seeing his wife smile. "Not a definite yet, but she might be staying at the boarding house thanks to Olivia."

"Really?" Lillian asked. "How did that come about?"

Shrugging, Buzz said, "Olivia asked."

"You have a soft spot for her. Always have," Lillian said with an amused smile.

"What can I say? She's a unique woman." Buzz laughed. "She and Natalia have been through so much together. To see them happy makes me happy." Glancing at his wife and noting her

tiredness, he placed another kiss on her mouth, and asked her what she wanted for supper, quite sure that the last thing on her mind was going home and cooking.

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"Will you two stop it!" Blake yelled at her twin sons as they fought over the game controllers. She'd had enough of them arguing with each other and with Clarissa since they got back from school. To top off the crappy day, Ross had promised this morning when he came over from the Beacon that he'd be here to talk to the kids about what his plans were, and as of 7:30 p.m. he hadn't arrived, and no indication if or when he'd show up.

Sighing heavily, she grabbed the portable phone and called his hotel room as he must not have gotten around to getting a cell phone. There was no answer to his room and she shrugged, hoping that he might be on his way. She'd give him another hour before she had to send Clarissa to bed.

Firing up her laptop on the kitchen counter-top, Blake checked her emails and found one from Natalia with regards to book recommendations and a request to meet for coffee, and another from Ashlee Wolfe about a project for her sophomore year in the journalism program. Looking over the attached file, Blake smiled; Ashlee would go far with her intelligence and her ability to see the good in people. Shaking her head, she hoped the young woman would stay that way.

As she prepared to send a note back to Ashlee, she thought about Doris and she wondered if Doris had let her daughter know that there had been a change in their relationship. She didn't think it was her place to do so, especially in an email. Even so, she'd be hard pressed to explain exactly why – that Ross had shown up alive on her doorstep. Her head was starting to throb with a headache, and the sudden increase in noise from her sons' playing video games felt like someone was driving a pike through her head. Quickly jotting down the note for Ashlee that she'd send along a more detailed response in the morning, she closed the laptop and headed to her bedroom.

Briefly turning around at her door, she called down to her sons, "Boys, turn down the music or it's going off all together. Clarissa, go get ready for bed, please."

In her bathroom, Blake grabbed a bottle of Advil and swallowed a couple gel caps with a glass of water before heading to her bed and curled up. Picking up her cellphone she typed out a quick note to Doris. *'Got an email from Ashlee. Don't know what to say. I miss you. B.'*

\*\*\*\*

"I don't know what to do, Doris," Olivia said, frustrated at not being able to help Natalia and with Emma's increased behavioural changes. She put down her glass of water on her desk. The tension in her neck and shoulders was so wound up with knots that it was giving her a headache. Even though Natalia hadn't said so, she was sure that her partner had continued nightmares, and it seemed to her that the slightest thing would set off Natalia into an agitated or angered state. She hated walking on egg shells until Natalia figured out what exactly she could do to heal. Sometimes she was able to get through to her and they'd have a quiet night in, just relaxing, cuddled up on the couch watching a show or the news on TV, or they'd be playing with the girls, but other times, smaller enclosed spaces or sounds would get the younger woman agitated and panicked.

"Have you tried talking with her about what's going on with you?" Doris asked her gently, taking a sip from her own glass of wine.

Confused about Doris's question, she responded, "What?"

"I mean, I know she's been going through hell since the kidnapping, but have you talked about what you've been feeling about that, and about what you've been feeling about the rape since the Kathryn Howard case?"

Sighing heavily, Olivia looked over at her friend. "No. I don't want to put that on her just yet. She's got enough going on."

"Don't you think she might think you're trying to shut her out about your stuff?" Doris questioned.

Taking a sidelong glance over at Doris, Olivia quipped, "Since when did you become my shrink?" She smirked to take the sting out of the comment.

"Look, I'm relatively new at the long term commitment thing, but it's bloody frustrating when you feel like you're shut out from the person you love." Doris ran a hand through her hair before looking anywhere but at Olivia.

"God, I'm sorry, Doris," Olivia reached over and put a hand on Doris's arm. "How are you doing?"

"Frankly? Like shit. I didn't realize it would hurt so much." Doris brought her hand up to her face, resting against her chin. A stray tear slipped over an eyelid and streaked down her cheek. "It's like I'm in limbo, not knowing if she's going to stay with Ross or come back to me."

"Shhh," Olivia said gently, wrapping her friend into a hug. They stayed like that for a few moments before returning to their spots.

"It's not like I can really do anything for her right now. When I saw her yesterday at Company, she was near tears after a conversation with Ross and I just pulled her into my arms. I didn't care if he saw us together or not." Doris sighed and rolled her shoulders. "The boys have been driving her nuts as well, acting out and not wanting to do anything until their father shows up. They've been ditching school, too, apparently."

"Tell me about it. Natalia and I got a call from the principal's office the other day to say that Emma had skipped classes. When we asked her about it, she said the teachers didn't look for her that hard, that she was in the library working on a project and that she'd had her earphones in so she didn't hear the pages on the intercom."

"And?" Doris asked.

"And what?" Olivia replied. "I don't know if it was actually the truth, but Emma knows that she can come to either of us if there is anything she needs." Shaking her head, Olivia continued, "I think somewhere in the cosmic universe my mother is having a grand old laugh at my expense. Something about payback being a bitch."

"Sometimes, what they just need is space at that age, with limitations, of course. I know I wasn't the greatest mother to Ashlee when she was growing up at that age." Doris paused, regret tingeing her voice as she spoke. "We've mended fences over the past couple years, but I know that I hurt her unintentionally more times than I should have."

"I don't think either of us will win 'Mother of the Year' awards anytime soon, but we do the best we can." Scratching a spot on the back of her neck, she looked thoughtfully over at her friend. "Speaking of parenting and looking after kids, how is the case for Kathryn Howard?"

"We've got a solid case, but Jeffrey was a real pain in the ass with the jury selection. The judge has given us a court date next week, so we'll be ready to go then. Why do you ask?"

"I've got an idea on helping her, but it will depend on if you can argue for continued ankle monitoring and her willingness. I had lunch with her today and we had a good talk. Something she had said when I met her at Brooke's office made me think she was close to being evicted from her apartment. That might put her situation in jeopardy, correct?" Olivia asked.

"It certainly won't help matters. What do you have in mind?" Doris asked, curiously.

Olivia took a deep breath and delved in. "I had a chat with Buzz earlier. Checked with him to see if she and her daughter could stay in the boarding house. He said it would be no problem."

"Sounds plausible, but won't she have the same problem with affordability?" Doris asked her.

"I'll be covering it. At least for the time being until she can get work, which Buzz is willing to offer her." Olivia sighed. "Of course, the latter will have to wait until you and your team win the case. But if she needs housing during the trial, it will be available. I've mentioned it to Brooke, since she's also Kathryn's counsellor to see if she thought it was an idea to present to the girl, but I wanted to get your thoughts on the matter."

Doris tilted her head slightly as she thought about her friend's proposal. "Why? I mean, why Kathryn?"

"I just thought that sometimes there's very little that separates us from being in the same situation that she finds herself in; a bad relationship, raising a child in a near impossible place, being scared of what comes next when all you can think of is putting food in front of you and a place over your head, you know?"

Doris nodded, understanding what Olivia was saying, when she felt her cell phone buzz. Picking it out of her pocket, she glanced at the message from Blake. *'Got an email from Ashlee. Don't know what to say. I miss you. B'*. Closing her eyes, Doris rested her head on her forearm. She hadn't even mentioned her temporary break from Blake to her daughter, hoping that Ross's reappearance wouldn't mean the end of their relationship. She hardly felt Olivia's hand resting on her shoulders in silent support. After a few minutes, Doris downed the rest of her wine and decided it was time to get home. If nothing else, she'd pop something in the microwave and watch a corny movie until she fell asleep.

"You okay?" Olivia asked, concerned about her friend's sudden change in demeanour.

"Blake."

"Ah, Doris," Olivia said softly.

"No, I'll be all right. I've got to head home, and you need to get home to your family." Doris stood up and straightened out her blazer and skirt. "Thanks, Olivia."

"Any time." Olivia followed suit, then sent a text message to Natalia that she'd be home soon, realizing she would be later than she'd expected to be. Standing up, she picked up her briefcase and locked up her office, then headed to the day care center to pick up Francesca to go home.

On her way, Olivia was pulled over by the police, apparently unaware she'd been speeding. With a sigh, she pulled over to the side of the road and waited for the officer to come and take her information. She hadn't expected that the officer in question would be the new police chief.

Putting on her best smile as she rolled down the window, she attempted charm first. "Well, well, how did I manage to rate the new police chief attending to traffic violations?"

Michael Thorne smirked. He'd actually been on his way home himself when he'd spotted the white Nissan going a fair bit faster than it should have been. Deciding to take a personal approach, he figured he'd stop the vehicle finding the hotel owner and her daughter.

"Just your luck, I guess, Ms. Spencer."

"You remembered me, I'm flattered," Olivia said, her smile widening.

"No need to be." Michael shook his head, chagrined. "Two Spencers speeding in one day, my luck."

"Pardon?" Olivia looked confused.

"Ava's your daughter, correct?"

"Yes," Olivia responded warily.

"Got her this morning." Michael smirked. Looking in the back to see Francesca strapped into her car seat, he returned his gaze to Olivia. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"Home." Olivia now dropped the charm; she was tired and she was sure that Natalia was worried, despite the earlier text message.

"As with Ava, I'm giving you a warning. Next time, it will be a ticket," Michael said more seriously. "Get home."

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At the farmhouse, Olivia wasn't in the door long before she noticed the kitchen was darkened and there was a covered casserole dish on the counter. Dropping her purse and briefcase on the table, she went in search of her partner, carrying a fussing Francesca on her hip. "Let's go see where Mama is, Sweet Pea."

Finding Natalia sitting on their bed, flipping through a magazine, she smiled seeing her looking relaxed. Francesca squirmed in her arms, wanting to go to Natalia, so Olivia let the tired little girl down on the bed. "Sorry for being delayed."

"Supper's downstairs," Natalia said shortly as she moved to pick Francesca up in her arms and hold her. "Has she eaten yet?"

"Yes, Leyla gave her her supper about an hour ago," Olivia said as she stripped out of her work clothes and pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt. Looking over at Natalia, she wondered if she hadn't pushed her limits.

"Good," Natalia said as she left the room with their youngest daughter and moved to get the young girl ready for bed.

"Natalia? What's wrong?" Olivia was growing concerned by the short worded answers.

Looking back at her partner who stood against Francesca's room's door frame, Natalia responded, "A call would have been nice. What kept you at the office this late? There were no scheduled meetings."

"Doris came over to discuss a few things. About Blake and the case she's working on, though that wasn't very specific."

"I see," Natalia said as she put the wriggling girl into her pajamas.



Olivia sighed deeply as she broached the topic of Kathryn Howard's living arrangement with Natalia. "I want to run something by you, since it will be coming out of my finances. Kathryn Howard will likely be moving over to Buzz's boarding house for at least the duration of the trial, perhaps beyond that."

"And how is that going to come out of your finances?" Natalia started and looked over at her partner before it dawned on her. "You're going to cover the costs of her staying at the boarding house? Does she know this?" Natalia asked, getting annoyed.

"Natalia, look," Olivia began.

"No, don't '*Natalia, look*' me this time. What if she doesn't want to take that charity? Did you even think of that?"

"I don't think she will have much of a choice, Natalia. She doesn't have a job, she's going on trial for manslaughter, and she's on the verge of being evicted from her apartment." Olivia was getting frustrated; couldn't Natalia see that she was just trying to be helpful?

"Why you, though? Couldn't Doris, Mel, and Beth organize something for her? Wouldn't that be more appropriate?" Natalia fired back.

Shaking her head in confusion, Olivia queried, "Appropriate? Natalia, why are you so bothered by my offer of assistance to the young woman?" She ran a hand through her hair and took a deep breath.

"It's like you see her as some sort of charity case," Natalia responded. "Maybe she doesn't want or need your charity. Some people can get by without it."

"Woah, hold up. Where's this all coming from?" Olivia walked over to her partner, trying to keep her voice down so they didn't disturb Francesca. "Are you referring to Kathryn, or are you talking about yourself?"

That caught Natalia's attention and she pulled her partner out of the room and down to their own bedroom, away from the girls' hearing. Making sure to close the door before she turned on Olivia, "This isn't about me!" Natalia said forcefully.

"No? Because you're certainly acting like it was you I was talking about and not Kathryn Howard."

Natalia took a deep breath to try to focus her thoughts and not say something she might regret. "Where do you get off assuming that just because you offered a near complete stranger housing that it's about me and my issues."

"Natalia, calm down," Olivia said and cringed once the words were out of her mouth, knowing Natalia hated feeling like she was being patronized. "Do you want to know why I made the offer to Brooke and then to Doris as a way to help?"

Pacing the room, Natalia thought about Olivia's words. She did want to know. What's more was that she wanted to know why the offer was making her so upset. Slowly she sat down on the edge of the bed and nodded.

"This hasn't been about you, or Gus and offering charity," Olivia started. "At least not directly." Before Natalia had the chance to interrupt, Olivia held up her hand so she could continue. "You were the first person to teach me about giving help without having an ulterior motive." Olivia gave a chagrined smile. "At least taught me to do it and have it stick in my head. The point is, this offer to Kathryn Howard is just about helping because I can. You and I both know what it's like to raise a child on our own, as Kathryn has been doing for most of Dani's life. Hers has been in an abusive relationship. Both of us have been fortunate that the relationships that we've been in haven't been physically and emotionally devastating as that." Olivia stopped for a moment to focus her thoughts. "I don't know if I can really explain very well why, but on some level I can see a part of myself in Kathryn, knowing that at some point in my life if I'd made different choices that could have been me. I would fight to the death to protect my family. You know that. You've seen that when we thought Phillip's return could have meant harm to Emma. You saved me from facing a similar sentence if I'd actually taken that gun to face Phillip."

Slowly Natalia nodded, starting to understand Olivia's perspective, but still feeling unnerved, with the tightly wound energy she had built up needing an outlet. "Okay, I get that."

"I sense a 'but' there," Olivia said gently.

"But nothing," Natalia said. Standing up, she headed over to Olivia and put her hand on her partner's chest, over her heart. "I just...I need to figure some things out."

"Such as?"

"Like why that bothered me so much. Like why the simplest things have the tendency to make me mad for no reason that I can think of. That's not me. Or at least it's not the me that I can face in the mirror." Taking a deep breath, she gave Olivia a small smile. They'd made some kind of progress tonight, but there was a lot more that she was going to have to face. "Can you look after the girls for a bit? I need to go out for a little while."

"Sure," Olivia said, realizing Natalia needed some space. She pressed a kiss to Natalia's forehead, and whispered softly, "Te quiero, cariño."

"Yo también." Natalia smiled at her. "Thank you."

"Can I ask where you're going?"

As Natalia opened the door to their bedroom and proceeded down the stairs, she turned to Olivia. "To see Detective Li about a punching bag."

"Wait. What!?"

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The driving to Anna Li's apartment took about ten minutes, during which time she had called to apologize for the lateness and asked if it was still okay if she came over. Thankfully the answer had been yes or she would have ended up at the minimart with a pint or two of mint chocolate chip ice cream. Trying to organize her thoughts and think about the reasons Olivia had given for helping out Kathryn, she rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the tension. Before she realized, she had pulled up to the apartment building.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Anna said, as she opened the door to admit her friend. "You seemed a little distant when we talked earlier."

"I know. I just don't know where or how to get rid of the built up anger. Or even why things are making me angry in the first place, where before they didn't, or at least not to this level." Natalia paced the room, her thoughts rolling around her head and she tried to focus them.

Giving Natalia a few minutes, she simply waited by the door to her work out room. "You remember me talking to you about PTSD on the phone earlier?" She waited for Natalia's acknowledgement. "I got you some pamphlets and information for you to take a look at when you're ready. You can put them in your purse or briefcase to read later."

Stopping her momentum, Natalia looked over at the other woman, "Thank you."

"In the meantime, come into the workout room. I'll walk you through a few exercises." Anna said, guiding Natalia into the room.

"Exercises?" Natalia asked curiously.

"Well, stretches to start. You can put your coat up on the bench there," Anna said, pointing to a wooden bench that ran the length of one wall.

"Okay."

Guiding Natalia into the center of the space onto the mats, Anna directed the woman to follow her in a series of stretches of her arms, legs, and torso. As she did so, she talked with the other woman about what kind of things had been making her angry or frustrated, and what she'd been doing to relieve those emotions.

"Cleaning mostly," Natalia admitted with a chagrined smirk. "Olivia said the last time the house smelled this much of bleach was when I was engaged to Frank Cooper."

Anna burst out laughing before apologizing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh, but I could picture her saying something like that."

"No, it's just fine. Looking back, I can see her point, and it is kind of funny now." Natalia took a deep breath as they went through another stretch. "Most of my life I've worked in the service industry in some manner, keeping things clean and tidy in various hotels, offices, restaurants. I guess I just focused so much of my attention on doing that in order to put a roof over our heads, especially when Rafe was sick, I didn't really have much time to get angry about things. Sometimes they were things out of my control. By the time I finished one, sometimes two, work shifts, I got home to run Rafe through his homework and make meals for us, and I'd just fall asleep, too exhausted to do anything else."

"What about these days? What do you use to relieve stress, anxiety, anger?" Anna asked.

"More cleaning?" Natalia responded, a wry grin crossing her face. "Or if I'm in a good mood, sex."

The latter comment surprised Anna – not so much that she and Olivia had used sex as a stress reliever, but that Natalia had voiced it. "Well, I'm going to teach you a few methods to

relieve those stressful emotions in a healthy outlet." She smiled at her friend as the other woman appeared quite eager to move forward with this process. Heading over to a desk she kept in the corner, she pulled out a leather bound journal and brought it over to Natalia. "First off, I want you to start keeping a journal of your progress. That way, you'll be able to read through it and look back at your progress, but also, you should be able to see a pattern over time about what triggers the strong negative emotions and the powerful positive ones."

Natalia seemed hesitant. "The last time I kept a journal, I was sixteen years old. I stopped after my father found it and learned that I was pregnant."

Anna nodded. That incident in itself would have been enough to make a normal person furious, and she suspected that Natalia was used to keeping her emotions, at least her really strong ones, bottled up, or ignoring them altogether. "This is important, Natalia. I want you to write down what you're feeling when something makes you mad, frustrated, scared, but I also want you to write down things that make you happy. If you get thrown off the path, refocus, breathe and write. Many people find writing things down a lot easier than talking about it. It's all about balance – mind, body, spirit. I will do my best to help with each, but as I said on the phone, you should also see a counsellor."

As Anna waited for Natalia to absorb the information, she went over to a shelf and pulled off a pair of boxing mitts and a pair of trainer gloves. Handing the boxing mitts to Natalia, directing her to put them on, she then pulled on the trainer mitts.

"Anna?" Natalia queried.

"Now, we're going to focus on the body. I want you to try to hit me," Anna said with a smile.

"Excuse me?"

"Part of the problem, as I see it, is that you keep your feelings bottled up. Am I correct on this?" Anna asked and waited for Natalia to respond.

"I guess, yeah." Natalia was wondering where Anna was going with this.

"Boxing, in a controlled training situation, can be a strong stress reliever; you're focusing your throws and punches into a single source. However, we're not going to be using this in any regular routine, unless you find it's something you like. Rather, I'm just going to show you how to do the manoeuvres to use with me, or with a punching bag."

"I'm not sure about this, Anna," Natalia said sceptically. "I don't really like violence."

Thinking for a moment, Anna decided to try something. "How did you feel about Olivia's coming home late this evening, without much word and a sleepy daughter?"

"Frustrated, annoyed," Natalia said, as a shadow seemed to cross over her face.

"And what did you do about it?" Anna inquired, curious about Natalia's coping mechanisms.

"I took a few good deep breaths, called you, took Shadow out for a walk in the field in front of the house, and when she still hadn't come home, I went upstairs to try to read. But I couldn't concentrate."

Anna nodded, surmising as much. "Put them on; I want you to throw a punch at me."

Doing as asked, Natalia threw a relatively light and weak punch.

"Really? That's all you've got?" Anna looked at her askance. When faced with the other woman's exasperated sigh, she continued. "I want you to close your eyes. Okay, now think of something that made you really mad. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Okay, now hit me; a lot stronger than what you just did. I have the gloves on here. Just land a punch on that," Anna added as she prepared her stance. She probably should have put her hands up a little higher to protect her face, but she didn't think the force of Natalia's first real punch would do any damage. As it was, she was knocked on her rear end, slightly stunned as Natalia had done more than graze her left eye and left her with a bloody nose. It surprised the both of them.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry," Natalia said as she whipped the gloves off and went over to help the detective up from the floor.

"No, no. That's my fault. I should have remembered the first rule of boxing: protect your face." Anna grinned suddenly, surprising Natalia. "At least I'll have a fun story to tell the guys at work tomorrow."

Natalia kept apologizing, more than a little mortified at injuring the detective.

"I think maybe, we shall focus today's attention on the punching bag," Anna laughed. "Today, you needed a way to learn an immediate response in a healthy outlet. Next time we're going to focus on learning some t'ai chi moves. Start at the beginning and I will show you the moves and the reasons behind them."

After another half hour of teaching and demonstrating with the heavy bag that hung from a steel crossbeam, Natalia was breathing heavily but feeling much better. Anna was pleased that the younger woman took to the activity with relative ease, happy to be learning something new.

When she caught her breath, Natalia asked, "When can we do this again?"

Anna laughed. "How about Tuesday? I have training sessions at work tomorrow, Friday and Monday. We'll start again with the stretches, but then we'll go into t'ai chi first, then if you're up to it, you can go again on the bag. Keep in mind, tomorrow, your shoulders, arms, and back will feel pretty sore as you're not used to these movements." Grabbing a protein bar out of her desk drawer, she tossed it back to Natalia. "Here, eat one of these on your way home. We'll look at your food routine over the next few weeks as well."

"What should I bring to wear?" Natalia asked, looking down at her jeans and t-shirt attire, which wasn't very practical for the workout she'd been through.

"A loose t-shirt and a pair of shorts, or stretchy leggings. Something you can easily move around in but will allow your skin to breathe. And a pair of good sneakers." Anna was glad for her new student's enthusiasm, but on a serious note, she reiterated to the other woman that between now and then, she wanted her to write down what she was feeling when and why. "I also think you should let Olivia know what you're doing. She can help to support you as you progress and if things aren't going as well as you wanted. Let her be that support. Okay?"

After letting out a long breath, Natalia agreed.

"And, if you have trouble talking to her about it, on occasion you might feel better letting her read parts of the journal. It will help her understand what you're going through as well."

"Okay. Thank you, Anna."

"No thanks needed. It will be thanks enough to see you progress and learn to deal with the aftermath of the kidnapping." Anna looked down at her watch. "Now, it's time for you to go. One of my favourite shows is coming on."

Natalia laughed. "Which one?"

"'*Criminal Minds*'. Don't you think our new police chief looks an awful like one of the characters on that show?"

"Good night," Natalia said, smiling as she picked up her belongings and left the apartment, feeling a lot better than when she arrived.

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#### **Act IV**

Again as Natalia entered St. Margaret's Mission the next morning, she could hear the sounds of music being played, and to her amusement when she spotted her friend stacking boxes, Sister Anne was belting out The Rescues song, '*Break Me Out*'. Natalia chuckled as she made her way closer.

"You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you like to toy with people's expectations of what nuns are like," Natalia said with a big grin.

Shrugging and grinning, Sister Anne said, "I tend to buck traditions. Makes life interesting." Returning the affectionate greeting, she went around the long table to give her friend a hug. "Morning, Natalia. Bright and early I see."

"I wasn't sure how long we'd be, so I took the morning off. There's nothing heavy going on today at the Beacon, and our first business meetings weren't until this afternoon. Might as well take advantage of the good days," Natalia said, as she shrugged out of her light jacket. "So, what are we doing this morning?"

"Well, I got into a rhythm yesterday after you left and got the office all packed up and transported to my new office upstairs. I even got some of it put away," Sister Anne said with a pleased grin. "Today, we're sorting the donations that came in this week into containers. I have labels and Sharpies. Clothing is on that table, toys on that one over there. I'd like to be able to sort the clothes by gender and sizes for adults and children, rather than just have



them in bins. We could probably just sort them extra small, small, medium, large, extra large for adult sizes and for kids by age groups?"

"That sounds good to me. I'll grab one of the Sharpies and labels and start over here," Natalia said, picking up the supplies. As she pulled up a chair to the table, she started writing down the sizes on the labels and applied them to the large Rubbermaid bins. Taking a breath as she ordered her thoughts, she turned to see Sister Anne looking over at her.

"How are you doing?" Anne responded.

"Better today," Natalia said as she actually felt more relaxed than she had been in some time. She knew there was a long journey ahead of her, but she felt like she had a goal to work toward instead of feeling like she was floundering. "I went to see Detective Li last night." Natalia smiled as she continued, "It was rather interesting in many ways."

"How so?" Sister Anne said curiously, as she noted her friend's improved mood.

"I had talked to her on the phone when I got home from picking Emma up. We talked a little about the continued nightmares I've been having, and she mentioned a few things about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." As Natalia thought about the discussion she'd had with the detective, the more things had started to make sense with regard to her mental health. "Olivia was late getting home and then we had an argument. I just felt so frustrated even though we'd sorted through the disagreement, so I headed over to Anna's to see if I could find out some more information."

Sister Anne waited as Natalia processed her thoughts and she was pleased that her friend was feeling a lot better than when she saw her yesterday. "And?"

"She gave me some pamphlets about PTSD to look over later and then we talked some about the practice of t'ai chi and balance of mind, body, spirit." Natalia paused a moment. "She recommended that I see a counsellor, but I had a hard time seeing Dr. Tremaine." Pursing her lips a moment, she looked up at her friend, concern etched on her face. "I was wondering if you'd be able to take me on in a professional capacity?"

"I'd be happy to, Natalia," Sister Anne replied. "You need to feel a level of comfort to be able to talk about certain things you've been going through, and for each person that is different."

"Anna also gave me a journal to write down what I'm feeling, like triggers that make me angry and frustrated. It made more sense once I got home and thought about it more as I read through the pamphlets." Thinking about last evening's events, she stretched her shoulders and rolled them as the detective had been correct on the muscles being tender. Grinning, she pictured the other events of the evening. "You know how I don't particularly like violence and fighting of any kind?"

Sister Anne nodded and looked amused by the change in Natalia's expression.

"She had me boxing." Natalia nearly laughed at her friend's surprised response. "Well, not in a boxing ring or anything. She had me throw a punch at her with boxing mitts on. I accidentally hit her in the face instead of hitting her trainer mitt." Despite the initial mortification of hitting her friend last night, she smiled. "Then she had me using a heavy bag, showing me how to throw punches on it to relieve stress. Now we're not usually going to be boxing, but I think she realized how frustrated I was last night and figured that was the best way to relieve it at the time."

"Sounds like you had a very productive evening," Anne said.

Mood brightened, Natalia said, "Oh, I did. I never thought I would have felt as good as I did, given the state I was in when I arrived."

"Increased physical activity will do that for you. Sounds like you got a good head start on working on your overall health. That's given me a few ideas on how to approach the therapy sessions so that will work to your benefit." Sister Anne realized that she hadn't been working as much on the sorting as she'd been paying more attention to her conversation with Natalia. "If you don't mind, and this is not a requirement so don't feel you have to, but I was wondering if you think you could share your journal with me after a couple weeks. Detective Li was right on the mark with having you detail that kind of information to help you understand the kinds of triggers and patterns that develop on how and why things bother you, or situations that might make you panic. Writing that down will certainly help you in the long run, and even in the short term, you should quickly be able to notice changes."

Natalia nodded at her friend's request, realizing that it would probably help, but she wanted to work on it first.

"The other thing that Anna may have mentioned is that when you write in your journal, don't think about it too hard, trying to make everything come out 'right'. Write what's first in your thoughts because those thoughts are often the most honest. If we think about it too much, we try to rationalize the feelings we're having rather than them being raw, even if it is painful."

Bemusedly, Natalia realized that that was most often her tendency – processing or rather over-processing her thoughts and feelings; sanitizing them so she could then deal with them later.

"What did Olivia think about all of this?" Sister Anne asked, knowing there had been some tension between them before she had gone to the detective's place.

"You mean after I explained about going to see Anna about a boxing bag?" Natalia giggled, surprising the other woman with her response.

Sister Anne joined in on the laughter. "Okay, I need to know the story behind that."

"Well, I was so ticked off and frustrated when I left the house last evening that I just blurted out that I was headed over to Detective Li's to see her about a boxing bag, then I just left, leaving Olivia to stew on that." Pursing her lips together as she remembered her partner's worried expression when she returned. "We sat down on the couch and I told her what Anna and I had spoken about. We talked for a while, just curled up together and I think it helped both of us a lot." Natalia smiled at the memory as she took in a deep breath.

"Good to know." Anne was happy for her friend and glad things were looking up for her. "Okay, let's get moving on this so you can head back to work."

Natalia nodded, slightly blushing at the remembered heated make out session that followed that talk with Olivia. Cold shower, cold shower, Natalia thought as she went back to working on the task ahead of her. Maybe she'd pin Olivia in their room later. *Mmmm, yeah, that'll work.*

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The large kitchen at the Spaulding mansion was warm as Hilda started to prepare another batch of muffins. The first batch of carrot walnut muffins were cooling on a rack when

Phillip passed by, pilfering one as he made his way to the coffee pot. It earned him a smack on the hand by the long term housekeeper.

"Scoot!" Hilda said with a laugh, knowing Phillip's sweet tooth.

Sniffing the air slightly, Phillip grinned. "I will if those are chocolate chip muffins going in next." Pouring himself a cup of coffee, he sat at one of the stools that surrounded the breakfast nook, newspaper in front of him.

"You're as bad as your daughters," Hilda said in fondness for the girls.

"Where do you think they got it from?" Phillip laughed. Both Lizzie and Emma also had a sweet tooth, but he refrained from telling Hilda that Emma's preference in cookies came from Natalia; he had to admit Natalia made fantastic cookies. His son, James, however, tended to take more after Beth in food likes and dislikes. Spreading the newspaper out in front of him, he flicked over to the financial section first. The *Springfield Journal* wasn't a big paper by any stretch of the imagination but it did provide the essentials. Once the stock information and overnight international financial news was checked, he checked the political columns and shook his head at the idiocy of some of the politicians. If nothing else over the past few years, Phillip's brush with a near fatal disease made him appreciate his family much more, and that included his extended family.

Over the past year, he had fought and won a decision with his Board of Directors to initiate provisions for non-discriminatory clauses within Spaulding Enterprises, and extending benefits for employees in same-sex relationships and their families. It had been one of the first private sector businesses in Springfield to do so.

His reading was interrupted as Beth came into the room and kissed him on the head as she passed to the fridge for some orange juice.

"Hey, you. Sleep well?" Phillip asked.

"Better last night, thanks." Sitting at an adjacent stool, she glanced fondly at her husband. Pointing at the paper, she asked, "Anything interesting in there this morning?"

"Same as usual. I see that Judge Harris has scheduled the Howard trial to start next week."

"Yeah, Jeffrey seems to be gung-ho to get this trial started and finished so he can focus on the official DA position," Beth said, as she reached over and snagged a muffin.

Phillip looked up at Hilda, giving her a mock frown when she hadn't scolded Beth as she had him. Then, turning back to his wife, he gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Just wondering since we don't have any plans tonight if you minded if Emma and Francesca stayed the night? It would give Olivia and Natalia a chance for some time to sort through some things?" He'd been a little worried when he'd gotten an email from Olivia the previous night after Natalia had left the house. His ex had been increasingly concerned about Natalia's well-being over the past couple months and he thought she might like a break from the kids for a night.

"No, that's not a problem at all. They're great girls. We can set Francesca and Peyton up in the same room again."

"Sounds great. Thanks, love," Phillip responded as he kissed Beth. Standing, he resorted up the paper, leaving it for Beth to read. "I'm just going up to the study to get stuff ready for the office."

"Okay, I'll see you in a bit. Just going to check the phone for messages, then I'll be up to get ready for work." Grabbing the phone on the wall unit, she pushed a couple buttons and waited for the messages.

*"Hello, Beth, this is your mother. If you get a chance, can you call me back later,"* Lillian's voice came recorded on the voice-mail as Beth picked up her messages. Checking the timecode on it, she realized that it had come the previous evening when she and Phillip had been out. Looking at her watch, she couldn't remember if her mother was working today or not. As she pressed down on the release button she heard an extra click on the line that wasn't normally there, but it stopped so continued not thinking any more of it. After a few rings without an answer, the voice-mail started its introduction.

"Hey, Mom. Just got your message. Heading to the office shortly, but give me a call when you can. Phillip and I will be home this evening, as Emma and Francesca will be staying over night." Beth shook her head as she thought she heard the clicking on the line again just before she hung up and thought she should mention it to her husband to check the lines.

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When Ava arrived at the Little Lights at 7:30 in the morning, it was already three-quarters full of children and staff and there were still parents arriving. Bearing a couple travel mugs of coffee along with her briefcase, she handed one of the mugs out to Leyla.

"I come bearing coffee."

"Oh, you are a goddess," Leyla said with relief. She hadn't had much time to get some before she left her apartment this morning. "Thank you."

"I was thinking about your plans for the center and I had a couple funding ideas that might work for you to keep costs down, if you're interested," Ava offered.

"Do you have a few minutes? I can get Katie to run things for a bit." Leyla gathered up her paperwork from the front desk where she'd been working as people came in.

"Not a problem. My first official meeting is not until nine o'clock." Ava nodded and waited until Leyla got her assistant to cover the front desk, then they headed to the small office Leyla had in the corner. "Busy this morning."

"Yeah, this is normal. Part of the reason for the expansion plans." Leyla directed Ava to sit in the chair opposite her. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking you might want to find out what you can set up with the Springfield University's Early Education program to do clinical rotations and non-paid internships, giving you some extra help, with the potential to turn them into actual employees on graduation."

"That sounds good. I had a couple places in Chicago where I did my internship that had similar set-ups," Leyla agreed. "If I can get a few extra hands on deck this weekend, I think we can get that other unused boardroom cleared out. Olivia mentioned one of the suites needed some desk furniture replaced and I know I saw about four or five desks in the boardroom just being stored."

"Not a problem. I'm sure we can round up some bodies if we promise food." Ava grinned, knowing Jonathan, Bill and Shayne would likely be able to lend a hand; especially if that food included some beers afterward. "Any particular time?"

"9:30 work for you?" Leyla asked as she grabbed a pen to make a few notations on her plan. "I'll send out an email this morning to them." The ideas that Ava had given her would keep her busy for the rest of the morning and she smiled thinking of the planning going into the expansion project. She still had to wait for the official approval from Olivia and the board of directors but she'd gotten positive response from Olivia thus far. Standing up, she

accompanied Ava out of her office, bringing her coffee and her laptop with her. "Thanks again for the coffee. Anytime you want to drop some of that off, you're welcome."

Ava smirked. "Something wrong with that coffee pot over there?" she asked as she indicated the one on the upper counter.

"Yeah, it tends to burn the coffee or something. Tastes like crap."

"You could buy a new one," Ava quipped, as she shook her head.

"Yes, I know, and I keep meaning to when I'm out, but by the time I get home I'm so wiped out and I forget to add it to the list of things to do." Leyla put her laptop down on the reception desk allowing her assistant to return to her previous task.

Ava laughed in understanding then waved goodbye as she headed to her own office, leaving her sometimes friend to go back to work.

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Knocking on her daughter's partially ajar door, Natalia smiled as Emma sat on her bed reading a book, Shadow lying on the floor beside the girl's bed.

"Hey, Em," Natalia started pensively. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Emma looked at her Ma curiously for a moment before responding. "Sure. What about?"

"Just about some of the stuff Detective Li has been teaching you." Natalia sighed, as she thought about how to address some of her own concerns with Emma. "We haven't had much chance to talk lately about that and how it's working for you."

"I like it," Emma said with a smile, though a little nervous. She knew she'd been acting out a bit more than she used to. A growth spurt, along with other things about her body, was a source of confusion for the newly adolescent girl. She wanted more independence but she still craved the support and comfort of her family. Curiosity winning out, she asked, "Why do you ask?"

"You know how upset and angry I've been at times since the kidnapping?" Natalia asked with hesitation. She acknowledged that her daughter was bright enough to know something was wrong and she waited for a response from Emma. When she saw the girl nod, she

continued. "Last night I went over to Detective Li's and she's going to help me much the way she has been helping you."

Emma's face brightened and she smiled. "Really? Maybe I can help."

Natalia hadn't realized how much she worried about Emma's response until it came. She relaxed her whole body and gave the girl a hug, gently running a hand over Emma's head. Finishing with a kiss to her daughter's head, she pulled back and smiled. "Perhaps you can. Maybe we can practice sometimes out on the lawn now that it's warm."

Looking over at her Ma, Emma's eyes glinted and she smirked. "Maybe we can even get Mom doing the exercises so she doesn't feel left out?"

"Well, we can certainly ask her," Natalia nodded, laughing gently. "But first, Anna's going to teach me the mechanics of things, and then we can practice, okay?" Remembering Olivia's earlier email, she added, "Have you got all your stuff packed to go to your Dad's for the night?"

Emma nodded with enthusiasm; she loved going to her Dad's as there was so much to explore in the house and she sometimes let her Dad win at the video games...well, after she finished her homework. And sometimes she just sat in the study while he worked and she read her books.

"Okay, I've got to get Francesca all ready to go as well. They'll be here just before suppertime. Phillip said he's taking you girls out for supper before heading out to the house."

"Yay!" Emma said, bouncing off the bed to put her books in her backpack. Shadow quickly stood up next to Emma looking at the promise of going out."

"Tell you what, why don't you take Shadow out back for a little bit while you wait, and when you get back if you want you can help me surprise your mom with her favourite supper."

"Tuna noodle casserole?" Emma asked grinning.

"Yep. Go on. I'll see you in a few minutes." Natalia smiled as she headed for Francesca's room to get the young girl's travel bag, stocking it with some clothing and her favorite blanket.



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After the girls had gone with Phillip and Beth, Olivia and Natalia sat at the kitchen table, a half-empty bottle of white wine, and a partially eaten dish of tuna noodle casserole gracing the table.

The house was quiet except for the low playing sultry music, and Natalia held her hand out to Olivia. "Dance with me?"

"Sí, cariño," Olivia said as she took her partner's hand, standing and wrapping an arm around Natalia's waist. Pressing a kiss on Natalia's lips, she started to lead them in the dance, swaying to the music. "I love you."

As Natalia pressed against her partner, following with the movements of the dance, she said contentedly, "I had a talk with Sister Anne this morning while we were at the mission getting clothing and toys sorted. We spoke about what Anna had said, with regard to what I've been feeling and ways to resolve some of those issues."

"And?" Olivia asked with a little hesitation. While she was happy that the love of her life was starting to come around and find a goal, she wondered how she would fit into the whole scheme of things.

"And she was in agreement with Anna's ideas for working on balancing physical, mental, spiritual aspects of my life." Natalia paused as she buried her face in the crook of Olivia's neck and started pressing kisses to the skin there.

Olivia turned her head back and to the side to allow Natalia more access. She was barely able to think as her partner's kisses drove her to distraction. With a hoarse voice, she whispered, "And what part of the plan is this?"

"Oh, this would be a combination of all three," Natalia said softly as she moved her kisses forward along Olivia's jaw line and up to her lips, capturing the flesh with vigor. "Upstairs, now."

"Oh, yes," Olivia said as she was led by Natalia in a way that left no need for interpretation.

As soon as they got into their bedroom and clothes were removed, Natalia pushed Olivia back on the bed. "You are mine," Natalia whispered in her partner's ear as she pressed the length of their bodies together and sighed.

"Te quiero mucho," Olivia whispered in adoration as she submitted to Natalia's loving kisses.

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Emma knocked on her father's bedroom door rapidly and waited for a response. She'd been woken up by the sounds of someone in the hallway, but when she went to investigate as she went to the bathroom, she thought she saw a shadow of a person moving down the hall. But with only a small hall light illuminating the large hallway of the old house, the shadows unnerved her. She had hoped it was her father or Beth, or one of the house staff that had stayed late. With no response, Emma knocked again, this time adding her voice to the alert.

"Daddy? Beth? It's Emma. Can I come in?"

"Just a minute, sweetie," Phillip called out. Grabbing his robe, he opened the door and noticed the scared look on her face. "What's the matter, Em?"

"I...I saw someone in the hallway coming back from the bathroom. I don't think they were supposed to be there."

"When?" Phillip asked, knowing that all the staff had gone home for the night. Beth was in their bed and the little girls were tucked in for the night. There shouldn't be anyone else in the house. It bothered him, especially as Beth had mentioned hearing clicking noises when she used the kitchen phone that morning. He'd found bugs in the phones when he'd gotten home from work and had them removed, checking all the landlines at the time. "Okay, sweetie. You go back to bed and I'll go take a look."

"Okay," Emma said hesitantly. Sighing she added, "I wish Shadow had been able to come."

"I know, Em." Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he went into to tell Beth what Emma had said before heading back out into the hallway, catching Emma before she went back to her room. "Em, Beth said you can go in and stay with her until I get back, okay?"

Emma nodded vigorously and quickly disappeared into her father's bedroom.

Phillip was mad. If someone had gotten into the house, they knew enough to bypass the detailed security system he had in place. He'd have a few words for his security service chief in the morning. If someone screwed up, the shit is going to hit the fan so quick. No one messed with his family without penalty. Law be damned.

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## Episode 6: The Only Constant is Change



### Act I

The warm sun had been welcomed as Natalia left the farmhouse an hour earlier, but now that she and Sister Anne had been moving some furniture to go out on the lawn next to the mission, she could feel the sweat rolling down the middle of her back. The wisps of hair that had been freely moving before were now stuck to the sides of her face. As she wiped her arm over her forehead to try to push them out of the way, she sighed, her thoughts focused on her son. He hadn't been able to make any of their scheduled online chats and she had been getting increasingly worried. Her gut feeling was that something was wrong but there was nothing she could pin it on, and she didn't feel her recent attempts of prayer were doing her, nor Rafe, any good.

The bed frame was heavier than it had looked, but Natalia braced the edge on top of her leg to adjust for better leverage and picked up her end. Sister Anne eased backwards through the doors, tilting down slightly on the left side to make it fit through the tight doorway. Natalia followed the other woman's lead and together they were through the doors of the small office turned storage room in a matter of minutes.

Once Natalia cleared the door, Sister Anne tilted her head to the left and moved toward the nearest wall. "Over here for now."

They set the solid wood frame down and both groaned in relief. Sister Anne laughed. "Wow! That was really heavy!"

Natalia nodded and fell back against the wall. Slipping her cell phone out of her pocket, she glanced at it and then sighed before putting it back in her pocket. She hadn't worked this physically hard in a long time, probably before Francesca was born. She smiled thinking of her daughter who was having a day out with Frank. For a few weeks there, she and Olivia had been hesitant to let Frank be alone with Francesca, but Eleni had told them how dedicated he'd been to his counseling sessions and how he hadn't touched so much as a beer since his breakdown. At some point, she had to show some trust in him again. This was only for a few hours so she wasn't worried.

"It feels good to work like this though. I haven't worked some of these muscles since I first moved to Springfield." The brunette smiled up at her friend. "Between this and the lessons Anna is giving me, I've been exhausted and sleeping so much better."

"And happy," Anne added as she brushed her hands off on her shorts.

Natalia smiled. "And happy. Some people use hard work and physical labor to avoid thinking or working through their feelings, something I became very good at over the years, but now it actually helps clear my head." She added with a laugh, "You should have seen how spotless the farmhouse was when I realized I was falling in love with Olivia."

"I bet you could eat off the floor," Anne chuckled.

"You have no idea!"

The nun clapped her hands together and looked at her friend. "So, are you ready to get this all the way outside and get to work on it?" She gestured to the bed.

"You bet!" Natalia pushed off the wall and rewrapped her fallen ponytail.

For another hour, the two women worked side-by-side sanding the wood to prep it for a new, darker stain. When Natalia mentioned that Kathryn Howard and her daughter would be offered a room at Buzz's boarding house, Sister Anne immediately offered to donate some new furniture for the room, something suitable for the young girl and her courageous mother, from the mission storage. Natalia had found a worn but cheerful yellow bed set that

would go perfectly with the darker stain in some old belongings she'd brought from Chicago but never used again. It would be perfect for the young girl.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sister Anne noticed that Natalia had been checking her phone regularly since she had arrived that morning. "Don't let me keep you here if you need to do something."

Natalia looked up to see the blonde gesturing toward the phone in her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was being that obvious. No, there's nothing to do. I cooked a big meal last night so there's nothing I need to rush home for right now. We're having leftovers." Anne nodded but she wasn't convinced. "But that has nothing to do with checking your phone constantly."

Blowing a strand of fallen hair out of her face and using the back of her hand to brush it aside, Natalia glanced over at the nun, sighing. "We haven't heard from Rafe in a few weeks. His recruiter told me this could happen; that they could be gone on a mission for weeks on end and we wouldn't hear from him, but...I don't know...something just doesn't feel right."

Anne watched her for a few moments before speaking, "What does Olivia say?"

Natalia chuckled. "Not to worry. Typical Olivia. She worries about me worrying. I don't think either of us could handle it if both of us worried about the same thing."

"I'm sure she's worried too, Natalia. She loves Rafe very much."

Nodding, Natalia pushed down the tears that threatened, accepting the fact that her partner was in this with her and that soothed her fears to some degree. But... "A mother knows though," she said with finality.

Pushing her sanding wool and other items away, Anne scooted across the rough concrete closer to her friend, taking Natalia's shaky hands in her own. "Would you like to pray for him?"

Quickly, Natalia nodded. When she looked up tears fell down her cheeks and she lifted an arm to wipe her nose with her sleeve. "I haven't been able to pray as much lately. I'm afraid I'm letting Rafe down. It's the only way I can be there for him now."

Anne fought to bring a smile to her face, but was worried and pained for her friend. "Do you want to go inside where it's more comfortable?"

Again, Natalia quickly shook her head. "No, here's good."

Anne scooted closer to Natalia so they were facing each other, their crossed knees touching. Leaning close, she began to lead Natalia in prayer as the warm, early summer sun rose high in the sky overhead.

\*\*\*\*

The cool air of the Beacon lobby was vastly different from the increasingly warm day outside. Mike Thorne took off his sunglasses and slipped them into the pocket of his navy blazer. As he walked across the lobby, he slipped off the blazer to reveal large biceps straining at the sleeves of the snug shirt he wore.

All Greg could do as he watched the handsome man cross the lobby was swallow. Fortunately, that meant his mouth wasn't hanging open, but he did go momentarily speechless as the man flashed a bright smile his way and said, "Hi."

Greg swallowed again and cleared his throat. He tried desperately to sound professional and not let his voice squeak. "Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to the Beacon. How may I assist you?"

When the handsome man chuckled, Greg flushed a bright red. Only then did he realize what he had done. The delivery of his question had a slight "come hither" tone and Greg had glanced down the man's body, blatantly checking him out.

Appearing unphased the man introduced himself. "I'm the new police chief, Michael Thorne. And you are?"

"Greg," he squeaked out with embarrassment.

"Nice to meet you, Greg. I'm actually looking for someone. Ava Peralta?"

Glad to have something to do, Greg blew out a relieved breath and immediately picked up the house phone. "Of course, I'll call right up to her."

"Thanks," Mike said and turned to look around the lobby. He walked a few steps away, near the hallway that led to the elevators. To kill time, he read the menu of the restaurant and the signs for the Beacon services, including the daycare.

Greg watched him out of the corner of his eye as Ava's phone rang. On the third ring she picked it up. "Ms. Peralta, there's gentleman, a very good looking one I might add, in the lobby looking for you." He heard the amused chuckle on the other end and a friendly admonishing of "down boy" before she told him she'd be right down and hung up. Considering Olivia and Natalia's relationship, he'd given up the pretense of hiding his sexuality. It was actually nice not having to worry about it.

When Mike turned back toward the desk, Greg caught his attention. "Chief Thorne, Ms. Peralta will be right with you."

Another bright smile. "Thank you, Greg."

When Mike looked away, Greg did a modified happy dance and mumbled, "He remembered my name."

The distinctive clicking of heels on the stone floor caused Mike to turn from the CNN broadcast on the television in the corner. A much more pleasant image rounded the corner as Ava adjusted her suit jacket before reaching out a hand to shake Mike's.

"I thought I paid my time for my crime, Chief," Ava joked.

Mike laughed and handed over something in his hand, neatly folded. "Even though it's warming up, I thought you might want your jacket back. You left it at the station when I took you in."

Ava smirked at Mike's teasing smile. "Ahhh, so that's where it disappeared; I'd wondered. I was a little distracted that day." She took the item from him. "Thank you."

A few awkward, silent moments passed between them. Ava couldn't help but wish there was more to his visit than to return her jacket. When nothing was forthcoming, she pulled out her genetic Spencer charm. With a coy but knowing smile and a slight tilt to her head, she gestured to the restaurant. "Will you join me for coffee?"

Leaning back on the heels of his feet, Mike considered the offer before smiling. "That sounds lovely. Maybe you can tell me more about the daycare?" He pointed to the directional sign behind Ava.

Ava began to speak when she was interrupted.

"What about the daycare?" Leyla asked as she approached Ava.

Ava sighed as she turned and acknowledged the other woman. "Leyla."

Leyla walked up to stand next to the taller woman. She tossed Ava a quick but amused smile before looking at the gorgeous specimen in front of her. She stepped a little closer, just on the edge of Mike's personal space, and reached her hand out. "Hi, I'm Leyla Rivera, owner and director of the Little Light's Daycare. I'd be happy to answer any question you have. Perhaps over dinner?"

Ava's dark eyes jerked in Leyla's direction, but the younger woman ignored her.

Oblivious to the angry glare Ava burned into Leyla, Mike shrugged happily. "Sure, that sounds great! My daughter is staying with family in Chicago until I get settled so I really need a daycare with a great reputation to watch her while I work. Oh, but Ms. Peralta was going to tell me more about it over coffee. I know, Ms. Rivera, join us for coffee and you can give the inside scoop."

For Ava it wasn't a complete victory, but she couldn't help but smile smugly as Leyla looked at her. "Wonderful, let's go."

"Yes, wonderful," Leyla agreed through gritted teeth.

"I'd still like to go to dinner with you though, Leyla," Mike said, getting the younger woman's attention back.

"You would?" Ava questioned him before she could stop herself. Her head was spinning with the shifts in direction.

"Of course," he confirmed. He looked at Leyla and nodded. "I'll call you later this week?"

"Sure," Leyla agreed, having a hard time hiding her amusement. "So, I take it there's not a wife?"



"No, not for three years. She left not long after Breeona was born. She wasn't cut out for motherhood." Mike led the way with Leyla at his side and a not-amused Ava bringing up the rear.

\*\*\*\*

"Hey Em! I have this great idea." Olivia talked out loud as she bounded down the stairs. With the recent stress and distance she'd been feeling with Emma, Olivia thought some old-fashioned girl bonding would be good for them so she set up an appointment at the salon for makeovers while Natalia was helping Sister Anne.

When she reached the last step and glanced up, she realized for the first time that the house was empty. "Em?" Olivia called out. Confusion turned to worry. "Emma!"

Some recently forgotten fears resurfaced especially with Phillip having some strange happenings going on around the house. Olivia went from room to room calling her daughter's name becoming more and more frantic with each silent second that passed.

She ran shaky hands through her hair and cursed into the empty room, "Damn it, Emma! Where are you?"

After covering every inch of the house, she ran outside and called for Emma only to be greeted by chirping birds and crickets. Panic was starting to set in, and she could feel her heart racing frantically. Taking a deep breath, she tried to clear her head and think of any places she may have missed.

Then she remembered Emma's new favorite place to hang out was the barn - partly to practice her t'ai chi, but mostly to be alone in her prepubescent angst. Olivia broke into a light jog as she headed to the barn.

Giving the old wooden bar across the doors a good shove, she lifted it fairly easily and flung the door open. "Emma!"

A frantic scurrying to her right drew her attention. She saw the orange glow and smell of the smoke before the cigarette was ground out against a wooden post. Her mind barely took in the rest of the image - Emma seated on the hay between Blake's two boys, Kevin and Jason, who were smirking up at her and a third boy she didn't recognize - before Olivia yelled, "Emma Spencer Spaulding!"

The young girl pulled back as Olivia marched forward. Olivia wasn't sure if she wanted to hug her or strangle her. The boy's faces went from haughty to terrified with lightening speed. The response pleased Olivia as she glared down at them.

"Get out before I ensure that you three are physically incapable of producing testosterone." The boys were pinned to the spot and Olivia sighed. Her patience worn down to the point of nonexistence, she growled, "Out. NOW!"

Scrambling to their feet, the boys gathered their backpacks and raced out of the barn.

Olivia looked at her daughter as she sulked on the hay. She was disappointed in Emma, but she was also exhausted from the stress and fear of the last few minutes. She fought the urge to let her body crumple in on itself and weep with joy and relief that Emma was okay because now she had a much more serious issue to deal with.

Squeezing the bridge of her nose, Olivia took a deep calming breath. "Get in the house. We need to talk."

"But Mom!" Emma whined.

"NO!" Olivia barked. She wasn't up for a civil discussion with her precocious daughter. There were some lines that couldn't and shouldn't be crossed. This was Olivia's. "You don't get the right to talk right now, young lady. In the house...now!"

Climbing to her feet in a huff, Emma stomped off past Olivia and out of the barn. Olivia watched from the barn door as Emma's stomps turned into a jog. Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she dialed Blake's number.

When the other woman answered and listened to Olivia's recounting of her discovery, Olivia sighed and acknowledged Blake's frustrated tone as she apologized profusely.

"Don't apologize, Blake. It'll be fine. Though you may want to drive out this way and get the boys. I put a good scare into them."

Blake made a joke about bringing a change of shorts for them because Olivia probably scared the crap right out of them.

Sighing, they both hung up their phones.

Olivia walked back into the barn and located the smashed cigarette butt. Then trudging the path back to the house, Olivia prepared herself for a face-off with Emma.

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The sun was setting as Natalia walked into the farmhouse. After the physical and emotional day she had put in helping Sister Anne, all she wanted was a hot soak in the tub and a chance to cuddle up with Olivia. Though, after the long talk she'd had with the nun about Rafe, she felt her burden lightened considerably. The prayer hadn't hurt either; it was the first time she had felt remotely connected to God since her kidnapping.

The loud crash of a door slamming upstairs made Natalia jump, and she immediately dropped her purse to the kitchen table and raced up the steps. She stopped at the top of the landing when she saw Olivia standing outside Emma's room - her head resting against the wood and her hand on the knob.

"Emma, open this door right now!" Olivia yelled.

"Go away!" Emma's muffled, high-pitched scream was heard on the other side.

Bewildered, Natalia took a step forward. "What in the world's going on?"

Olivia turned to her and sagged with exhaustion against the door. Her usually bright green eyes that flashed with passion and intensity were dull and drained. "I don't know what to do. I can't get through to her."

"About what?" Natalia asked her partner, taking another step forward. She couldn't help but worry about Olivia's health. The stress couldn't be good for her.

Shaking her head, unable to find the right words, Olivia sobbed as tears spilled over. Natalia was at her side in an instant. "Come on, querida. Let's go sit down and talk. We'll figure it out." She guided her partner to the stairs and helped her down. First things first, Natalia had to find out what was going on. She walked Olivia to the couch and gently pushed her down then went to the kitchen. Returning with a glass of water and a box of tissues, she sat down by the older woman.

After Olivia drank half the glass and set it down on the coffee table, Natalia took her hand. Raising the delicate hand, she placed a kiss to the back of it and brought it down to rest in her lap. "Okay, start from the top."

Sighing deeply, Olivia used her free hand to squeeze the bridge of her nose. Dropping her hand, she looked at the brunette. "I caught Emma in the barn with Blake's boys smoking."

Natalia pulled back, shocked. "Wait...what?"

"Exactly what it sounded like the first time," Olivia's voice was laced with sarcasm and she grimaced as soon as the words were out. She waved a hand dismissively. "Sorry."

Natalia wasn't even worried about her partner's tone. She was still thinking out what Olivia had said, "Were the boys smoking or was she?"

Unable to stand it any longer, Olivia stood up and began to pace. "Her. Either way, does it matter? She was sneaking around...with boys."

Natalia watched her partner pace and could tell that she needed to word whatever she said very carefully. It wasn't that Natalia wasn't concerned. Sneaking around with boys and smoking behind their backs could be the start of more serious behavior, or it could simply be that Emma was growing up and exerting her independence. The approach she and Olivia took would set the course for whatever they faced next and probably for whatever Emma did to push their boundaries. First though, Natalia had to approach Emma's mother with just as much caution.

Standing, Natalia walked over to the older woman and reached for her. She took Olivia's trembling hands in her own and raised them to her chest the way she always did to focus her partner on their connection. "I'm not happy about this either. Emma's too young to court trouble, and we both know those boys are trouble or they never would have gotten kicked out of school. I also know that Emma's just starting to change from a girl to a young woman. This is a tough time for her, and we need to get on the same page about how we deal with this."

Olivia dropped her head wearily and rested it against Natalia's. She blew out a tired sigh. "I guess locking her in her room until she's forty isn't an option."

Natalia chuckled and squeezed the hands she still held. "I think some would call that child abuse."

"I'm so afraid she's going to get hurt," Olivia choked on her sob and squeezed her eyes shut against the tears brought by her biggest fear. She could see the images of Emma growing up

too fast and paying the price for it flashing in her mind. Anger and pain bubbled up in her. "I wanted a better life for her than what I had."

Natalia pulled back, realizing suddenly what Olivia's real fears for Emma were and what they meant. She placed the palm of her hand against Olivia's bowed head before leaning over and kissing the place where her hand had been. She traced her hand down the side of Olivia's face and tugged her face up gently to look her partner in the eyes. "Oh, querida. What happened to you won't happen to her."

Olivia's eyes swam with a mix of anger and sadness. "You can't make that promise," Olivia said flatly.

Natalia stood up a little straighter, trying to convey to her frightened partner the confidence she felt in their ability as parents. "No, you're right. I can't. But...we...can teach her how to protect herself and respect herself and we can be there for her, be firm and consistent. Emma's a smart girl. We need to agree on how to handle this and stick to it. We can't stop her from growing up, but we can prepare ourselves for what that means."

When Olivia nodded, Natalia continued, feeling encouraged, "We haven't even talked about her dating, if she gets a car when she's sixteen, or what her curfew is going to be."

Groaning at the thought of Emma dating, Olivia smiled for the first time since Natalia had gotten home. "We have a lot to figure out."

"Good for you that I've already been through the teenage years with one kid." Natalia grimaced. "I guess that's not the best example."

Olivia pulled her partner in close, feeling comforted and reassured by Natalia's calm approach to their family problems. "Don't. Rafe had some bumps in the road, but he turned out just fine."

"Emma will too. She's going to push our buttons, but we handle it as a team, okay?"

Olivia leaned in close, nuzzling along the brunette's jaw line until she reached a tantalizing ear. "We always were a good team." She lightly nibbled Natalia's earlobe and smiled as she felt the woman shiver in her arms.

"Don't distract me." Natalia tugged at Olivia's hips, her control disintegrating quickly. She pushed back from Olivia and chanced a glance up at the green eyes of her lover. The heated

smolder was nearly her undoing, but there was unfinished business that needed to be taken care of first. "Let me go talk to Emma. Let her know that we're going to talk and we'll sit down with her over breakfast in the morning." Olivia took a deep breath and nodded. Natalia leaned in and kissed the other woman tenderly but with a hint of expectation. "I'll meet you in the bedroom."

Natalia ascended the stairs steadily as Olivia closed up downstairs. She rested her hand on the knob to Emma's bedroom. Her hand twitched automatically as she began to open the door then she thought better of it. She lightly knocked instead. "Emma?"

Time stretched and a sudden fear snaked into Natalia's subconscious. What if she climbed out the window? She began to turn the knob again when a muffled but discernable, "Yeah," came through the door.

Relief forced the breath Natalia had been holding out of her lungs and just in the nick of time too as she heard Olivia's footsteps on the stairs. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Emma answered.

Natalia entered and closed the door behind her. The room was pitch black, and she felt this was indicative of where Emma was emotionally at the moment. For as long as Natalia had known Emma, she had slept with a night light. The complete darkness signaled the change Emma was going through - no longer a child, not yet a woman - and it made Natalia incredibly sad.

"Where are you, Em? I can't see a thing," Natalia asked, leaning against the door to keep her bearings.

"On the bed," the girl softly replied.

"Can we turn on a light?"

Emma sighed into the darkness. "I don't want to." Before Natalia could respond, Emma asked, "Mom told you what happened, didn't she?"

"She told me what she saw, yes," Natalia responded honestly and inched her way in the direction of the bed, hoping she didn't kick Shadow accidentally on the way over. When her knees bumped the mattress, she turned around and sat on the edge. "She told me that both of you were really upset."

Natalia waited, giving her daughter a chance to respond in her own time. Finally, Emma spoke up but her voice was tinged with fear, "Are you mad at me, Ma?"

"I could never be mad at you, Em. I am worried about you though, and so is your mom. She's beside herself with worry, Cariño." Natalia reached across the comforter until her fingers found Emma's knee. She rested her hand on the young girl's leg for a moment before squeezing. "Your mom and I want to talk to you in the morning. Tonight, all of us are stressed and tired, and it's not good to talk when our emotions are so frayed. Just promise me you won't do anything crazy between now and morning."

"Like what?" Emma sounded perplexed.

"Oh, I don't know. Like climb out your window or something." Natalia shrugged and tossed out the idea to see what her daughter would say.

"No way, Ma! I'm like way up on the second floor!" Emma chuckled.

"Ah ha! So you have thought about it!" Natalia teased.

Emma giggled. It was a sound that warmed Natalia's heart, and for a moment she believed that everything would be okay. Emma agreed to be there in the morning and to talk to them about what had happened today in the barn.

In the short couple of minutes that Natalia had been in Emma's room, her eyes had adjusted to the darkness. She leaned over where she saw the outline of Emma's head in the shadows and kissed the top of the girl's head.

"Love you, Em," she whispered.

"Love you too," Emma responded through a yawn.

Natalia was almost to the door when she heard the softly spoken, "Ma?"

"Yeah, sweetie?" Natalia stopped and turned back to face the center of the dark room, looking in the general direction of Emma's bed.

A soft sniff preceded Emma's whispered, "Sorry about the barn."

Feeling heartened by the girl's words, Natalia smiled into the darkness. "See you in the morning. I'll even make banana pancakes."

Closing the door quietly behind her, Natalia walked to her own bedroom door. Cracking it open, she was assailed by the sound of water running, lavender and vanilla scented steam wafting out of the bathroom door, and the view of a long leg with a shapely calf rising out of the soapy suds of a tub. Longing immediately clenched in Natalia's stomach. As she walked across the bedroom, she discarded her clothes. Pushing the door open, a rush of desire flared through her body as Olivia casually turned her head and hooded emerald eyes caressed her naked body.

Bracing her hands on the door frame to remain steady, Natalia asked, "Is there enough room for two in there?"

Olivia didn't answer as she stood up in the tub, the warm soapy water cascading down her body. She was pleased when Natalia's eyes followed the rivulets of water and she swayed slightly in the doorway. Crooking her finger at her dark-haired lover, Olivia beckoned her forward. "With what I have planned for you, darling, it won't matter."

Natalia dropped her hands from the door and walked over to stand beside the tub. Reaching out, she lightly ran the tip of her fingers down Olivia's shoulder and the front of her chest until her hand reached the engorged peak of her nipple. Slowly, she drew circles around the nipple moving freely in the soap-slicked water on her body.

A sharp intake of air pulled her eyes upward. Olivia's mouth had fallen open slightly and her eyelashes fluttered. As she began to guide her fingers lower, Olivia reached up to take her hand and return it to her side.

She attempted to move her hand back to its preferred location on Olivia's breast and again Olivia thwarted her. Natalia protested, "But I want to."

Olivia leaned teasingly close, her lips almost but not quite touching Natalia's. "Oh, you will." She breathed. "Many, many times you will. But right now, this is all about you, querida."

The kiss was deep and intoxicating. It made Natalia feel like they hadn't kissed for months, and she was enthralled all over again by the power and allure of her partner. She tilted her head, angling to take Olivia deeper.



For a few seconds, Olivia indulged her lover's exploration, being in the moment with her, tasting her unique flavor on her tongue. It amazed her how Natalia always tasted sweet. It must have been all of those damn cookies she made; the sugary silk of her mouth and body were like some kind of life-giving nectar to Olivia. As if she couldn't live without it.

Moaning, she pulled away from Natalia to regain her composure. Her hands had at some point come up to cup Natalia's face and were now kneading at her naked shoulders. It took all her strength to not reclaim the swollen lips of her lover.

Instead, Olivia dropped one of her hands and caressed the inside of Natalia's thigh. As she edged closer to the damp curls, she watched Natalia's dark eyes flutter shut and her bottom lip disappear between her white teeth. Teasing her fingers in the soft curls, Olivia toyed with her lover until Natalia gasped when one of her fingers dipped into the wet folds.

"Olivia," Natalia moaned.

For a moment, Olivia was mesmerized. She must have been still a little too long because Natalia opened her eyes in confusion. The look in Natalia's eyes did something to Olivia she couldn't really explain; she never was really able to explain it. All she knew was that in that moment the idea of breaking the contact between them and moving to the bed went completely out the window.

"Can you do this standing up?" Olivia questioned.

Natalia shook her head, trying to focus her muddled thoughts. The light touch of Olivia's fingers between her legs wasn't helping. "No...um, I...I've never tried."

Olivia wrapped her free arm around the brunette's waist and brought her closer. "Want to try?"

Bringing her hand up to cup Olivia's cheek, she knew what her answer would be, what it would always be for her. Olivia didn't have to ask her permission. She gave it freely to this beautiful woman long ago, but Olivia asked. She would always ask with her because that's just who Olivia was.

Natalia nodded. "I want you, Olivia." She opened her legs a little wider, offering herself to Olivia.

Her fingers slid easily through Natalia's wetness, coating the tips. Moving back to Natalia's clit, she used her pointer and middle finger to find the shaft of Natalia's clit. When she did, she made small up and down movements.

At first, Natalia wasn't sure what she was doing. Olivia had teased around her opening, encouraging her to spread her legs further in the assumed anticipation of being entered. When Olivia's fingers moved back up to her clit as if in search for something, Natalia almost asked her what she was doing, but everything made sense as she realized that Olivia quite literally was jacking her off as if she was a man. The realization and orgasm hit her at the same time leaving Natalia shaking and hanging on to her inventive lover.

As soon as she was able to take a full breath, Natalia pulled back from Olivia. "Where did you...? How did you...? Jesus!"

Olivia quirked her mouth to the side, trying not to smirk because she felt damn proud of herself. "I was curious if that would work."

"I think that's a definite 'yes'. But you know what?"

Something in Natalia's eyes made Olivia nervous. "What?"

"We're not done."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. "We're not?"

Natalia shook her head and took Olivia's hand to help her out of the tub. She then walked them over to the shower and turned the water on. She climbed in first then helped Olivia step in. Stepping under the warm spray of water, she handed Olivia the loofah and soap. She relaxed as Olivia soaped up her body and scrubbed her back.

Olivia had barely finished washing Natalia when she gave in to her desire. Dropping the sponge, she leaned in close to Natalia allowing her breasts to slide along her lover's soapy back. Natalia's head dropped back to Olivia's shoulder and she took advantage of the access to Natalia's shapely neck, her mouth latching on to the closest skin she could find then teasing along the curve up to her ear.

Suddenly, Natalia spun around. "You had your turn. This is mine."

Natalia kissed Olivia as her thigh insinuated itself between Olivia's legs. A low moan was Olivia's response and even through the water, Natalia could feel the unique texture of Olivia's arousal against her leg. In spite of her earlier orgasm, she could tell her body needed more. She raised her outside leg and set her foot on the built-in marble seat behind Olivia. Without ceremony, she reached for Olivia's hand and guided her fingers to her center.

There was no need to tell Olivia twice. Three of her fingers slid easily into Natalia, and she could feel the way her lover pushed down that she wanted more. Bending her knees, she angled to reach deeper, and that was exactly what Natalia had been waiting for because she quickly slipped her hand between them and entered Olivia.

"Oh, Jesus!"

"Oh, God!"

Both women spoke at virtually the same time, and Olivia would have laughed at the invocation of the deities if it didn't feel so fucking good. Their gasps, grunts, and pants were muffled as they held onto each other - kissing, touching, and tasting any part of their lover they could find. Both of them kept going, orgasm or no orgasm, until they slid to the shower floor in an exhausted heap. Olivia was still buried deep inside Natalia as the younger woman curled into her side, and she tried to free her hand but Natalia had other intentions.

She looked up into the dark but content eyes of her lover as long fingers wrapped around her wrist. "Don't go. Stay. Just a little longer."

Even with the cooling water beating against their skin, Olivia couldn't deny Natalia anything she wanted.

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## **Act II**

Emma looked at the clock on her bedside table and groaned. It was 7:15. She would barely have time to gobble up her breakfast before racing for the bus. Her moms wanted to talk to her about smoking and probably put her on restriction. She felt better after talking to her Ma last night, but she still dreaded it all the same. Sitting on the side of the bed, she tied her tennis shoes before grabbing her backpack and walking downstairs.

"Come on, Shadow. Let's go face the music," she said to her dog on a sigh and the dog obediently followed. Being put on restriction was a crappy way to end her school year! She had an idea though, and she hoped it would work. In her head, she envisioned her plan working and that made her happier. Bounding down the stairs, she skipped lightly into the kitchen.

"Morning!" Emma called cheerfully. She opened the door to let Shadow out then came back to sit at the table.

Olivia almost choked on her coffee, not expecting her daughter to sound so chipper after last night. Natalia, on the other hand, turned from her pancake-making to smile. "Well, good morning to you, too! You're right on time." The brunette picked up Emma's plate and slid a pancake onto it.

"Thank you, Ma," Emma smiled and responded politely.

Olivia raised an eyebrow and felt the hair on her arms begin to stand up. Emma was up to something. She glanced up at her partner who turned to her with a pancake and slid it onto her plate as well. With a wink and a happy smile, she turned back to the stove.

Suddenly, Emma set her fork down and looked back and forth between them seriously. "Mom, Ma...I just want to say that I'm sorry about the cigarettes. I was curious and wanted to see what it was like. It was the only time I did it, and I promise I won't do it again."

The two women shared a look. The decision they had come to last night spoken in their eyes. Natalia nodded her head slightly and Olivia looked back at their daughter. "Thank you, Emma, for accepting responsibility. I'm sorry if I came across angry as well last night, and I'm sorry I raised my voice to you." She took a deep breath then continued, "Your Ma and I have talked it over and feel that, while we accept your apology and that certainly works in your favor, some kind of punishment has to be dealt out."

Emma nodded. Everything was going according to plan thus far. "I understand. Smoking is really bad for my health. It was a mistake."

"Right, so, our decision is a one month restriction. During this time, we'll confiscate your cell phone and you won't be able to attend any events without one of us or your father or Beth present."

The girl tried not to visibly grimace. A month of restriction was pretty harsh, but it could have been worse. At least she could still go places and see her friends. "Okay, I can do that." Olivia took a deep breath. She wasn't quite done yet. That was the easy part. "Good, but there's one other part to the agreement." Emma swallowed and waited. "You can't see either Kevin or Jason until we tell you otherwise."

Emma's eyes went wide and her mouth fell open. "But Mom!"

Olivia held up a hand. "No, Emma. This is not negotiable. That's our final decision."

Inside, Emma seethed. She couldn't believe her mom could be so mean. The boys weren't even smoking! She apologized. What else did she want? Pushing around her pancakes, Emma realized she'd lost her appetite for them. She pushed her plate away and stood up. Two feet from the door, her mom stopped her.

"Hold up, Emma. I'm taking you to school. Since you have a short day, Anna's going to pick you up for your lessons." Olivia finished her coffee and stood. After giving Natalia a quick kiss, she grabbed her purse with her agitated daughter in tow.

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The small café wasn't the usual place Blake would have suggested for meeting someone. Company was her comfort zone, but considering the person she was meeting was Ross and the reason for meeting had to do with their sons, she felt that the familiarity of Company would have made such a serious conversation difficult.

She followed the hostess who guided her to a corner booth exactly as she had requested. She had been comfortably seated a few minutes, enough time to check her emails, when she felt eyes on her. Looking up, she felt her stomach do a lazy flip when she locked eyes with the dancing blue eyes of her husband – ex-husband, former husband, back from the dead husband, whatever he was. His nonchalant charm and easy mannerisms had wooed her from the start, and she couldn't deny that Ross still had some effect on her.

Leaning over, Ross brushed his lips against her cheek. She shifted uneasily in her seat as his cologne, familiar yet foreign, invaded her senses. For years, she had mourned the loss of him and been able to eradicate these small memories from her everyday existence. Walking down the street, she'd catch a scent of his cologne on a passing man and begin to weep. However, in recent months, she'd replaced sad and painful memories with thoughts of a

hopeful future with a person very different from the one standing before her. Doris was so much of what Ross wasn't.

Shaking her head, she brought herself back to the present and gestured to the seat across from her in the booth. "Please."

"It's good to see you, Blake. You look gorgeous today," Ross gushed and took delight in the blush that flared on Blake's cheeks.

"Thank you. You're looking typically handsome as well."

The waiter came to take their drink orders and left them to make a decision on their meal. After a few moments of light conversation, the waiter returned. He inquired, "Will this be on one or two checks?"

"One."

"Two," Blake corrected quickly and proceeded to place her order before Ross had the chance to protest. "I'll have the special with wheat toast and sausage."

Ross smiled recognizing her sidestep but allowed her some leeway. "And I'll have the eggs Benedict."

The waiter disappeared with their orders. Ross watched until he was certain they were alone. "I can take care of the check, darling. We are married after all."

The redhead bristled at the assumption. "I seem to remember a 'til death do us part' clause in the contract."

"But I'm not really dead," he smirked.

Blake sighed, tired of the game already. At one time, she would have relished the teasing and banter, even found it a turn on, but not anymore. "And this isn't why we're really here."

Ross leaned back into the leather of the booth seat and gave up the pretense. "Of course. Very well. Let's talk then about the boys. What happened?"

Blake, relieved that Ross had accepted her change of topic, waited until the approaching server placed the food in front of them and left before responding. "Olivia caught them in the barn with her daughter, Emma."

Ross seemed to contemplate her comment as he sat forward and stirred his coffee. "HMMMM, yes." He tapped the spoon on the side of his mug and placed it on the table. "From what I understand though, Olivia Spencer also became quite upset and even threatened our children." He interrupted Blake as she began to respond, "Really, Blake, you're running with pretty unsavory friends."

"That's not a relevant point, and you know it." Blake took a deep, calming breath. "The fact is that our sons need discipline. They've been uncontrollable for years."

"I don't seem to remember them that way." Ross shrugged. "They're perfectly well-behaved for me. Sometimes having a father around can do that."

Looking down at her uneaten food, Blake realized she had completely lost her appetite. Coming to a conclusion, she nodded. "Well then, since you're back now, I guess you can make yourself useful again by being a proper father to them. A nice, long summer vacation with you may be just what they need."

Ross's face blanched when Blake called his bluff. "But..."

"I'll talk to Mel about having an amendment written up to our child custody paperwork. She'll be in touch." Standing, Blake dropped money on the table to cover her bill and left the café.

All Ross could do was watch as she walked away.

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Digging her feet into the grass, Anna focused hard on keeping her footing as Emma spun and kicked the target guard that Anna held tightly in her grips. The young girl's strength and confidence in her skills were increasing and Anna felt it in every inch of her body this morning. She braced her body as Emma spun again and placed another forceful kick in the center of the target.

Anna agreed to forego their usual calmer t'ai chi session for a little kickboxing. It had been at Emma's request. Before the girl even uttered a greeting to Anna, she had asked for it, and

with the hard and frustrated look on the normally smiling girl's face, Anna had a feeling that Emma needed this outlet.

Emma quickly assumed the position for another kick and Anna dropped her hand and stepped back. "Hold up! Let's take five." The older woman dropped her target guard to the ground then reached into her bag for a Gatorade and tossed it to Emma.

"But we just started," Emma grumbled and leaned against a nearby tree, taking a small sip of the drink in her hand.

For a moment, Anna watched her young friend as Emma picked at the label around the bottle before ripping off a long strip. Finally, she sat down and patted the ground in front of her. "Hey, come over here and sit."

Emma did a first with Anna – she rolled her eyes. However, she did eventually push away from the tree and sat down in front of her trainer turned friend. "Okay."

"You don't have to bullshit me, Emma. Something's bothering you."

Still looking down, Emma kept picking at the label, not answering.

Finally, Anna reached across and placed her hand over the young girl's hand. "Stop please, and look at me."

Sighing with defeat, Emma looked up and Anna was taken with how much she looked like Olivia right then – the fierce determination captured in soul weary eyes. Just like Olivia, the pain and loss were laid bare for the whole world to see, if it ever bothered to look. Anna did look, probably one of the few people that did.

Emma shrugged. "I don't want to talk about it really."

The older woman smirked a little at Emma. "You know I don't buy that. Everyone needs to talk sometime."

"Well, I don't!" Emma tried to stand but Anna latched onto her wrist.

"Bullshit! Now sit down and talk to me," Anna insisted, giving the girl's arm a slight tug.



Flopping back to the ground, Emma threw her hands up in the air. "Fine! I had a fight with my mom, and I guess I'm not over it yet."

"What was it about?" Anna asked. She was surprised that Emma and Olivia had a fight. They rarely got that upset with each other that it didn't blow over quickly.

Picking up a nearby stick, Emma began to draw in the dirt with it – a little house with the sun shining bright in the sky. "She caught me in the barn yesterday smoking."

Anna furrowed her brows, thinking. *Not that Olivia condones smoking, especially by her child, but that doesn't seem like something that would get her that upset.*

Emma looked up from adding a tree to her dirt art masterpiece and bit the bottom of her lip. "I wasn't alone. Blake's sons were there, too. She went on and on about them and how they're a bad influence. But they're nice to me. At least they have been since I kicked their butts." She smiled at the time they had picked on Clarissa by the pond almost a year ago and how she'd reacted. "They don't treat me like I'm a baby."

"And your mom does?" Anna concluded. Emma shrugged but didn't respond. She smiled at the young girl. "You know that's what she's supposed to do, right? It's a natural instinct. She can't help it."

"But it's annoying, Anna!" Emma fussed. "She's always protecting me from everything. As if I don't know what's going on! Well, I do. I know more than she realizes."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. She knows you know. You're very smart, Emma, and you've always seemed older than your age. The thing is, you're her baby and you always will be. That woman could be seconds from taking her last breath on this Earth, but I swear, she'd tell God that He just had to wait because she had to take care of you...one more time." Even as Anna spoke the words, she knew they were true; she wasn't exaggerating just to get through to the girl.

Tears had welled up in Emma's eyes. She propped her arms over her raised knees and subtly wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I know. I just wish she'd let up a little. It was just a stupid cigarette. One stupid cigarette."

Anna sighed. "She probably will with time, but honey, I don't think her biggest concern was the cigarette. She caught you in a precarious situation, Emma, with two older boys. You may

think you know them, but something bad could have still happened to you. They could have hurt you, and just because they're Blake's sons doesn't mean they wouldn't have."

Emma rocked a little thinking as awareness suddenly sank in. "Like my mom was hurt when she was young?"

Anna sucked in a breath, not sure whether to confirm or deny. "Emma."

"I know. They think I don't, but I do," Emma confirmed sadly. "I overheard them talking once."

"She doesn't want it to happen to you, too. It terrifies her. Hell, it terrifies me. Every woman!" Anna choked out.

The young girl nodded sadly then looked up at Anna with a renewed determination flickering in her eyes. "That's why I'm training. I don't want it to happen to me either."

Anna nodded back in solidarity. "Let's get back to it then."

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Winter was gone and the warm May air doing wonders for Olivia's mood; it felt good to get out and pound the pavement rather than the treadmill. Running helped clear her head particularly when she felt overwhelmed.

She enjoyed this route as it lead past the river and the train tracks, then looped around for three more miles before it ended at the path to the lake. Natalia had encouraged her to get back into running. It was good for her heart although Natalia warned her to not overdue it. Rick encouraged her as long as she took it slow.

Natalia was working through her angst with Anna, taking t'ai chi lessons twice a week. That, plus her chats with Sister Anne was helping Natalia put the kidnapping and other worries in perspective. She would never forget the incident, it was engraved in her memory but she was finding tools to help her reconcile with the trauma. Natalia feeling more settled made Olivia more settled.

Now, if Emma could only settle down. Her little girl was not so little anymore. She turned away from the railroad tracks and saw the bank of the river in view. She and Natalia used to roll their eyes and laugh at Emma's antics, anticipating what the little girl would be like

when she became a teenager. She and Natalia weren't laughing anymore. Just a few days ago she found Emma and Blake's two sons out in the barn smoking cigarettes. It was so obvious, the obnoxious smell wafting out through the barn door. After a strong reprimand, she called Blake and told her to come and pick up her boys. As she continued her run, Olivia replayed the conversation with Emma over in her head, haunted by her daughter's defiant look. Where had her sweet girl gone?

*"It wasn't what you think, mom."*

*"I know what I saw." Olivia stood with hands on hips, the smashed cigarette between her fingers. "Care to explain yourself?"*

Emma didn't really have an excuse and she accepted the two-week ban on texting without much fuss. She'd figure out how to get around it.

Olivia knew it wasn't about smoking. She had snuck a cigarette or two when she was only twelve. It was the terrifying thought that this was just the first step down the road to Emma's reckless behavior, the same kind of reckless behavior that had gotten Olivia in trouble years ago. This is what kept Olivia tossing and turning at night.

She tried to wipe that image out of her mind as she felt the warmth of the sun on her back, and the rush of the river indicating the warmer weather was definitely here to stay. That thought made Olivia smile as she puffed along, and stripped down to her T-shirt. She felt a little clammy and slowed to a trot. She loved this part of the riverbank the best; there were a few twists and turns and then a large oak that had been uprooted years ago was laying half covered by the swirling current.

She continued to jog in place as she stopped a moment to catch her breath. Something caught her eye near a branch of the old oak. She jogged closer to the shore, trying to make out a bulky bundle that was being sloshed around. She stopped moving and continued to peer down into the murky brown. It appeared to be a cloth of some kind. She looked around for a stick and began to poke at it. A jacket she assumed. Working the stick she brought the jacket nearer to the shore and managed to flip it over.

She threw a hand across her mouth to stifle a scream. *What to do?* How would she explain that she had found a jacket with the remnants of an arm in it floating in the river?

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Natalia was thankful for the day off so she could simply relax and catch up on some work around the house. Olivia had assured her that she could handle the meetings with the vendors and Greg would take care of settling the contract to host an election night extravaganza. Today was Natalia's to do what she liked.

After cleaning and putting away the breakfast dishes, she logged onto her laptop and checked her emails to make sure nothing had blown up at work. She felt assured that she'd have been called if that was the case, but she made sure to check her email just to be on the safe side.

Ah, yes, the safe side. That was something Natalia was good at doing – erring on the side of caution, being reserved, contemplating her options.

She tapped the table next to her computer before clicking the Skype icon. She knew it was fruitless. She kept the program open at work and when no one was looking she logged in at home. But...Rafe was never there.

Nothing new this time either.

Setting the volume on the computer to its highest setting and turning off the screensaver, Natalia stood up and began picking up around the living room. When she finished that, she found the furniture polish under the sink and started at the fireplace mantel, dusting her way back toward the kitchen. She was nothing if not methodical in how she cleaned. Even when she was a housekeeper at the Beacon, she would start in the farthest corner and at the highest point of a room and worked her way out and down. Vacuuming was always last because if everything else has been cleaned above, the remaining dust and dirt should be on the carpet and ready to pick up.

With precision, Natalia worked the room, inching closer to the small hallway that led back to the kitchen. Her mind wandered when she cleaned. She found it interesting that something that most people dreaded became her must-do activity simply so she could think clearly.

She turned to the left and dusted the shelves along the wall. She picked up each knickknack and dusted beneath it. The final item she always dusted was her Mother Mary statue. She had had the statue since she left home as a teen, pregnant and alone. Mary had kept her company many sleepless nights or at least nights she wasn't bone weary from working so many jobs. Next to God and Rafe, Mary had been her best friend. Mary was also the last item she dusted and cleaned because it gave her an excuse to take the statue and sit down with it

at the table. As she cleaned, she talked, opening up about problems or worries she was facing.

In those early days, her problems were always about Rafe. Was she doing the right thing? Was he safe and happy? Could she do more to give him what he needed? Rarely did she ask for anything for herself except the endurance and patience to be a good mother to her son.

These days though, her prayers had expanded so much, including much more than just Rafe and herself. Olivia, Emma, Francesca, Ava, and Leyla. Her parents. Phillip and Beth. Even Frank. All of them were a part of her circle of family and friends that she prayed to Mary for to intercede and help them.

When she was sure the last speck of dust was gone, Natalia placed the statue on the table in front of her and looked at it for a long while.

"Yes, it's been awhile." The statue stared back at Natalia without judgment. Eventually, she continued, "If you have a moment though, there's a lot I need to talk to you about."

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Grumbling in frustration, Ross yelled into his empty car, "Aw, come on!" The traffic was moving at a snail's pace, and while he could see the flashing blue lights of police cars, he was still aggravated at all of the people rubbernecking as they went by the scene.

The fight with Blake wasn't helping his mood either. Ross was having trouble understanding why Blake seemed so difficult and argumentative, even agitated, now that he was back. Of all people, he thought she'd be happy to see him, and he had hoped that they could rebuild their life together. Certainly, being gone six years didn't help matters, but it wasn't exactly his fault. Phillip Spaulding had sabotaged his plane after all. If anyone was to blame it was Phillip!

Thinking about Phillip Spaulding didn't help his mood either. He'd tried so hard to help his nephew over the years and being nearly killed by him was how he got repaid for his troubles.

Ross tapped his steering wheel impatiently. "We'll see who gets repaid in kind, my dear nephew."

As Ross came upon the scene, he understood why the traffic was moving so slow. It wasn't a wreck like he'd expected. Easing across the bridge, Ross saw the yellow crime scene tape stretching in a large swath from the side of the bridge, along the side of the road perhaps a hundred feet and then diagonally across to a large fallen oak tree by the river.

Within the scene, he didn't see many familiar faces. It had only been six years that he'd been gone, but so much had changed. Finally, he spotted Olivia Spencer standing next to a police cruiser, talking to a tall black man and a shorter but serious-looking Asian woman. When he was well past the scene, Ross pulled his car off the road and got out when there was a break in the traffic. The lawyer in him couldn't help but wonder what was going on.

It was clear that the two officers were asking Olivia some questions, so in deference to respect for the law and confidential questioning, he stood off to the side behind the yellow tape. At one point, Olivia looked up and locked eyes with him. She was in the middle of talking but stopped short upon seeing him, drawing the attention of the officers to him. She said something to them and walked over to Ross.

Smiling, Olivia leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "So, the rumors are true!"

"Yes, yes. The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Ross joked with a charming wink at the beautiful woman.

Olivia turned to the two officers and introduced them. "Ross, this is Detective Anna Li, and our new Chief of Police, Michael Thorne." She gestured back to Ross, adding, "This is Ross Marler, Phillip's uncle and Blake's, ummmmm..."

"Husband," Ross finished for her.

Anna's eyes went wide. "Oh!" She reached her hand out to shake his. "It's nice to meet you. I've...heard a lot about you."

Ross smiled teasingly at her. "Really? I hope it's been good."

"Mostly," Anna mumbled as she looked up at a smirking Olivia.

If Ross heard the comment, he didn't let it phase him. Instead, he greeted the tall, handsome man among them. "Chief Thorne, nice to meet you." He glanced at the trio then. "What in the world's going on here?"

Anna looked to her boss for his lead. Michael didn't hesitate. "Well, Mr. Marler, it seems we may have a dead body that's washed up."

"Please, call me Ross, Chief. Do you have any idea who it is?" He asked.

"Only if you'll call me Mike, and no, not yet. Forensics is on it." He gestured with a nod of his head to the navy jackets milling around close to the river's edge. "Hopefully, we'll know something soon."

"Chief!" A woman with curly dark hair called from the middle of the crime scene team.

"Excuse me," Mike said, walking down to the woman who had spoken.

Ross smiled as he spoke, "Is that Eleni Cooper?"

Olivia crossed her arms as all three regarded the scene by the river. "Yep."

"And what in the world are you doing here, Olivia?"

She looked back at the man she had considered a friend at one time. Probably one of the few men in Springfield that she automatically felt was off-limits to her. Seducing Ross Marler had just never really crossed her mind. "I was the lucky girl to find the body."

Ross grimaced and nodded his head. "Nice! Well, at least you weren't the one to put the body there."

"I've had my moments," Olivia quipped. He knew the tumultuous relationship she'd had with Phillip so the comment came as no surprise to him.

"I better get going," Ross said and looked to Anna. "Nice to meet you, Detective Li. Hopefully, I'll see you around, Olivia."

"Oh, I'm sure you will." Olivia commented then added, "But I'll be quite happy if I don't see your boys near my house anytime soon."

Ross smirked at the comment but continued walking.

Olivia and Anna watched as Ross left and then Anna turned back to the crime scene whispering to her friend, "So, that's the infamous Ross Marler." Anna continued when Olivia

nodded, "He's... handsome. Charming, even. Doris told me once that Ross was Blake's one true love. I don't think Doris was too happy about that."

Olivia sighed. "Blake has a lot to figure out."

"And in the meantime, Doris is sitting in the middle waiting...worrying," Anna's tone was protective, even angry sounding.

"Don't, Anna," Olivia warned.

"What?"

"Don't! Don't get in the middle. Trust me; let the situation take its course. It'll work out the way it's supposed to in the end," she advised.

Anna smiled up at her friend. "That's ironic coming from you."

"Hey, I did let it take its course with Natalia! I went completely off script with her, and it worked out." She looked over at her friend, who was reluctantly accepting her advice. "I know it's hard, and you won't hear me say this often, so make a note of it but...have faith. Just have faith."

Olivia followed Anna's line of sight as she looked up to the sky and then stepped away. Olivia laughed. "What?"

"I'm getting out of the way. Lightening could strike!"

Olivia swatted at her friend. "Oh shut up! So, am I done here? I called Natalia so she wouldn't freak out because I wasn't back on time from my run, but I need to get into the office for a meeting. Thank goodness I have a change of clothes there!"

"Sure. I'll call you if we need anything else."

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Eleni acknowledged Anna as the detective walked up to her and Mike. The tall man turned to Anna and asked, "I know it could go without saying because of my new position and all, but I don't want to step on toes. Would you mind if I handle the footwork on this case?"



Anna shrugged, a little relieved actually that she didn't have to deal with what could be something major, especially with the Howard trial starting soon. Springfield may not be the hotbed of criminal activity like Chicago, but strange shenanigans always seemed to be going on here and a little down time would be a relief. "Not at all, boss!"

He raised his hands in the air and turned to smile at Eleni as he began to walk backwards. "See? I love Springfield! Teamwork!" He pointed to Eleni. "Call me when you have something."

"Will do!" Eleni smiled.

Both women chuckled but Eleni stopped first and turned to her friend, mumbling, "Newbie...he has NO idea!"

Anna laughed because all she could do was agree. When she first arrived here, there was an air about the town that it was boring and quiet. Time had proven to her that her first impression was way off base. "Even though this isn't my case officially, I'm terribly curious by nature. What's the deal?"

"The good news is that there's enough left of whoever this is to probably be able to make an ID. We've found a partial skull, various other bones, clothing, and even some teeth." Eleni paused from talking to Anna and spoke to a member of her crime scene team, "Hey, go get the mud boots out of the van and pan for some gold on the river bottom." The tech ran off to do as he was told and Eleni turned back to the other woman.

"How did the body get here? This is a well-traveled bridge and a lot of people take walks out here. Surely, someone would have noticed the body before." Anna thought out loud.

Eleni nodded and tucked a strand of curly hair behind her ear when it fell free. "That's exactly what I was thinking and considering the rate of decomposition and destruction done to the body, I'm thinking this person met his or her demise up river, got trapped by the winter freeze, and floated down river with the thaw and the recent heavy rains. Of course, I won't know exactly from where the body came until I can examine the sediment on the bones and compare it to the different parts of the river."

"It sounds like you have your work cut out for you." Anna felt a little bad for her friend. She was going to have a lot of long, tiring nights in the lab ahead of her.

Eleni beamed at her. "Are you kidding? I live for this!"

"Oh, you live for dead people. Nice!" Anna joked and got a slap on her arm for her trouble.

"Besides, I have Frank to make coming home worthwhile," the medical examiner said, giving her a wicked smile.

"Ugh!" Anna threw up her hands, waving them in the air. "On that note! Damn, Andros, you sure could clear a room with that visual!"

As she walked away, Anna could hear her friend giggling like a teenager. She was happy for her, but she still needed to find some bleach quick to clear the image in her head.

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The last several days and nights had been long and arduous for Eleni as she leaned against her desk and rubbed her tired eyes. With a big yawn, she reached for her coffee mug sitting on her desk and took a sip. It was cooler than lukewarm but passable so she drank the rest quickly. She needed the caffeine more than she needed the warmth of the brew.

She tilted her head from side to side and rolled her shoulders working out the tension built up in her muscles. She was close to figuring out who the dead person was that washed up in the river. Samples of skin, what little remained of it anyway, and scrapings of bone were being analyzed by her techs. The few teeth that were left were examined and photographed according to their approximate location within the deceased's mouth. The results were now being run through an FBI database of missing persons and known criminals. By studying the fibers on the remnants of cloth, Eleni had figured out the deceased had been wearing a cotton blend shirt and there was material similar to that used in making feather down jackets – shiny, slick, and black – and minute traces of wool. Her best guess at the moment, based on the various types of clothing, was that the person died during the winter.

Hunter or fisherman, criminal on the run, hobo that ran the trains in and out of town, suicide, bear attack, or a simple random murder victim...all of these were possibilities for who the person could be.

Eleni was frustrated that she was nowhere nearer knowing the dead person's identity now than she was three days ago. Sighing, she walked back over to the table and stared down at the loosely rearranged bones.

"Talk to me. Tell me your secrets."

She walked around the table close to the head, talking to herself. "Blunt force trauma perhaps. Not enough skull left to determine with any certainty. Some hair left, looks to be brown." She walked down the side of the table and continued talking out loud, "Cracked ribs, broken arm. Either you got a bad beating by someone or you took a nasty..."

The door to the lab burst open and Shawn, her newest tech, barreled through the door waving a sheet of paper and smiling. "Lt. Andros! We have a positive ID on the deceased."

She pumped her hand in excitement and relief. "Yes! Who is it?" She took the paper from Shawn's hand as he scampered to a hasty stop in front of her, his breathing coming in uneven pants.

She read over the paper then spoke the name out loud, "Grady Foley."

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Anxiously, Leyla waited outside the Beacon. She had grown nervous waiting for Mike to call her and truth be told, she had given up on him ever doing so until he had called yesterday to make good on their date. Initially, she had only made a play for him to antagonize Ava. She wasn't sure why she got such a charge out of getting under the older woman's skin, but she couldn't seem to help herself. Oddly enough, they'd have some fairly reasonable conversations from time-to-time, but other times, all they needed was a boxing ring and Jell-O to make the picture complete.

Sighing, she checked her watch for what seemed like the tenth time in the last fifteen minutes. Mike wasn't terribly late because she'd shown up only a few minutes before seven, but still, she didn't like waiting for any man.

The doors opened to the lobby and Leyla glanced in that direction expecting to see a hotel guest exiting. Instead she saw Ava Peralta and she couldn't stop the groan of frustration. She really didn't need this right now.

Ava looked down at her watch and tsked in a fake Spanish accent, "Oh, this doesn't look good, Señorita Rivera. Not good at all." Olivia had told her about Leyla's date so the fact that Prince Charming was late tickled her pink.

"Suck it, Peralta!"

"You wish," she looked the other woman up and down then gestured to her. "But it takes more than what you've got to satisfy me."

"That's it," Leyla growled and took two threatening steps toward Ava.

"Hi, ladies!" Mike called a few feet away. A little girl with curly dark hair stood next to him holding his hand. "Am I interrupting something?"

Leyla stepped back and put on a charming smile for her date, brushing down her dress with her hands to just have something to do. "Nothing important. You look very handsome this evening." He truly did in his dark button down shirt that fit snugly over his muscled arms and khaki pants. "And who is this beautiful young lady?" Leyla complemented and stretched out her hand to the little girl, who had the same warm and caring eyes of her father.

The girl took Leyla's hand and smiled. "I'm Breeona."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Breeona. I'm Leyla." Leyla smiled down at her.

"You're really pretty," Breeona complemented.

"Awww, thank you, sweetheart. So are you!"

Mike leaned over and kissed Leyla on the cheek in greeting. "Her father thinks so as well."

Ava watched the entire exchange and finally she couldn't take it anymore. Rolling her eyes, she made her escape. Faking like she was receiving a call on her cell, she gasped, "Oh! Looks like a 911 from Greg. He probably found a wrinkle in a drape or something. If you'll excuse me."

"Do you need any help?" Leyla asked.

Ava shook her head. "Nope, I've got this." She disappeared quickly back into the hotel, leaving Leyla and Mike alone.

He shuffled on his feet and glanced down nervously, then tilted his head to his daughter. "I guess we should get her checked into the daycare."

Leyla smiled and nodded. "Yeah, let's do that."

On the way in, Leyla drew up short as she saw a familiar face walking toward them. This was just not her day! "Hi, Jonathan. How are you?"

The good looking man hesitated a moment, glancing between Leyla and the man next to her holding a little girl's hand. He assumed the man was the girl's father. "I'm good. And you?"

"Fine. I'm fine." An awkward moment of silence passed as Leyla stumbled with something to say. "Oh, this is Mike Thorne, the new police chief."

Jonathan shook the hand the man offered. "Good to meet you, Mike." Awkwardly, Jonathan ran his hands through his hair and pointed to the door, before saying to Leyla, "I, um...I better get going. I'm meeting Josh and some others at Farley's. I'll see you around."

Leyla nodded and watched him walk away.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in Mike's car and driving to a restaurant on the north side of town. Leyla tried to put the uncomfortable run-in with Jonathan out of her mind and just try to remember the fun of going out on a date as Mike pulled the car into the lot and parked. She was always so busy working that she rarely had a chance to treat herself to places she didn't get to visit otherwise. Behind the rustic, cabin-looking restaurant was a waterfall that cascaded over rocks and down into a lake. Even from the parking lot, she could tell that colored lights were built into the rock facing to shine on the falling water. With the sun almost completely below the horizon, it created a romantic and unearthly feel.

"This is beautiful! I had no idea this was here," Leyla spoke in awe.

Mike offered his arm to her. "You think this is great. You should see inside!"

Together, they ascended the stairs to the front door of the restaurant and as they entered they were greeted by the maître d'. "Bonjour. Do you have a reservation, sir?"

Mike stepped forward. "Yes, it's under Thorne."

"Ah yes, here you are! Please, follow me." The maître d' found Mike's reservation and the table location he requested before guiding them to their seats. A young woman in a tuxedo stepped up to the table at the same time the maître d' did and pulled out Leyla's chair.

"Morgan will be your hostess tonight. Enjoy." The maître d' bowed and quickly returned to his post as Morgan, a pleasant woman with thick, curly blonde hair adorned by a bright streak of pink, took their drink orders and sauntered away with a wink at Mike.

Once she had left, Mike leaned across the table slightly. "So...who was the guy at the daycare?"

Leyla was hoping that he wouldn't bring that up. "That was Jonathan."

Mike raised his eyebrows. "And?"

She sighed and decided to just spill it. "We dated for a little while, and I thought he really liked me. He made this excuse about wanting to create a solid, dependable life for his kid, and he needed someone he could depend on."

Mike sat back in his chair and watched her for a moment before speaking. "I'm not so sure that was an excuse. If he wants to find someone to settle down with for the sake of his daughter, then there's nothing wrong with that."

"Is that how you feel?" Leyla couldn't help but ask. If Mike was going to be Jonathan all over again, she wanted to find out sooner rather than later.

He laughed slightly, amused at how the pretty woman had a no-holds-barred approach. "My view is a little different. I love my daughter very much, and I certainly want her to feel loved and cared for. However, I'm the one that will be providing that for her. I'm not expecting it out of other people that may be in her life. Even though she's young still, I've tried to explain to her that sometimes daddy needs non-Breeona time, and sometimes she needs non-daddy time. Both of us need more than each other in our lives to be happy and healthy."

Morgan returned with their drinks, interrupting the conversation. Leyla picked up her wine and took a sip of it. "It sounds like you have a positive attitude in raising your daughter."

Mike leaned forward again. He looked serious and it made Leyla hold her breath. "Look, I like you. You're an attractive and interesting woman, and I'd like to spend more time with you. But I'm not trying to find another parent for Breeona. That job's filled, okay? I want to meet a lot of new people and make some new friends, and no matter where my future may lead me I want to do it with as little drama as possible. Now, it looks like you have a little drama in your life with Jonathan and your bickering with Ava. But I have no interest in being more drama for you. Let's simply enjoy each other's company. Deal?"

Leyla was strangely relieved by his clarification. It became clear to her all of a sudden that she wasn't ready for settling with anyone yet, and even though she loved children, she didn't want the job of being someone's mommy right now either. Her plate was more than full. Reaching across the table, she said, "Deal, friend."

Mike shook her offered hand and laughed. "Good. Now let's eat. I'm starving!"

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### Act III

Eleni stretched her arms over her head and leaned back. She had been in one position for so long, bent over the microscope that she could literally hear the popping of her vertebrae as they realigned during her stretch.

She groaned and stood up, sliding the stool out from under her, and glanced at the clock on the wall. "Six o'clock!" She had been in the lab since seven that morning and only paused long enough to go to the bathroom and drink more coffee to keep going. But Frank had asked her to dinner earlier in the week and the time had been set for an hour ago to meet up. Quickly, she scrambled through her briefcase until she found her phone to call Frank. When she turned it on though, three texts and a voice mail were waiting for her from Frank. "Shit!"

Listening to the voice mail, Eleni grimaced. *"Hey, El, I guess you got stuck at work. Don't worry. I understand how that goes. Anyway, it works out fine because this new medicine the doc has me on for depression is kicking my ass. I think I'm just going to call it a night. Call me tomorrow, okay? Sweet dreams."*

Eleni sighed and turned the phone back off. No sense in calling him now if he was asleep. She spoke into the empty room, "I'll make it up to you, Frank. I promise."

Deciding a power nap would do her good, Eleni opened the foot locker behind her desk and extracted a well-worn blanket and pillow. She set the alarm radio on her desk and curled up, her eyes already half-closed before her head hit the pillow.

\*\*\*\*

The bar at Towers was busier than usual and Ross was having a hard time finding a spot to settle in for a drink. Walking around to the other side of the bar, he chanced upon a familiar face.

"Well, well...I wondered when I'd run into you," Ross said smoothly and patted the surprised man on the shoulder.

Jeffrey O'Neill laughed when he realized who had surprised him and held out his hand to give Ross's a hearty shake. "I'll be damned! The rumors are true."

Ross smiled amicably, acknowledging their shared past. "Now these rumors are true, yes."

"Please, join me for a drink," Jeffrey said as he motioned for the bartender. When the barkeep came over, he added, "Get him whatever he wants. On my tab."

The bartender nodded, happy to do as was requested since Jeffrey was a big tipper. "Yes, sir, Mr. O'Neill!"

Jeffrey stood when Ross's drink was handed to him and motioned for him to follow. The taller man took the steps to the back of the restaurant that overlooked the bar area. Behind an expanse of heavy curtains, reminiscent of an old-fashioned theater, were several more secluded tables. Ross followed Jeffrey's lead as he took a seat. The remote location and heavy drapes blocked much of the noise from the bar and allowed for easier conversation.

"That's much better." Jeffrey smiled at him as he got comfortable in his chair. Curious about Ross's circumstances and experiences, he couldn't help but ask, "So, how has your return to the land of the living been treating you?" He couldn't help but wonder if Ross was getting treated with the same disdain he faced.

An amused laugh preceded Ross taking a sip of his martini. When he set the glass down, he looked at the other man. "It's been...interesting."

For a moment Jeffrey watched the contradiction of the man's laugh play out beside his unamused smirk. "Let me guess, Blake's not as enthusiastic about having her husband back as you had hoped she'd be."

Ross sighed and leaned forward placing his elbows on the table as he stared into the murky liquid of his glass. "I don't begrudge her finding someone else. Really, I don't. I just wasn't



prepared for her to not be exactly the same person she had always been. I feel oddly the same, but the entire world around me has shifted."

"I know that feeling well," Jeffrey agreed. Having lost Reva to Josh and finding no forgiveness from her upon his return, and knowing he had no right to ask for it, he truly felt for Ross. Soon, Ava would be joining him for dinner, and now wasn't the time to become melancholy. "Please tell though that something good is happening in your life."

Ross's chuckle was real this time. "I don't think seeing a dead body is good in anyone's book, but it certainly helped me see that my life could have turned out worse!"

"Wait, you were the one to find Grady Foley's body? I thought that was Olivia." Jeffrey asked confused.

Ross sipped his martini and chewed an olive slowly, nodding his head. "It was Olivia. I came along later, just snooping around." He looked at the other man curiously. "Have you heard anything about how it happened? I hear this Foley guy wasn't exactly squeaky clean."

"That's an understatement! He gave most of the troublemakers in Springfield a run for their money while he was in town," Jeffrey commented drinking the last of his beer. He signaled a waitress to bring him another and looked back at Ross. "Your buddy, Phillip, hated him because of what he did to Lizzie."

Ross scoffed, "Do I even want to know? Then again, that bastard had it coming to him after sabotaging my plane."

Jeffrey nodded in remembrance. Seeing how Ross was deep in thought, tapping a finger nervously against the table, and also knowing how much Ross hated Phillip, an idea came to him. "You know, Phillip had a lot of run-ins with a lot of people in this town, but no one got under his skin quite like Grady Foley. Phillip's fiercely protective of his children. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a hand in Grady's demise."

When Ross stopped all movement and looked up at him, the wheels nearly visible turning in his mind, Jeffrey knew he had him.

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The shrill ring of the alarm on her desk caused Eleni to jerk awake. She rubbed her eyes and sat up on the couch, yawning. After shuffling over to her Keurig machine, she popped in a coffee container into the holder and set it up to brew.

While she waited for the coffee to finish brewing, she checked for any new messages from her techs. A soil sample came back with high readings for material common to several different parts of the river, though the northern, outer boundary of Springfield was sandier than the southern portion closer to town that was heavier in clay. If she had to make a guess at the moment, Eleni would say that Grady Foley's body was transported down river by the winter thaw. If he had died in the winter though, the degree of decomposition wouldn't have been as severe. Unless the decomposition had occurred over several winter thaws, and that would add in the possibility of bears and other animals using the dead body as a convenient meal.

She shivered a little at the thought. "What a horrible way to go," she said to herself.

Eleni walked over to her microscope and removed the fiber she'd been examining before, placing it back in its holder. She looked through some of the other samples and decided to take a new approach. Unless she found something out of place soon, Grady Foley would be nothing more than an accidental death. Who's to say he didn't get stinking drunk and wander off into the woods to be eaten by a bear? With the scant evidence she had at the moment, it was as good of an explanation as any.

Hearing the hiss of her coffee pot as it finished brewing, she walked over and removed her mug before settling down again behind her microscope. With another yawn, she placed one of a handful of hair samples she'd recovered from the remains. Cross checking hair samples was easy enough now that she had some DNA to go on. She guessed within a couple of hours she'd be finished and would call it a night.

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Jeffrey reclined casually back in his seat as he waited for Ava to arrive. Planting the seed of Phillip's hatred of Grady Foley in Ross's mind had been almost too easy. The former mayor and congressman had been quick to latch onto the tidbit and for some reason that amused Jeffrey.

He was mindlessly scanning through some news headlines when he saw an alert pop up on his phone: *'Body found in river now classified as a murder. Suspects not named.'*

"Holy shit," Jeffrey mumbled.

"What's going on?" Ava asked curiously and her father glanced up at her as she approached the table.

He waved his phone in the air. "It seems Grady Foley was murdered."

Ava slumped down in her chair. After all these years, the man who had intended to kill her was dead. She couldn't help but feel a little pleased even if it was still a shock. "Wow...do they have any idea who did it?"

"Not yet, but Grady had enough enemies in this town, even you. I guess we shouldn't be too surprised." Jeffrey smirked and flagged the waiter to come over. Since both of them seemed to visit Towers often, looking at the menu was unnecessary so they quickly placed their orders.

Curiously, she wondered what her father thought of the potential suspects. "Excluding myself, of course, who do you think had the best motive for killing Grady?"

Jeffrey sipped at his beer and leaned back, smiling at his daughter. He thought it strange how they seemed to fluctuate between love and animosity. Then again, that was how their relationship was forged so many years ago when he was stupid and cruel with Olivia. Was it any surprise that he and Ava couldn't seem to find a happy medium as father and daughter?

He sighed and entertained her question, put the other thoughts out of his mind and simply tried to enjoy the moment with her. "Honey, we could be here all night with theories on who could have done it. However, I wouldn't be not surprised at all if it was Phillip. With the horrible things Grady did to Lizzie, who could blame him?" He smiled at the pretty woman that reminded him so much of her mother. "If anyone threatened you or hurt you, they'd have to deal with me and that wouldn't be pretty."

Ava smiled and looked down. "Thanks."

He shrugged. "A parent's love has no bounds. It just is." Pausing for a moment, he couldn't help the gleeful smile that crossed his face. He leaned across the table, speaking in a conspiratorial whisper, "Imagine though if it was Phillip who did it. Getting Phillip Spaulding convicted of murder would set my political career."

For a long moment Ava sat perfectly still simply looking at the man she shared DNA with before closing her eyes and dropping her head in a sigh. "You should have stopped talking while you were ahead."

Realizing a little too late what he had said and how it was taken, Jeffrey tried to backtrack, "Ava, honey."

The lanky brunette raised her hand and stood from her chair. "Don't. Just...don't. Okay? I need to go." She grabbed her purse and walked briskly from the restaurant before anyone saw the tears fall from her eyes.

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The weather set the pace for the busy weekend ahead as Olivia and Natalia prepared Emma and Francesca for the long holiday weekend with their fathers. Olivia, already drenched with sweat, walked back into the house after putting Sweet Pea's bag of toys and goodies in the car. She walked straight to the living room to stand in front of the floor fan she'd bought yesterday.

Natalia smirked as she descended the stairs with Francesca in her arms. "Hot much?" She put the little girl on her feet when they reached the bottom of the stairs so she could climb on the couch. Climbing was Francesca's new favorite thing to do and she climbed on literally everything and everyone she could.

Turning from the fan, Olivia sauntered over and wrapped her partner in her arms. "Hot for you," she husked out.

"Oh my God, Olivia! You're so sweaty!" Natalia giggled and playfully pushed the older woman away.

Olivia gave the brunette a saucy smile and leaned closer to Natalia's ear, whispering, "Tell me you don't want to lick every inch of me right now." She was pleased at the soft whimper that escaped Natalia's lips as she placed a soft kiss under the younger woman's ear.

"Olivia," Natalia sighed, but with a hint of warning that she better stop now.

Olivia pulled back and winked. "I know...later."

Taking a deep calming breath, Natalia called up to her other daughter, "Hey, Em, you ready?"

"Coming!"

Olivia had snuck off to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of water. "Don't forget your bathing suit, Bean! Your dad said the pool will be up and running."

"Got it!" Emma came out of her room with her backpack over her shoulder and descended the stairs with Shadow right at her heels.

Natalia scooped up Francesca, grabbed the bag of dog food for Shadow, and walked her girls out to the car. She hooked the little girl into her car seat and handed her a toy from her overnight bag. She gave the little one a kiss and then walked around to the other side. She waited on Emma to get Shadow settled beside her and then leaned over.

"Love you, Em. Have fun!" She gave the girl a kiss and stood up to close the door.

"Love you too, Ma. See you Monday."

She closed the door and turned to Olivia who was waiting by the driver's side door. Shrugging at Olivia, she gave her a kiss as well even though Olivia was only dropping the girls off and coming right back home. Natalia was glad to see Emma in such a good mood. She was almost like her old self again. A weekend with Phillip and Beth, and playing with Peyton, would do her a world of good.

"I'll pick up some veggies for the grill," Olivia said. "Anything else?"

"Nope, I got everything else yesterday. Blake texted earlier and said they were still coming tonight."

"Good. I have a feeling she and Doris need some quality time," Olivia commented and sighed. She worried for her friends and their relationship. Ross's return had thrown both of them for a loop and everything was still so uncertain.

"They're not the only ones." Natalia smiled.

Olivia leaned closer and smiled, giving her lover a slow, tender kiss. "Two words for you, my dear...all...weekend."

Natalia watched her partner get in the car and drive away. She waved and then turned to walk back in the house, practically skipping to the door.

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Doris wandered out through the back door, an extra martini in her hand, heavy on the olives. "How are those burgers coming along, Butchy McStuddly of the Grill?"

"Watch it, Wolfe, or I'll flick a hot charcoal on you," Olivia joked, threatening Doris with the spatula, before taking the proffered martini. "Thanks!"

"Ohhhhh, I'm so scared." Doris laughed.

Turning back to the grill, Olivia checked underneath one of the burgers and moved it away from the flame. "I say another five minutes and these will be perfect. Natalia doesn't let me indulge in bad food often so when I get a chance, I want to make it count."

Olivia looked over her shoulder, making sure that neither Natalia nor Blake were coming outside, before glancing at Doris. "So, um, have you heard anything from the governor about Rafe's troop?"

Doris knew the question was coming. She had been making calls for several weeks and urging the governor to call in his own favors with his military contacts. The weeks had been dragging on with no word from Rafe, and Olivia was worried and anxious. Perhaps even more so than Natalia, or at least that's the way it seemed to Doris.

"All the governor can find out is that Rafe's troop was deployed on a mission that was very secretive, but that's as far as he got." Doris shrugged and shook her head. "I'm sorry. Believe me, I want to know too. Ashlee's been driving me crazy with the texts and calls."

Looking up to the sky as if she'd get some answer from the heavens, Olivia shook her head and sighed. "I'm really worried, Doris."

"Natalia seems to be holding up better," Doris said, hoping it would make Olivia feel a little better.

"So it seems," she conceded and began taking the burgers off the grill. Olivia changed the topic, not wanting to think too much about Rafe at the moment when he was halfway around the world and nothing could be done about it. "How are things with Blake and the Ross situation?"

A smile returned to Doris's face as she thought about what had happened a few days ago. "The other day she came over and she was hot over him."

"With the way you say that and the smile on your face, I take it to mean 'hot' as in a totally non-sexy way," Olivia said as she closed the grill lid and turned to her friend.

Doris's eyes got big. "Definitely non-sexy. It seems they had words over the incident with the boys and Emma." She hesitated, not sure if she should say the rest of what Blake had told her. Olivia's green eyes took on a cold look and it appeared to Doris that her friend was bracing for something.

"Let me guess, it was all Emma's fault," Olivia deadpanned.

"Uhhhh," she was speechless at Olivia's accurate observation. "How did you...?"

Olivia tilted her head. "Don't you know? It's always the girl's fault."

"Or the result of poor parenting," Doris added and waited for the fallout from her friend.

"Oh really?" Olivia's voice rose and she set the plate of food down before she threw it. She touched her forehead where she knew the vein there was beginning to pulse.

Doris put a hand on Olivia's shoulder. "Calm down, Olivia. He was directing that at Blake when he said it. Mostly."

Olivia felt her anger at the surface, barely contained. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she let it out. "Ross Marler better hope he doesn't run into me anytime soon. If I had known the other day what he had said, I'd have put him next to Grady Foley in that river."

"But you won't," Doris clarified as encouragement. "Because Ross is Dinah's father, and she's your friend, so..."

Olivia threw up her hands. "You're right! Damn it, you're right. Wait a minute, when did you become a good influence on me? That's Natalia's job. Old me would have been over there by now kicking his ass, but oh no, I have to be good!"

Doris picked up the plate Olivia had discarded. "Yes you do. For your family."

Olivia harrumphed. "When did Ross become such an asshole? I thought my days of dealing with asshole men were over."

Laughing, Doris began to walk back into the house but said over her shoulder, "Just because you're a lesbian doesn't mean you don't deal with them. It just means you don't sleep with them."

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A low, contented moan was the first sound Olivia made as she stirred and felt warm, soft skin against her own and gentle curves under her hands. She couldn't resist running a hand over a rounded hip. Hearing an answering sigh from her partner stirred her body to life and hips rolled forward into her lover's beautiful, naked ass.

Memories of last night played in her mind drawing out another deep moan as her lips found Natalia's shoulder and she placed slow, lingering kisses across the younger woman's shoulder and back.

"Good morning!" The brunette in her arms was fully awake now and reached back to grab Olivia's hip and pull her closer. "What a wonderful way to wake up."

Olivia scooted back and rolled Natalia over, kissing her deeply. "I'm not done yet," she said as she broke the kiss before diving back in for more. She could never get enough of Natalia.

Last night, they had made love slowly, grateful to have the opportunity to savor the feel of each other without anyone in the house. Having the kids nearby always made them hold back a little for fear of making too much noise, but last night, Olivia had heard screams coming from Natalia that were guttural and raw. More than once, the brunette had demanded that Olivia "fuck" her, and she did...gladly and repeatedly.

She felt Natalia smile into the kiss. "Querida, I'm not so sure I can even walk this morning much less do anything else."

Olivia stopped and looked down at her naked lover. She tried to keep a serious face but found it nearly impossible as Natalia smiled up at her. "What part of 'all weekend' didn't you hear? Honey, I am going to have you begging for mercy, but before you do that, you're going to beg for more." She rolled her hips into the younger woman, making Natalia gasp, then proceeded to kiss her again.



As she trailed kisses down Natalia's neck and chest, she became lost in the feel and taste of her partner. She was so lost that she didn't hear the pounding on the front door.

"Olivia," Natalia said, tapping her on the shoulder to make her stop.

Sitting up, Olivia finally heard the banging. "Shit! Worst. Timing. Ever."

Both women climbed out of bed and slipped on their robes hurriedly as the knocking increased. They nearly ran down the stairs and before they could get there, they heard Doris on the other side starting to yell, "Goddamn it, you two! I know you're in there!"

Olivia flung the door open. "Doris, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Doris was frantic, out of breath, and dressed uncharacteristically casual in tennis shoes, shorts, and a threadbare t-shirt. "Get dressed. Now! We have to get to Phillip's!"

Their first thought was that Emma was hurt. Natalia gasped in fear as Olivia lunged forward grabbing Doris's arm. "What is it? Is it Emma? Is she hurt?"

Doris shook her head, wincing at the force of Olivia's grip. "No, she's not hurt, but she is freaking out."

"Why?" Olivia and Natalia said at nearly the same time.

"Phillip's being arrested for Grady Foley's murder."

Olivia looked at Natalia with fear written all over her face. This was the last thing any of them needed, especially Emma. A long moment of shocked silence passed between the three women. Finally, Doris nudged Olivia. "Go, get dressed. I'll drive. The car's running."

In shock, Olivia looked at Natalia who turned her toward the stairs. "Come on."

Upstairs in the bedroom, Natalia pulled out some clothes for Olivia as the older woman stood silent in the middle of the room. "Here," she handed the clothes to her partner and began to get dressed herself.

"Shit," Olivia mumbled suddenly. Then, "Shit!" She added more forcefully.

Natalia looked up at the expletives and she saw Olivia pushing her hair back with one hand and gripping the strands tightly. She was about to say something to get the older woman moving, but Olivia snapped out of it and began to get dressed at record speed.

The drive out to the mansion was mostly quiet except for Natalia asking about how Doris found out. "Beth called, of course. Phillip's going to need representation and she obviously can't do it."

"But you're handling the Howard case," Natalia observed. "Both are so high profile."

"Mel could take it, I guess," Doris shrugged.

Olivia chuckled and commented, "Cyrus won't like that too much. Besides, Phillip has some of the best lawyers in the state on retainer. He'll be fine."

"He fired all of them," Doris said, tapping nervously at her steering wheel as she took a left at the traffic light. "Beth said he did it because all of the lawyers were beholden to Alan and he wanted to be free of that."

"Fabulous," Olivia said without humor.

As Doris pulled the car up the long driveway to the Spaulding Mansion, the gates were open and the guards were gone. Further in, they were greeted by four police cruisers. "Overkill much?" Doris grumbled as she parked and got out, heading directly for the house.

Olivia and Natalia got out as well and immediately started scanning the unfamiliar faces for Emma.

"Mom! Ma!" They spun at the familiar voice and saw Emma running out of the front door of the mansion with Shadow close behind and Beth trailing them. At that moment, Olivia didn't give a damn that she was a heart transplant patient. She scooped up her little girl and held her close. She took comfort in the familiarity of her and the feel of Natalia wrapping her own arms around them both in protection.

"Are you okay, baby?" Natalia asked Emma as she pulled back and stroked the girl's hair.

At first Emma nodded then she shrugged. "I guess. What's going on? Why is Daddy being arrested?"

Olivia put Emma back down on her feet and looked up at Beth questioningly. The blonde shrugged. "I didn't know how much I should tell her."

"Did Daddy do something bad? Is he going to jail?" She looked between the three women that she trusted the most. She wanted the truth. She wasn't a kid anymore and she could take it. "He is, isn't he?"

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose then looked down at her daughter. "I don't know, baby. The police seem to think he did something wrong and that he hurt someone." She bit the bullet and jumped right to the heart of the matter. "If they can prove it, he could go to jail. It's possible."

The young girl's eyes glistened with tears and her face reddened as she fought the need to cry. She said resolutely, "Daddy's not a bad man. He loves us."

"You're right," Natalia confirmed. "He does love us, especially you, Emma. If, and that's a big if, he did hurt someone, then I'm sure there was a good reason for it. All we can do is wait to see what happens and stand by him, be strong for him."

Olivia took Natalia's hand and squeezed it, thankful to have a partner that always looked for the good in every situation. Natalia handled difficulty the complete opposite of her, with grace and strength, and that was exactly what Emma needed right now.

Beth leaned over and spoke quietly to Olivia, "He convinced the police to wait to handcuff him and take him away until Emma was gone. He didn't want her to see that."

Nodding, Olivia gave Natalia a look to convey that she needed to follow her lead. "Doris brought us over. If you can get her, we can get out of here."

"I'll do you one better. I'll get the driver to bring the car around and take you home," Beth said and turned to walk away.

"No! I'm not leaving!" Emma yelled. She knew they'd try to do this.

"Emma," Olivia said with a warning tone.

The girl spun around to face her mother. "I'm not a baby anymore, Mom. I'm staying here. I can handle it."

Caught off guard by Emma's tone, Olivia lashed out sarcastically. "Oh, yeah, like you handle your problems so well by skipping school, running around with boys, and smoking, right? You're a child and I'm your mother, Emma. You do as I say!"

Fresh tears sprang to Emma's eyes. Pain laced her voice as she spoke quietly, "But not as you do. Right, Mom? Are you afraid that I'm going to use a bottle to kill my pain?" Emma swallowed at the look of heartbreak her words caused her mother but she had to say this, "I know you've been hurt by a lot of people – Ma, Dad...Jeffrey. But have some faith in me. I'm not a baby anymore."

Olivia was shocked to hear Jeffrey's name mentioned. How could Emma possibly know about Jeffrey and her? She looked at Natalia who was crying too.

"I'll take her in to say goodbye to Phillip," Beth said as the two women stood silently and watched.

"Natalia?" Olivia reached for her partner and felt herself enveloped in protective arms.

"I've got you. Just hold on until we get home, okay?" Natalia whispered in her ear, feeling the weak nod against her shoulder.

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Blake paced in her living room as she waited for Doris to call her. Instead of going back to either of their places where temptation was waiting for them to succumb to the antsy feelings that time and distance had caused, they decided to hang out in an all-night diner near the outskirts of town simply drinking coffee and talking. An early morning call from Anna had interrupted them and the news that Eleni had found, not just one but three, hair strands of Phillip Spaulding on Grady Foley's remains had set Doris into motion and straight over to see Olivia and Natalia.

When the door bell of her townhouse rang, Blake was taken back by who she saw there. "Ross! What are you doing here?" Kevin, Jason, and Clarissa barreled past before he could answer. The boys went straight to the kitchen in search of food while Clarissa ran upstairs.

Blake turned back to Ross who was standing there with a smirk and his hands stuffed in his pockets. "Can I come in?"

Feeling a bit overwhelmed, she waved her hand. "Sure, I guess." She watched him walk into the living room and casually made himself at home. Sighing, she decided she didn't feel like fighting him right now. "I made some coffee. Do you want some?"

"That would be wonderful!" He smiled up at her.

She walked into the kitchen and poured two cups of coffee. The boys were making a king sized mess with their Pop Tarts and juice. They started to leave the kitchen and head upstairs when Blake stopped them. "Hold up, you two. Put the top on the juice and put it back in the fridge."

Kevin sulked but he did as he was told. Then he followed his brother out of the room. Sighing, she stirred the sugar into the coffee mugs and took them into Ross, handing one off to him.

He accepted the mug and leaned back in his seat, sipping the coffee and sighing contentedly. "I guess you heard the good news. Phillip's been arrested for that guy's murder."

She set her mug down on the table next to her chair, not really in the mood for it, and nodded. "Yes, I heard. Whether it's good or not is a matter of perspective."

Ross shrugged. "Murder is murder. There's no middle ground here."

Blake rubbed at her tired eyes. "Except that Phillip is the father of my best friend's daughter."

"You forget so soon that Phillip was the one that had my plane sabotaged?" He asked then leaned forward and set his mug down on the table in front of him. "I understand this puts you in a tough situation, Blake, but Phillip did something wrong, more than once, and he should pay. I just wish I had been the one to find the smoking gun on him. Not that I didn't try."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Excuse me?"

Ross shrugged. "What can I say? None of us are innocent, are we?" He hesitated but eventually continued, "I...I kind of snuck around the mansion, looking for something. Anything, really, to take Phillip down."

Standing, Blake began to put some pieces together and she walked to the other side of the room. "Last night, Olivia was talking about Phillip hearing some strange noises around the mansion the last few weeks. That was you."

He shook his head, a slight smile still gracing his face. If Blake didn't know better, she'd think he was pleased with himself. "Awww, come on, Blake. Don't look at me like that. It's not like you haven't done some unsavory things too, as long as the ends justify the means."

"Those days are long gone for me, Ross. I wish they were for you, too." Blake walked across the room and sat down on the couch next to the man she had loved so desperately at one time. "Let it go, Ross. For yourself because this vindictiveness...it's not you. That's not the Ross I knew, that I loved. If you can't do it for yourself though, do it for our boys. Kevin and Jason need you. They need their father, the real one, not this cold-hearted one you're pretending to be. And if you had any hope of ever mending things with me, you'll get back in touch with the Ross you used to be because the one I see sitting here now, I don't like."

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Natalia stood in the doorway to Emma's bedroom watching her sleep. The little girl kicked restlessly in her sleep causing Shadow to jump down off the bed and settle on the rug next to her instead. Dinner had been a quiet affair. Emma had disappeared to her room to read, and Olivia had said she needed to take a walk after helping clean the dishes.

Closing her eyes, Natalia said a quiet prayer for her family. "Please watch over them," she whispered quietly into the darkness.

Pulling the door almost closed, Natalia turned from Emma's room and descended the stairs. She walked out onto the porch and gazed at the stars twinkling in the clear sky. In spite of the oppressive heat of the day, the night was cool and comfortable.

A familiar creaking sound drew her attention to the barn and backlit by the nearly full moon was the outline of her lover disappearing into the darkness of the barn. Much like the moon in the sky and the tides that it affects, Natalia couldn't resist going to the woman that was her world. Going back inside the house, Natalia took the house keys from the hook and locked the front door. Comforted that Emma was safe inside, she moved down the steps and quickly across the field.

As she drew closer, the smell of old hay and damp wood assaulted her senses, but the hair on her arms tingled as well as she moved into the darkness and could already feel Olivia's presence.

When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, helped by the light of the moon streaming through a hole in the roof, Natalia inched closer to the shadows Olivia was tucked behind.

The intoxicating scent and warmth of the older woman's body was the first sign she was close by. Reaching out a hand hesitantly, Natalia's fingers brushed over the warm skin of Olivia's arm. Stepping closer, she trailed her hand up to a muscular shoulder, soft hair rolling over the tops of her fingers as the hand moved closer to the center and then traced down a strong back.

The desire to touch, comfort, was too strong for Natalia. Moving within inches of Olivia, she allowed her hands to trace the curves of Olivia's shoulders, enjoying the shiver as her fingers teased along the hourglass curve of the other woman's waist to rest at her hips. She drew in even closer, burying her nose in the heavenly scent of Olivia's skin and hair as her hands pulled their hips together.

Olivia sighed at the contact and dropped her head back to Natalia's shoulder. The brunette read the movement of her lover's body and the soft sounds as the first stirrings of arousal. Natalia knew Olivia's cues better than she knew herself. Their love was an unspoken language reminiscent of how it had grown between them over that first year – slow, steady, and silent. No words were needed. They never had been. When Olivia's hands settled over her own, it wasn't a sign to stop. This Natalia knew.

Reaching around with one hand, Natalia easily unsnapped the button of Olivia's shorts. She untucked the t-shirt and traced the muscles of Olivia's stomach with her hand, feeling the rise and fall of Olivia's breathing pick up speed the more confident her touch became. She gently nudged Olivia forward with her left hand and slipped her hand under her shirt to unfasten Olivia's bra. Any thought of control on Natalia's part vanished into the cool night air when Olivia rolled her hips wantonly back into her. She yanked the shirt and bra over Olivia's head and tossed it aside before latching fiercely onto Olivia's large breasts, her fingers squeezing and rolling the taut nipples until Olivia hissed from the pain and the pleasure. Natalia loved the way Olivia made her feel alive and powerful, the way the passionate woman gave up control to her, allowed her access to a part of Olivia no one else got to see. It was a heady addiction as powerful as any drug, and Natalia was helplessly addicted to loving Olivia. She came so close to losing all of this – this passion, this family,

this raw feeling of desire and hope. Natalia felt the desperate need to give that back to Olivia, to take away the fear of the day, of the past few weeks and months, hell...over Olivia's entire damn life. One thing Natalia knew with absolute certainty was that their days on this earth were numbered. Tomorrow, all could be gone. Love, in all of its wonder and beauty, could only be guaranteed in the here and now because tomorrow everything could change. Aside from the assuredness of their love, the only constant Natalia was certain of was change. It was all the more reason to love Olivia as completely as possible...right...now.

Moving one hand away from Olivia's breast, Natalia dipped it under the waistband of her panties. The evidence of Olivia's desire and love greeted her fingers. It was heaven on earth. "Na...Natalia," Olivia gasped as her knees began to buckle. She reached down and held the younger woman where she needed her most. "Please."

Natalia pulled her in close, wrapping her arm around Olivia's waist to steady her. "I've got you."

Olivia whimpered as Natalia's fingers teased at her opening. "I can't stand...up."

Natalia eased her lover down to her knees where she could be steadier. The position had opened Olivia's legs wider and Natalia took advantage of it, dipping inside. Overwhelmed, Natalia dropped her head to rest between Olivia's shoulder blades. She closed her eyes and allowed herself the simple joy of feeling Olivia, wrapping herself tightly around her. She didn't think she'd ever get used to the awe and wonder she felt when she was inside her lover; there were no words to adequately describe the emotion.

Time seemed to stand still and the only perceptible movement was the synchronized thrusts and arcs of their bodies moving together as one.

A sudden tightening around her fingers was followed by a gasp from Olivia, her voice strangled and raw, as her body shook, "I love you. Oh, God, I love you, Natalia."

Wetness coated Natalia's fingers and hand, even up to her wrist. Olivia turned in her arms enough to reach up and pull her down for a kiss. Natalia was turned on so much it was painful and it didn't help imagining the playful dance of Olivia's tongue on another part of her body.

Olivia pulled back and stared into her eyes. Natalia was lost in the dark green depths and her hand began to move again.



"We're not done?" Olivia asked, sounding amused and aroused all over again.

Natalia could only shake her head in response, and Olivia stopped her hand from moving. Standing, she removed her shorts and panties and kicked them to the side. Taking Natalia's hand, she brought her to her feet. She kissed the brunette tenderly on the lips and kissed her way down Natalia's neck and over to her ear.

"Take your clothes off," she whispered.

Olivia stopped her pleasant assault on Natalia's neck to look down the younger woman's body as Natalia unbuttoned her shirt and pants, quickly stripping naked. She brushed the backs of her fingers between full, tan breasts and down to the patch of hair between Natalia's legs.

With a contented sigh, she let her fingers play in the damp curls. Looking up into Natalia's dark, sultry eyes, she confessed the truth that she could never say enough, "My darling, you...you are absolutely the most beautiful creature God ever created."

Natalia raised a shaky hand and traced Olivia's lips with her fingers. "Are you saying you believe in God?"

"I'm saying that you make me believe in Him with the way you love me." Wrapping Natalia in her arms, she kissed her with adoration and wonder. Pulling back, she raised a finger. "Don't move."

Natalia watched in confusion as Olivia gathered their clothes then stretched them out on the hay-covered floor. She then got down on her knees and motioned Natalia over with a curl of her finger. "Come here."

When Natalia was close enough, Olivia ran her hands up along the outside of Natalia's thighs to her hips. Natalia wasn't sure what Olivia was up to but she wasn't about to stop her.

Olivia ran her hands over Natalia's stomach, allowing her thumbs to stretch downward until they dipped between her legs. Pulling her thumbs back, she opened Natalia to her and she smiled as she leaned forward, tasting the sweet honey of her arousal.

Letting out a sharp gasp, Natalia tangled her fingers in Olivia's soft hair holding her close. "Jesus, Olivia!"

Olivia teased the younger woman with her tongue a little while longer before leaning back. Using her grip on Natalia's hips, she moved her over to the clothes. Laying back, she stretched out and took Natalia's hand. "Join me?"

Dropping to her knees, Natalia hovered over Olivia before leaning down to kiss her with abandon. Her hand slid up Olivia's thigh, her destination already in mind, when Olivia stopped her. "No."

Natalia furrowed her brows confused. "Olivia, if you don't want to..."

Olivia put a finger to her lover's lips, stopping the words from continuing. "That's not it. I want you. I want to taste you." She tugged at Natalia's hip. "Turn around."

Realizing what Olivia wanted made Natalia flood with new arousal. She loved making love to Olivia in so many different ways, but this had to be one of her favorites. She took Olivia's hand in her own and pressed it to her lips. "Olivia," she whispered.

Olivia bit her lip. "We can go inside if you'd be more comfortable there."

Natalia quickly shook her head. "No...no, I want you too. Right now, right here."

Under any other circumstances and with anyone else, Natalia never would have considered making love practically in the open, but there was something about Olivia, perhaps that dangerous and reckless part of her, that knocked down all of Natalia's inhibitions. It was only with Olivia that she felt safe enough to take risks and skirt the edges of danger because she knew Olivia would keep her safe and make it okay. Loving her in whatever form it took was somehow always okay.

With a slightly nervous quiver, Natalia turned around on her knees and allowed Olivia to guide her backwards by her hips. Moving an arm to the other side of Olivia's waist, she hovered over her hips, a wave of desire rolling over her as Olivia raised and then opened her legs in offering. She could feel Olivia carefully lift her leg and scoot over underneath her.

Even though she knew it was coming because she could feel Olivia tugging on her hips, pulling her down, the air was still sucked from her lungs at the first touch of Olivia's mouth.

"Oh, God!" Natalia's eyes slammed shut as Olivia's amazing tongue caressed her so intimately. She could feel, more than hear, the low growl in Olivia's chest.

"Dear God, Natalia, you taste amazing." Then Olivia's mouth went back to work.

Natalia was losing herself in the incredible sensation when Olivia's hands slid up her sides and one hand gently pushed her head down. Smiling at her own abandon, Natalia used one of her hands to spread Olivia open. It was like an out of body experience as she watched her fingers disappear inside Olivia. She pushed in as far as she could go and then pulled out, raising her fingers and looking at the glistening arousal. Her eyes fluttered shut as she took the fingers in her mouth.

"Mmmmmm, Olivia." She wanted more. Without hesitation, she entered her again and then hissed in welcome as she felt herself filled with Olivia's fingers. "Oh, God, yes!" She pushed back against the wonderful feel of Olivia's fingers stretching her. Olivia was matching her movements. The faster and harder she pumped into Olivia, the faster and harder she was filled by Olivia. She was close. Oh, so close, but she didn't want it to end. Not yet. She pulled out her fingers and began to use her tongue, tilting Olivia's hips into a more open position. She groaned as she felt Olivia's tongue plunge deep inside.

Neither of them wanted to stop. The sweet metallic taste was addictive but the ache and need became too much. Eventually, Olivia reached up and began to move in fast, light circles over Natalia's clit while her tongue stayed buried. As much as she wanted to give Natalia an amazing orgasm, she wanted to taste the woman she loved as she came.

Natalia panted as she felt her orgasm beginning deep inside, building in her. She did her best to keep her mouth on Olivia, but she was quickly losing control, the waves of pleasure about to overtake her. She wanted Olivia to come with her so she used her fingers to massage the other woman's clit. As she felt Olivia's clit stiffen, her orgasm hit her with violent force and she let out a primal scream. She was pretty sure she'd never been that loud before. Olivia hadn't orgasmed but she was so close, panting and digging her heels into the clothes beneath her. Leaning forward, Natalia plunged her tongue inside Olivia and almost instantly, Olivia screamed and dug her nails into Natalia's lower back.

Both of them collapsed in an exhausted heap, and they didn't care how undignified their positions may have seemed. They caressed and kissed tired and quivering thighs, teasing and kissing swollen lips. Olivia rolled Natalia over and ran her tongue through her swollen folds, not to tease or arouse, but in simple adoration. Natalia asked if she could do the same

to Olivia and they took turns casually touching and tasting each other, fingers dipping inside for more but not lingering.

When both women were satisfied, they curled up on the clothes. Natalia ran her fingers over Olivia's stomach, making various designs of no meaning but finally, she did a little something that she remembered kids doing in school, except it was usually the palm of your hand or across your back. She wrote out: I love you.

Olivia's eyebrows crinkled, realizing that Natalia was doing something purposeful but she couldn't tell what it was exactly. When she did recognize the words, she smiled and reached up for the beautiful woman she was blessed in this life to love. "I love you too."

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#### **Act IV**

Mel climbed out of bed in frustration. She looked back at the angry and sullen expression on Cyrus's face. He was propped up against the head board of the bed with his arms crossed over his broad chest. Turning back around, she closed her eyes for a moment before pulling a drawer open and rifling through for some underwear.

For some reason, Mel felt compelled to take on Phillip's defence. She couldn't really explain why, but Cyrus was furious about it.

He threw the covers off and searched for his pants. He didn't like the feeling of vulnerability being naked in bed gave him considering the circumstances. It didn't help that they had made love before Mel bothered to tell him.

Finding his shirt, he slipped it on, not bothering to button it. Walking over to her, he leaned over to look her in the eyes. "How can you really expect me not to be mad? Grady was my brother and you're defending the man that killed him."

She sighed and looked up at Cyrus. "Allegedly killed him. We don't know the facts or what transpired. It could have just been a horrible accident. Phillip may not have even been there when it happened. It's not like Grady was squeaky clean, honey. He had a lot of enemies."

Cyrus slammed his fist on the dresser in frustration. "That doesn't change the fact that he was my brother, and I loved him," he yelled as his voice shook with emotion. He fought back the tears, trying to maintain a small piece of dignity. "I can't stay here. Not right now."

"Cyrus!" Mel called out pleadingly as he bolted for the door. "Please," she begged him to understand.

He stopped in the doorway and looked back at her. "I need some time." He bit his lip to get control before finally saying, "I love you," and closing the door behind him.

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Natalia finished cutting up the chicken breast into small bite-sized pieces then handed the small plate of food to Francesca. The toddler was beginning to feed herself but the control wasn't there yet, so she made sure to give her daughter pieces she could grasp but not make a huge mess with either. The smile she gave her little girl was cut short as Olivia stormed into the kitchen and put the phone back on the hook.

"I can't believe this!" Olivia fussed. "Michael Thorne has the nerve to want to ask me questions about Phillip's whereabouts the day Grady disappeared. As if I was in my right mind back then! Hell, I wanted Phillip dead myself at that point, if you remember. On top of that, Chief Thorne has the unmitigated gall to also be dating my daughter."

Natalia looked up shocked. "Wait a minute, I thought he was dating Leyla."

Olivia nodded her head frantically and had that wild-eyed look. "Oh yeah, apparently he's dating both."

"Ohhhkay!" Natalia shook her head in confusion. Just another day in Springfield! "The guy's just doing his job. If it was Frank asking the questions or even Remy, you'd be mad at them too."

Olivia crossed her arms and shifted from one foot to another. Her partner had a good point. "Well, I still don't trust him."

The brunette stood up and walked over to Olivia. She cupped her face in her hands and kissed her sweetly. "I know, darling. I can't say I'm terribly happy about Jeffrey wanting to prosecute Phillip either."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "I know! Ava told me. She's pretty upset about it, too." She sighed and opened the fridge. Finding a bottle of water, she took it out, twisted the top off, and took a

healthy swallow. "Is it just me or does it seem like our family, and those connected to us, never get a break?"

Francesca spilled her milk and began to fuss. Olivia snatched up a paper towel and cleaned up the mess from the table and her daughter. She kissed the top of the child's dark head. "It's okay, baby. No harm done."

The little girl giggled and reached up for Olivia. "Mama. Pick up." Olivia couldn't resist the dimpled smile Francesca gave her. Lifting the girl in her arms, she pushed up the girl's t-shirt and gave the little one a raspberry on her belly, making her giggle even harder.

"I think we should get away for a while," Natalia said out of the blue as she watched her partner interact with their baby. She shrugged. "I mean, Springfield is kind of nuts. Maybe a break would do us all some good."

Olivia tilted her head. "Do you mean like a vacation or like moving?"

Natalia shrugged again. "I don't know really. It was just a thought."

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Jeffrey O'Neill better be glad he was on the other side of the prison bars because if Phillip had his way, he could be brought up on a whole new set of murder charges. He had never really liked the man and after what he'd heard about Jeffrey raping Olivia when they were kids, he had even less use for the man now.

Phillip paced his cell as Jeffrey smugly antagonized him with pieces of knowledge and information on Grady's death. To his credit, Phillip was smart enough and had seen Alan in sticky enough situations to know when to shut up and when to talk. This was a shut up moment if there ever was one.

"The facts are the facts, Phillip. We have more than enough evidence to put you away for a long time. You'd be smart to accept a plea, but if you don't, it's no skin off my back. I would enjoy nothing more than giving you life in prison for murder," Jeffrey said with a smirk.

Phillip walked over to the bars that separated him from Jeffrey and looked into the dark, empty eyes. "How do you sleep at night, O'Neill?"

"Very well, actually."

"Even after all the horrible things you've done, the sins you've committed? Who are you to point fingers at anyone?" Phillip countered and he was pleased to see Jeffrey look away. Maybe there was a piece of humanity left in the man...maybe.

Jeffrey seemed to pull himself together and looked at Phillip confidently as he adjusted his tie. "I have no idea what you mean. I've always been on the side of the good guys, doing what's right."

"Always? Really?" Phillip, like the shark he was raised by, could smell the blood in the water. Even though he was deliberately living his life better and more honestly, there was a thrill in playing the game. "Even when you were a mere teen at diplomatic functions having a little too much to drink and having some...indiscretions that needed to be covered up? Even then, Jeffrey?"

Jeffrey swallowed at the mention of the incident, something he was still ashamed of and wondered if he'd ever get out alive. "Think about what I said, Phillip."

Phillip leaned forward, his face close to the bars. "And you think about what move you should make. Think long and hard, okay? I'd hate for you to make a mistake that could cost you everything."

Phillip glared in amusement and pleasure as Jeffrey O'Neill quickly left.

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*The darkness weighed in on him from the edges of his psyche. Everywhere he turned, everywhere he looked there were wires and tubes and machines beeping. Panic set in. He shouldn't be here. He should be home. He should be in college, dating, and maybe planning a wedding. This wasn't supposed to happen.*

*"Doctor! He's awake!" A nurse called from the other side of the room.*

*A bright light was flashed in his eyes and it made him jerk back. "What is your name, son? How many fingers am I holding up? Do you feel this? Try to move your toes."*

*The commands and questions came faster than he could respond and he wanted to scream. He tried to scream but he couldn't. Tears coursed down his face as he felt the weight of his body, a body that couldn't move.*

*He shook and jerked his head back and forth but it was all that would move.*

*"Sedate him," the doctor commanded.*

*"No! No! No!" But his mouth didn't move.*

*"No!" A needle was jammed into his arm. "Noooooooooooo!!!!!"*

He jerked awake, a dim light from the street casting a soft glow across the bed. Panting, he heard his own heartbeat pounding in his chest.

It was just a dream. Just another dream.

He fell back to the bed, the chill of his damp sheets a minor annoyance. His hand reached up and came to rest on the dog tags against his chest and the small coin he always kept close to his heart.

He sobbed, the tears flowing down his face, and he said the only word that mattered, "Ma."

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## **Episode 7: The Past Is Ever Present**



### **Act I**

Wind, sand, and gravel combined to whirl around his head. It was deafening, a roar so loud as if an avalanche had taken up permanent residence between his ears. Grains of sand were imbedded in every orifice of his body. Not just any sand; toxic sand, according to rumors that circulated throughout his unit. This sand, rumor had it, was rich in high levels of



neurotoxin agents when ingested; as if he and his fellow soldiers had a choice not to swallow this wretched poison.

Loud voices bellowed orders assaulting him. The recurring nightmares were driving him over the edge.

Only one thing would stop all the noise. He groped for the tubes controlling the drug. He knew which tube it was; he wasn't stupid. The nurse had talked her way through the hookup so he knew. More drugs meant no nightmares.

"It was my shift last night. He was so agitated. Dude almost lost his mind," the young nursing assistant said in hushed tones to the on-duty physician. "They gave him a shot to put him out."

"He is not a dude. He is a soldier." Dr. Yamato gave the young man a steely glare. "And, it's not a shot, it's a sedative to calm him down. Aren't you still on probation? You need to learn some protocol here young man, if you're going to make it at the VA." Dr. Yamato roughly handed him the chart.

Chastised, the young man did not argue. He really needed this job. "Yes sir, I'll try."

He was tired of this patient who was bull-headed and uncooperative. He squinted at the name again. Rivera. Must be something in the genes he mused. He himself was a Rivera and as stubborn as they came. Most of the men in the Rivera family were stubborn, one just had to look at his grandfather.

"PFC Rivera." He squinted again at the chart, making sure he had the right patient; he needed to take some vitals.

Rafe abruptly opened his eyes to see a young man, not much older than he was standing by his bedside.

"I need to draw some blood," the nurse sighed.

Rafe closed his eyes again, willing himself to be left alone. "Go away."

"My job is to draw blood. And I'm going to get it whether you like it or not," the nurse gritted out between clean white teeth.

Now wide-awake, Rafe tried to buck and launch himself at this insistent pain in the ass.

"You're strapped down, big man."

Rafe took his chuckling nemesis in. Black wavy hair framed an olive skin face and shadowy peach fuzz covered his upper lip and chin. Like Rafe, he was a failure at trying to grow a moustache. Dark eyes were hidden by black-framed glasses.

The young man pulled on the tourniquet and gave Rafe a rolled up paper to squeeze.

"You could be gentler," Rafe complained. Rafe caught a glimpse of his name badge: Rivera. "You're a Rivera?" Rafe attempted to sit up.

"Uh huh, lay still I'm almost finished." He labeled his last vial and removed the tourniquet. "Here's some juice."

Exhausted, Rafe took the juice and drank it quickly. Closing his eyes, he quickly drifted back off to sleep.

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Olivia pushed the Caesar salad around her plate, knocking a few croutons onto the table. "I'm so over salad." A low sigh emphasized her disgust before she took a sip of her iced tea. "I hate Towers iced tea. Tastes like colored dish water." She continued her rant. "*Salad is good for you. It's nutritious. Good for your heart.* Blah, blah, blah." Her mock indignation made Doris laugh. Olivia stared her down.

"Shall I assume those are the words of your better half?" Doris continued to dress her hamburger with mayonnaise, pickles, relish, tomato, and cheese piled onto the double-patty.

"So not good for you, Wolfe."

Olivia watched impassively as Doris popped the top of the bun on and proceeded to take a big bite. She rolled her eyes to heaven. "This burger isn't as good as the one you burned for me the other day. No burger for you? Guess the little woman has you on a short leash, Spencer."

"You're a witch, Wolfe," Olivia growled and jokingly went to stab her hand.

"Tell me what's really wrong, Olivia." Doris downplayed the next big bite. "Salad is not the issue."

Olivia put down her fork and leaned in over the table. "It's Emma."

As Doris was running a French fry through a stream of ketchup, Olivia reached across the table and speared two French fries.

"Ketchup?" Doris asked with her mouth full.

"No ketchup. I'm on a diet and besides I'm sure it's bad for my heart."

They chomped away in silence.

"Is it about what happened at Phillip's the other night?" Doris waited for Olivia to spill, but her patience was running low. "I was busy playing the mayor while you were rounding up Emma, but I did hear some loud voices. Guess that was you?"

"Yeah." Olivia put down her fork and clasped her hands. Her thoughts whirled around her head trying to organize her thoughts about Emma's hurtful remarks. Staring at something over Doris's shoulder, Olivia took a deep breath before continuing. "Anna mentioned something to me the other day. She said that when she and Emma had their lesson the other day, she and Emma had a long talk. Emma said she knew." Olivia paused, regret and sadness evident in her expression but when she looked over and saw Doris's confusion, she added, "She knew about Jeffrey."

"Oh my God! How did she find out?" Doris set the coke down she'd been sipping. Olivia's words seemed to wash over the shocked woman, leaving a heavy feeling of sadness.

Olivia held up her hand. "I'm not sure if she knows Jeffrey..." She swallowed hard. The word was still very painful to say. "I have no idea. Perhaps she had overheard me talking to Ava, or...honestly, I have no idea. It's not something Natalia and I talk about while sitting on the couch eating cookies."

Doris was losing her appetite. She gazed across the table. What she saw tugged at her heart. She had known Olivia to be a strong, take no prisoners kind of woman; instead what she saw was a vulnerable, scared woman feeling overwhelmed about the changes in the family.

Doris reached over and squeezed her hand, her blue eyes filled with tenderness.

Olivia shrugged and proceeded to laundry-list all that transpired over the past few months. Doris had heard it before, but listened politely realizing that Olivia needed to vent.

Olivia tapped over her heart, tears welling up in her eyes. It had become a habit, but she went there when she felt overwhelmed. "I've tried so hard to protect Emma from pain and loss. She lived through Natalia's leaving. She knows little about my relationship with Phillip, except that I didn't trust him for a long time." Olivia refilled her ice tea glass with disdain. "But, Jeffrey." Olivia continued, running her hands through her hair, trying to pull herself together. "She knows Jeffrey is Ava's father and she knows that he hurt me."

Doris shook her head. "It infuriates me that that man is still breathing. And, he's going to be prosecuting Phillip." Doris took a deep breath. "Bastard; he should rot in hell."

She glanced up and saw the sad look on her friend's face. "I'm sorry. I know he's Ava's father, and you've managed to forgive him and all, but he's still an ass."

Both women sat quietly for a few moments alone with their thoughts. "What do I tell her when she asks?" Olivia pushed her salad away with a sigh. "Because, at this point it's not an 'if', but a 'when' situation."

"I honestly don't have an answer for that. You're lucky you have someone who can help you through this minefield." Doris motioned for another coke then reached across the table again to comfort Olivia. She also wanted to change the subject. "Augh, can we change the subject? I'm fond of you Spencer, but I don't do this touchy, feeling thing well."

Doris smiled at Olivia's smirk.

"Yeah, yeah. You're the tough, butch type. Gotcha, Wolfe!" Olivia joked, relieved to move onto a happier conversation.

Doris pulled her hand away in a mock scoff then smiled. "Seriously, I had a good time the other night with you two. It seems like you're getting along better."

Olivia smiled wistfully at the memories of her more intimate moments with Natalia recently. "Yeah, we're doing much better. Sometimes I feel like I'm spinning my wheels and getting nowhere. Between running to the therapist, keeping up with Emma's escapades,

now Phillip and worrying about Rafe, we have little time to think about ourselves." Olivia speared another French fry. "Working with Anna seems to calm Emma though."

Doris was mum. *Anna*. Hearing the woman's name ignited a feeling of longing.

Olivia put down her fork and fidgeted with her napkin. "Honestly, there's so much on my plate right now that I can't think straight. My mind is a jumble. I'd love to whisk Natalia off to New York to get married, maybe just elope rather than relive the nightmare. But, I know she wants a real wedding, you know the whole nine yards so I just keep my thoughts to myself."

The sad exasperated look on Olivia's face tugged at Doris' heart. She was mired in her own living hell with Blake. The return of Ross had changed everything. Reconnecting with Blake the other evening at the farmhouse ignited the flame that was burning just below the surface. She knew Blake missed her; she could feel it when they were together. Many times Doris felt herself going through the motions most of the day. She was at war with herself over why she had let the wisp of a woman invade her heart. Straight women break hearts. *Hell, lesbians break hearts too*, she mused silently. Anna. Blake. Maybe she should toss a coin.

"I wish Natalia would bring it up."

"What?" Doris broke free from her fog.

"Are you listening to me?" Olivia was annoyed with her.

"Yeah, yeah." Doris offered a little advice. "Olivia, the woman doesn't know what you're thinking or feeling. She's not a mind reader."

When the waitress returned to see how they were doing, Olivia ordered a latte. "Make that non-fat and decaf, which means a no taste latte." Olivia winced and smiled sweetly.

The waitress just rolled her eyes at Olivia's antics.

"Olivia, don't swallow your own feelings and needs. It'll only lead to resentment. Believe me, I know." Doris started to stand and she put a few bills on the table to cover her meal. "Look, I hate to bail on you, but I have a city council meeting to get to." Doris scrunched up her nose. "So long, my friend." Doris called over her shoulder as she left, "Heed my words."

A few minutes later, Olivia had settled the bill at Towers and was sitting in her car. She pushed the key into the ignition and thought about Doris' words. The past few months had been hellish; a merry-go-round without the laughter and fun that goes with the circus ride. Emma, Jeffrey, Phillip, and now this new detective who rattled her nerves. He seemed to be an equal opportunity heartbreaker by asking Ava and Leyla out. She worried that Ava would get hurt if he dumped her for Leyla. Yet, how could she possibly condemn him? Hadn't she made the dating circuit when she first arrived in Springfield? She wouldn't even call it a 'dating' circuit, more like a 'bed 'em' circuit.

Thinking about it made her cringe. She had been promiscuous as hell not caring if the men were married. She rubbed her eyes. In fact, the prey was more exciting if they were married. God, what a home wrecker she'd been. She had a hard time imagining she was the woman that she now despised.

Her thoughts drifted to Natalia. Natalia knew Olivia 1.0 and still loved her. She wanted to cry; tears of joy because someone loved her, warts and all, and tears of despair for the kidnapping that had upset the safe world they had created in the farmhouse. Olivia was trying desperately to get that feeling back for all of them.

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"Hey, are we related?" Rafe twisted and turned, trying to prop himself up in the hospital bed, but his legs were useless. As a result, he pulled out the catheter that made a real mess. Frustrated and soaking wet, he fell back onto the pillows.

He couldn't remember how long he had been at the VA in Chicago. He couldn't remember how long he'd been in Afghanistan. What he could remember was the relentless sand that crept into every crevice. There was always noise in these desolate hovels, people talking loudly in a language he couldn't understand.

"Probably not, you're a pain in the ass." Rafe's constant attempts to get up left a tangled mess of tubes and wires. The young man seemed annoyed with him. "Now I have to change all your bedding, wash you up, and change and your pants. We're doing the best we can here. Why can't you just lay still?"

"You lay in this bed and then you'll see..." Rafe tone was sharp. He was disgusted.

Finished untangling Rafe and rolling him side-to-side to change the bedding, the young man stood up; hands on hips.

"You think people owe you a living, well they don't," the nursing assistant spoke brusquely.

That remark just made Rafe more furious.

"I know your job was hard over there, but there are some hurt worse than you and they don't complain. They still manage to be nice to me. I've seen guys and women with no arms. Or their brain has been fried, yet their attitude is better than yours."

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"Just you and me." Olivia dried the last dish and put it away. "A weekend in Chicago, we can stay at the Elysian Hotel Chicago. It's a new boutique hotel near Michigan Ave. I want to check out the competition." Olivia wrapped her arms around Natalia's waist. "You mentioned we should get away."

Natalia snuggled back into her embrace. It felt wonderful lying against Olivia's bosom; this is where she wanted to be, needed to be. Her thoughts drifted back to their tryst the other evening in the barn. Wanting Olivia was not the issue; life just seemed to get in the way.

"Olivia, it sounds wonderful but I don't think now is the time." Natalia knew her lover would be disappointed and felt the need to explain. "I know I suggested we get away, and I'd love nothing more than to have you all to myself, but it was wishful thinking. Olivia, Emma is still unsettled, and I'm worried about Rafe." Natalia turned and draped her arms around Olivia's neck. She nuzzled her nose into Olivia's hair drinking in the scent that was purely Olivia. "You always smell so delicious."

Olivia closed her eyes, soaking in the intimate connection she desperately craved.

"I have an idea though," Natalia whispered in her ear. She leaned back and saw how Olivia's smile lit up the room. Natalia went back to finishing the dishes, while Olivia threw down the towel and headed off to the computer.

Natalia wiped up the sink, her mind whirling in a million directions. She felt terribly guilty that it was taking her so long to feel whole again. She felt guilty when they took some quiet time for themselves. Olivia had taken the brunt of her wrath and she was still here, trying to make it all better, loving her regardless of her wicked moods.

Saturday couldn't come soon enough. Olivia had arranged everything. At Natalia's suggestion, she had booked a day at the Touch of Healing spa that had been recommended

by one of Olivia's business associates. Even if for one day, she and Natalia would be pampered and pamper each other. A massage, hot oils and body wrap, and the rest of the day luxuriating in a suite with built-in jacuzzi. The moment Natalia had suggested a day trip, Olivia asked Ava to keep an eye on Emma, while she swapped a weekend with Frank to take Francesca. They wouldn't have to rush back home which made Olivia giddy with delight.

In spite of her quirky moods as of late, Natalia was excited about the prospect of a day at the spa, considering her one and only experience with a massage was the first time she and Olivia had gone away to figure out their relationship. She didn't find it particularly sensual, perhaps because there was a third party in the room. Afterwards, she and Olivia had tiptoed around each other, then Emma showed up and which made any chance of cranking the relationship up a notch was a mute point. This time though she had greater expectations.

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When they arrived at the spa on Saturday, Natalia mused about the grand foyer, taking in the waterfall and the plants that curved around the cedar staircase that led to upstairs rooms. The airy breeze almost felt tropical even though they were just outside Chicago's heart. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed contentedly. Before long, a guide took them to the first of the day's planning.

"Oh, Olivia...this is just divine." Natalia settled herself next to Olivia for their couple's massage. The massage table held the both of them; two masseuses would work on them side-by-side.

"Just you and me." Olivia smirked recalling the previous fiasco with Blake. "Let's enjoy our time together."

Olivia had requested the whole nine yards. Massages, facials, and a relaxing bath in the lavender scented infinity pool. Afterwards, there would be a light lunch and two hours of alone time in one of the well-appointed luxury guesthouses.

"Umm, yes...," Natalia dreamily sighed. She never had the money to be extravagant. She couldn't remember ever being massaged in her entire life before she met Olivia, but now with Olivia's coaxing she allowed herself this luxury. She could feel herself drifting as the fingers expertly kneaded knotted shoulders and worked their way down her spine. She turned toward her partner and found the table empty.



Alarmed, she rose partially off the table only to feel soft two hands push her gently back down.

"Natalia, relax. I've got you." Olivia had paid off the two masseuses who quietly left the room. "I didn't want to share you with anyone." Olivia positioned herself over Natalia's shoulders and began her work. For the next hour Natalia luxuriated in Olivia's touch.

Olivia helped her partner off the massage table wrapping her in a luxurious, fluffy robe.

"Olivia, your hands are marvellous." On her tippy toes she leaned in and kissed her lover thoroughly. "But I already knew that. I want to feel them all over me."

She couldn't remember feeling so relaxed. Olivia had taken liberties others would not have dreamed of...her hands smoothing oil on the inside of Natalia thighs close enough to touch her sensitive mound, her palms rubbing the sweet almond oil over her breasts circling her nipples, but never touching. Olivia ministrations had revved up her libido. "Take me back to the room." Natalia tugged on Olivia's hand as the older woman donned her robe.

Cobb salads, mineral water and a bottle of chilling champagne greeted them. Natalia smiled as her lover had been so thoughtful. Her body tingled with anticipation as she heard the door lock click. The jacuzzi looked so inviting.

When Natalia let the robe drop where she stood, Olivia sighed as she took in the sight of her lover. She wasn't thin; she wore the few pounds she could never seem to lose after the pregnancy in all the right places. Her partner's breasts were still firm and large and Olivia watched as the areolas had pebbled, the nipples at attention. Natalia's eyes, deep dark chocolate in color, never failed to mesmerize Olivia. She was truly a sight to behold and Olivia never got tired of gazing at her Venus.

Natalia held out her hand to Olivia beckoning her to the bed. "We have all afternoon."

Olivia's eyes were riveted on Natalia's breasts. As Natalia took her hand, drawing her closer, she felt her partner removing her robe and letting it fall by the wayside.

"I need to feel you all over me." Natalia's voice dripped desire and she could see Olivia shudder.

The bed had been turned back and the luxurious pale blue satin sheets looked very inviting. Natalia settled back into the softness and gently pulled Olivia on top of her, each revelling in the supple curves of the other. As Olivia adjusted her breasts so they were lying comfortably and directly on her lover's, Natalia gasped.

Olivia smiled. "I never thought two women could fit...together, you know...until you."

Natalia adjusted so their nipples were touching. "Olivia, you once told me we fit, and look..."

"Yeah, we fit. And we have plenty to fit." That drew a chuckle from Natalia who snuggled more intimately into Olivia's chest.

"I love how you move against me," Olivia whispered as she intertwined Natalia's hands in hers and raised them up, stretching both women to their full length. They wiggled around until all the parts fit perfectly. "We'll always fit perfectly." Olivia's voice dripped mushiness and Natalia giggled. "Too mushy?"

Natalia closed her eyes. "Never too mushy."

Natalia needed more and her hands began to explore. Olivia lay quietly, allowing her to love her. Finding the soft fuzz at Olivia's hairline, Natalia dropped petite kisses. She gently fondled the softness of Olivia's earlobe, drawing a finger down Olivia's jawbone. Then she kissed Olivia's eyelids and moved down to kiss the bridge of Olivia's nose. She worked her way slowly down to Olivia's lips that were moist and begging.

Olivia responded by brushing across her lover's luscious lips, teasing her with her tongue, then she sucked Natalia into a kiss that the other woman must have felt to her core. They kissed, long and luxurious to the point neither knew or cared for how long. It wasn't rushed; the kisses were slow, full of newfound discoveries and beyond words. It felt like the very first time. Everything about this moment felt fresh and sublime.

"Olivia...please." Natalia's urgency raked over Olivia.

"You said you wanted my hands all over you," Olivia said as she licked her lips. With an amused grin, she added, "I'm going treasure hunting." As her fingers massaged through Natalia's hair, she kissed her again, exploring her partner's tongue in a light licking motion. Olivia tickled the roof of Natalia's mouth that made the woman squirm. Feeling Natalia's impatience, shifting restlessly under her, she feathered fingertips down her torso, bit the

swell of Natalia's breasts, and then swirled her tongue around the areola and nipple. When Natalia had pushed her breasts together to give her better access, she smiled warmly at her little helper.

Olivia held up the heavy breasts, running her tongue over them making Natalia moan. It emboldened her and she used her tongue to skirt the entire surface of Natalia's breasts. Natalia showed her appreciation by grabbing Olivia's hair and holding her head in place. "Ummm..." was all she could muster.

"Natalia, I need to be inside you," Olivia whispered, hoarsely.

Natalia spread her legs wide for her lover and grabbed Olivia's hand.

Her breathing coming more staccato, she commanded Olivia, "Finger me."

Olivia obeyed, circling her opening, parting her.

Natalia's eyes rolled back, she clutched the comforter gaining purchase. "Inside, Olivia." Olivia continued to tease and stroke her. "Now, Olivia. Now!" Her voice was raw with desire. Olivia could feel her throbbing as she pumped one, then two and finally three fingers into Natalia and she when Natalia raised her hips to meet her, she could hear her groaning into her thrusts. Situating herself perfectly over Natalia's thigh, her own clit feeling the friction of their rhythm. The two women were in perfect sync, each one of them holding on until they reached a crescendo.

"Come with me, Olivia...yes, yes...," Natalia hissed loudly. She cried out and shuddered taking Olivia along on this exhilarating ride.

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Natalia stepped into the jacuzzi and offered her hand to Olivia. "Let me help you." They had dozed for a few minutes in each other's arms after making love. Natalia knew about Olivia's obsession with jacuzzi's. Unfortunately, her heart condition made it difficult to stay in past ten minutes so she decided to make the most of the time.

Gingerly, she lowered herself while Olivia entered the perfectly heated tub, kneeling in front of Natalia.

"Guess we should have showered before, the massage oil is very slippery," Natalia said as she cupped Olivia's mound, drawing a finger through her folds. "Something else is slippery; I so like slippery."

Natalia rested her head against the back of the tub as Olivia adjusted the jets. She jumped a little. "Hmm, right there."

Olivia straddled her lover's thigh, her hands resting on Natalia's shoulders. Natalia grabbed her ass, pulling Olivia down and closer. "This is heaven..."

When Olivia threw her head back, Natalia pulled her closer and kissed her pulse point, her hands moving slowly down Olivia's torso. Olivia's body was on fire and it wasn't from the 103 degree temperature.

"Let me." Olivia surrendered to her lover's hands that opened her up, allowing her the intimate sensation of rubbing against Natalia's thigh. Natalia bumped up her thigh into Olivia's center that made her whimper and begin to slide up and down. "Oh God." The friction against Natalia's thigh was almost too much and she clung to Natalia's neck as the other woman continued to move and it took little time for Olivia to tumble over the edge.

"Like my moves?" Natalia rolled her eyes as she helped Olivia out of the tub and wrapped her in a towel. She tucked in the edges and pulled Olivia close.

"Yeah, guess learning the electric slide for the weddings came in handy." Her eyes twinkled.

"I didn't realize how much we needed this." Natalia's words were loaded with sadness. All of the past six months came flooding back.

Olivia's eyes glistened. Her emotional response took her by surprise.

"Don't cry." Natalia wiped a renegade tear that rolled down Olivia's cheek. "I never stopped loving you, you know." She sighed as Olivia snuggled into her chest. "We've been through so much, but we're still together."

Reaching up, Olivia brushed her tongue over Natalia's lips.

Natalia continued, "My love for you has gotten stronger."

"Don't start with me, else we'll never get out of this room." Olivia waggled her eyebrows and laughed.

Natalia tossed a clean towel at her. "You. Shower. Alone."

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## Act II

Ava had been infuriated over her interaction with Michael Thorne; first the arrest, then the coffee fiasco at the Beacon. Over the course of a few weeks though, she had warmed up to him much to her mother's chagrin.

*"He's trouble," Olivia spouted with an emphasis on trouble. She pinched the bridge of her nose and muttered. "Thinking he's going to make a name for himself over Phillip's trumped-up murder case." She looked at her oldest child with pleading eyes. "I know I shouldn't tell you what to do, but trust me, Ava, you need to stay away from that man."*

*Ava hastily threw the files onto her mother's desk. She could feel her ire rising. Who did her mother think she was telling her what to do? And, about a man no less! Her mother's track record with men had been dismal.*

*Regardless, she was too old to be told how to live her life. "Mom, if he asks me out I'm going to say yes."*

*"But Ava, he's also dating Leyla." There was no love lost between the two young women and adding a good-looking stud into the equation would be a fiasco. Natalia had gently reminded Olivia that Ava was her own woman but it fell on deaf ears.*

*"Didn't you date the same man as Reva, and Dinah and Reva again, then you took Josh from Reva, and oh, let's not forget the woman who wound up marrying Rick, or was it Matt? You went after almost every man in Springfield."*

*Olivia slammed the ledger book on the desk. "Yeah, I know I'm not a saint. Far from it. Don't. Don't do that!" She angrily pointed a finger at Ava. Olivia had lost her patience. Ava may have been a grown woman, but she was still her child and she knew from past experience this scenario was a recipe for disaster.*

*Ava jumped back at her mother's outburst.*

*"What I did was wrong, and hurtful," Olivia said as Ava kept silent because Ava knew she was far from finished. "People talked about me. They used words like slut, and worse."*

*Olivia walked towards the window that overlooked the lake. She wrapped her arms tightly around her as if to keep the pain she felt from spreading to her daughter. Turning, her eyes were wet. "I don't want that for you, Ava. You're not that kind of woman."*

Ava rewound that conversation in her head as she headed for Company.

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Chief Mike Thorne had a few words with the bailiff then walked briskly outside scanning the street for Ava. He was glad the ticket hearing was over; he wanted to ask Ava out and was reluctant as long as he was the arresting officer. His date with Leyla had gone well, but he had to make it clear that he was not looking for a wife. What about Ava? What was she looking for? He knew so little about her.

As he strode down the street, he had a little conversation with himself. Ava was the mysterious dark haired beauty that sparked his curiosity. The incident with Ava had been unfortunate, but now it was behind them. A clean slate, Thorne concluded. It was time to move on with his life.

He caught up Ava in Company. Smiling at the brunette, he stood next to her waiting for her to order.

"Coffee, please." Ava glanced at Mike then pushed two dollars toward Buzz.

"Allow me," Mike said, handing Ava back her money and told Buzz to put it on his tab. "Ava, I'm relieved the hearing is over," he said as Buzz nodded then poured two coffees.

Ava was relieved the amount of the ticket had been reduced.

Ava's eyes gave him the once over. He was attractive: anyone could see that. It had been a dry spell lately. San Francisco had looked appealing compared to the decent and straight, if not terribly boring men in Springfield. Yet, this is where she felt she belonged.

"I'm wondering if we could perhaps have dinner next Friday night?" Thorne ran his finger around the lip of his cup. "There's a new French bistro that opened across town."

Ava eyed him skeptically. She had told her mother she'd accept an invitation, now her nerves took over.

"Look, it's hard when you're new in town." Mike pleaded his case. "My daughter takes most of my time. I'm not looking to settle down, just to talk and have a good time." Ava imagined what he meant by a 'good time.' If he thought she was going to sleep with him on the first date, well...

"Umm, okay, dinner sounds good. I need to run. Call me later in the week?" Why am I so nervous? Thank god, I didn't say anything embarrassing. Ava quickly headed off to the safety of the Beacon.

Rafe digested what the nurse had said; he saw first hand how soldiers came out of combat. He couldn't afford to make an enemy of the person who had been tending to him since he woke up. He would try to be nice.

"I'm a Rivera." Rafe said guardedly while the attendant finished tucking in the blanket.

"I know. You told me you're a Rivera. I told you I'm a Rivera. Besides, it says so on your chart." The young man continued to straighten Rafe's pillows focusing on his work, his head down to obscure the eye roll.

"Rafael Rivera." Rafe held out his hand.

"Paul Augustine Rivera." Now he fussed over Rafe's water jug.

Rafe's eyes widened. "No way. My middle name is Augustine."

"Way," Paul said, sitting down at the edge of the bed. "Named after some saint or something."

"How long have I been here?" Rafe asked, frustrated at not really knowing anything about his condition. After Paul explained that he was not authorized to discuss a soldier's diagnosis or how they got there, Rafe asked, "Can you call for the nurse? I'm in terrible pain."

"The nurse will be here in a few...I'm going on break." Paul stood and walked toward the service entrance and pulled out his cell.

"Yeah, says his name is Rafael Rivera." He wiped his eyes. "His mother? Don't know. Want me to ask?" The young man paced, picking at his nails and making sure he sidestepped the pile of garbage dumped in the back of the hospital.

Olivia turned toward the laptop that had taken up permanent residence on the breakfront. She discreetly loaded the Skype account, but there were no messages. She was careful not to let Natalia see her checking; something she did a few times a day.

"Oh, hey you." Olivia fumbled with the computer as Natalia walked into the room; her step quieter than usual.

Natalia smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "It's okay. I know you check probably as much as I do." "Natalia, I don't know what else to do. I've got Doris working on it, the governor's been poking around." Olivia confessed, frustration evident in her voice.

"Governor! Doris went to the governor?" Natalia squeaked out. Sometimes she forgot just how well connected her partner was with people of influence.

Natalia tilted her head to the side and reached down for Olivia's hand. "That's so sweet, but why didn't you tell me?" Natalia pulled Olivia in for a hug.

"I didn't want you to get all hopeful, and then be disappointed. Like you are now." Olivia sighed and adjusted her chair before sitting and pulled Natalia onto her lap. She hung onto the younger woman as if she needed an anchor in a stormy sea.

Natalia's sensed that something more was bothering this beautiful woman who meant the world to her. "Querida, is it Emma?"

Olivia's head shot up; her eyes wide. "How do you always know what's bothering me?"

Blake peeked through the window at Company. She let out a huff when she saw Ross sitting at a booth in the back. *This better be good*, she thought as she tugged at the door.

"Where are our sons?" Blake had thought Ross was going to take the boys to a Cubs game. "What happened to the ballgame?"

Ross seemed unperturbed. "Something more important came up." Ross continued to scan the newspaper, then jotted down a few notes.

Blake moved over to the table and hastily closed the paper. "Reading the paper is more important?"

She was close, very close to rolling up the paper and giving him a good whack with it. Since their last tense conversation about Ross's attempt to frame Phillip for Grady Foley's murder, something definitely had shifted for Blake. She did not like the new Ross very much.

Blake was far from naïve. She was older and smart enough to know that people change; Olivia Spencer was a perfect case in point.

Blake had changed as well. Who ever would have thought she'd have fallen for a woman? Not just any woman either, but Doris Wolfe, the irascible, fiery blue-eyed force to be reckoned with mayor of their fair town. Their time together the other evening over at the farmhouse confirmed something that Blake had pushed out of her mind, but not out of her heart. She still loved Doris Wolfe.

She had loved Ross with an intensity that had astounded her. At one time she would have thought no one could compete with the love of her life. Now, she reconsidered that declaration. Having him around was becoming a burden. She forced herself to focus on the issue at hand. Staring at the father of her children, who turned back to the newspaper, she continued what had become a one-sided conversation. "Ross, the boys have been grounded except for parental activities. Where are they if they're not with you?"

He rose and put his hands on her shoulders, squeezing lightly. "Blake, calm down. I gave them money to go to the movies. I'm working on the Spaulding case."

No, she did not like this new Ross at all.

Act III

It was late, well after visiting hours when Paul crept quietly to Rafe's room. "Rivera, you awake?"

"Paul, what's wrong with me?" Rafe tried to hoist himself up but it was useless.

Paul pushed him back down, flicked on the overhead light and pushed it away from shining directly into Rafe's eyes. "I can't tell you that," he replied, his voice thick with emotion.

"What can you tell me then?" Rafe's voice drifted off.

"Says you've been here for two weeks," Paul said as he sifted through the chart. "Your chart indicates that you didn't want kin notified." Paul couldn't fathom that he didn't want to see family. He'd want to see his mother first thing.

"You called for your ma. Why don't you want to see her?" In spite of their contentious start, Paul was curious about the young man's situation.

"Yeah, her name's Natalia. I don't want her to see me like this; she'll only worry about me."

"Don't you think she's worried anyway because she hasn't heard from her soldier boy?"

Rafe tried to explain his reasoning, but Paul threw up his hands in exasperation. "You're killing her either way. She probably thinks you're dead."

The young men sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I can't feel my legs," Rafe's voice was barely audible.

Paul rubbed his chin not knowing what to say. He usually could keep the wall up, but this was proving more difficult.

"Why did you become a nurse?" Rafe was curious. It wasn't a typical career path for men.

Paul shrugged and adjusted his glasses. "I'm just a nursing assistant. It was either this or JV."

"Hey man, I was in JV. Then jail. When I got out, I joined the Army. My ma was heartbroken." Rafe sighed heavily. "Long story."

"I got all night." Paul shrugged again and offered a guarded smile. This Rivera guy was growing on him.

Rafe wasn't sure he wanted to talk about his mother and Olivia, after all, Paul might not understand. Hell, he didn't really understand but his time in Afghanistan made him realize one thing; life was too, too short to waste time thinking about something you couldn't control. And, his ma seemed happy. Didn't he always say that he just wanted that he just wanted her to be happy?

"This is nice." Ava sipped her cabernet. "Conversation with someone other than small children, a sister who is going through puberty and has just discovered boys, and hotel guests who are complaining about scratchy towels."

Mike Throne rose his glass toasting her. "I agree. I'm thrilled to have a night off from listening to citizen's complaints and giving traffic tickets."

"Then stop giving those damn tickets." Ava glared at him. "Sorry." She regrouped. "Surely, it's more exciting than that."

Mike nodded and agreed. "Chicago and Springfield are like two different worlds." But, now with Edmund Winslow winding up on Detective Li's doorstep, the Howard case, and the Grady Foley murder case, yes, the job was getting much more interesting.

"This may sound so... cliché, or '70s but, tell me about yourself." Mike laughed good-naturedly at his own corniness. He soaked in the woman who sat across from him shrouded in the dim candlelight; her warm smile was a needed respite from his world of crime. With her doe-shaped eyes, short bobbed hair, and rich full lips, she certainly was a beauty. He could tell she was Olivia's daughter, who was a very stunning and sexy woman in her own right. He had been at the receiving end of Olivia's sharp tongue when she dressed him down last month, and he could tell that Ava had her mother's fiery spunk.

Ava wasn't sure how much to divulge. Everyone in Springfield was such a busybody, he could ask the postman and probably get an earful. She decided that this very handsome and engaging man sitting across from her didn't need to know too much about her life. "I lived in San Francisco for a few years, then moved back last year. My family is here."

"Your mother?" Mike refreshed her glass.

"What about her?" Ava became a little defensive.

"Well, the first time we met was in Towers which was a tad bit tense, then I pulled her over for speeding, and the third time she came to the station and chewed me out." Mike paused to order another bottle of wine. "I know she's with that woman, Natalia?"

Ava knew he was fishing and she wasn't offering any bait. Not that she was ashamed of her mother; it just wasn't any of his business. She wanted to be tactful which was not her strong suit. "I don't talk about my mother's personal life." A soft smile crossed her face. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, Mike left it at that.

"So your ma had to get married?" Rafe shook his head solemnly. "Funny, so did mine. A Rivera trait?" Both laughed, not yet comfortable enough with each other to say there might be some truth in the words.

Paul leaned back in the plastic chair, his eyes scanning Rafe. *Without my glasses, we could be brothers* he mused. "So what did your ma do to get you so pissed off?"

Rafe bristled at the question, turning his face towards the wall.

"Hey, I'm over here. You said it was a long story." Paul burped. "Excuse me. Too much spice."

Rafe couldn't help but laugh at Paul's antics. "I'm listening." Rafe didn't think he had laughed once in the past year.

He spilled his guts. And it felt good. Rafe hadn't felt that light in years. Now, if he could only feel his legs.

"Wow, soap opera stuff. My ma loves soaps."

Rafe was never one to share, he kept his thoughts hidden away in a locked box, but talking to Paul unlocked something inside.

"Your ma has a woman." Those words still could make Rafe cringe. "And you don't like it."

Rafe tried to explain, saying that his mother was happy and that should be enough for him. "I didn't like it at first. In fact, I hated it. First, Olivia gets my dad's heart, and then my ma falls in love with her? Who saw that coming?"

Rafe paused, strong emotions of remembered anger and confusion stirring in his head. Then he thought of Ashlee and Daisy and smiled. "Some really great friends helped me through it, if it weren't for them I'd still be in that frame of mind."

A soft smile crossed his lips. "My ma's finally happy. I saw it in her face before I left. She was standing there all weepy when the bus came and Olivia was holding her, comforting her." His smile got wider. "Olivia really, really loves her, 'ya know? For years, my ma went through the motions, taking care of me, working three or four jobs just to pay the rent." Rafe smile turned somber. "I don't think she was truly happy."

Mike walked Ava to her suite. It had been a fun evening, a delightful evening really, but something seemed off. Mike was attentive, held her hand as they walked to the Beacon, they laughed and flirted, but Ava just wasn't feeling that this man was genuine. Something was amiss and she couldn't put her finger on it. Too forced, maybe? He kissed her cheek goodnight and didn't ask to come in.

She threw her purse onto the bed and took out her earrings. If she and Leyla were on speaking terms she'd call her right now and gossip about this enigma late into the night.

"Olivia, you and Emma need to have a talk." Since the incident the other evening at the mansion, both mother and daughter had been tiptoeing around each other.

"I don't do talk well, I get all nervous...I just don't want to say something that's wrong."

"Natalia assured Olivia that the right words would come. She just needed to have faith. The two Spencer women took a slow walk down to the pond to feed the ducks.

Emma sat quietly as she watched her mother tear up the bread and toss it into the pond. She didn't know if feeding ducks was baby stuff, because if it was she wanted no part of it anymore. Maybe she'd ask her mom.

"Mom, is feeding ducks baby stuff?" Olivia continued to feed the noisy things as they dove for the little chunks of bread, honking and quacking.

"No Em. Feeding ducks is for everyone. It fills me with delight to see them all excited when I shake the bread bag." Dumping the last of the crumbs into the pond, she headed over to the bench. "Em, it's been a difficult time for all of us right now. Surprisingly, I do understand how you feel. I was there." She watched as Emma stared at the ground. "Not quite a child, not quite a young lady. It's very confusing."

"Mom, I know some things." The intensity in Emma's eyes took Olivia by surprise. "I know Daddy was mean to you. Were you mean to Daddy?"

"I was. I'm not proud of it." She'd be as truthful as she thought necessary. Though admitting to dancing on Phillip's grave would probably go beyond the realm of Emma's believability.

"Did Daddy shoot someone?" Whoa, that came out of left field.

"Daddy may have hurt someone," Olivia conceded.

Frustrated, Emma kicked at the dirt. "Why won't you tell me the truth?" When Olivia explained to her that they didn't know the truth, yet, she wasn't really satisfied with that answer. She pondered some more. "Jeffrey hurt you, too."

This one would be more difficult. Olivia scooted closer to Emma, wrapping an arm around her. "Yes, he did."

"Did he touch you?"

Olivia swallowed hard. "Yes, Emma he did. He did not have permission." Olivia held her breath for the next question. None came. Emma looked up at her, nose scrunched, her eyes glistening. They sat in silence as both absorbed the conversation, and what it meant for each of them.

Paul studied Rafe. Same stature, the curly black hair, the infernal chip on the shoulder. Yeah, they were definitely related. "Look, I have to go home. Let me tell you something." Paul

leaned over him, into his personal space that made Rafe twitch. "Your shoulder must be pretty heavy. Chips will kill you." Paul backed up realizing that Rafe was the helpless one in that bed. "I know. I've carried one my whole life."

Rafe eyes searched his newly found friend.

"My dad. Blew me off as a kid."

Act IV

"Olivia, I'm very proud of you," Natalia said as she kissed Olivia's cheek.

Olivia recalled the conversation that she and Emma had down near the pond. Olivia knew her daughter was processing. She was so much like Natalia in that way. Unlike her, shoot first and ask questions later Spencer. It was Natalia who coined that title for her when she grabbed her 9 mm. Glock that frigid February day and was going gunning for Phillip. Olivia just shook her head. It seemed like centuries ago.

Everyone was tucked in for the night. Olivia wrapped her legs around her partner who was sitting at the dressing table performing her evening ritual, and then she tucked her arms around Natalia's waist. "Three hundred twenty two." She counted. Brushing her hair soothed and calmed her. "Remember, when you were carrying Francesca and it hurt to hold your arms up?"

Natalia recalled those long ago days; it made her smile. "Yes, you were my arms, and my legs and my feet..." She rolled her eyes. "You were my everything." Olivia kissed her bare shoulder. "I was just a roly poly, but you loved me anyway."

"I *was* your everything? What am I now?" Olivia asked with a mock glare. Natalia reassured the still insecure woman that she was the love of her life.

"Five-hundred percent more of everything." Natalia put down her brush and leaned back into Olivia's embrace. "I treasure everything about you. You're my healing balm and I love you." She turned to capture Olivia's lips.

Sated, they lay quietly thinking about the past few minutes. Natalia marvelled at how a kiss could still ignite the intense desire she felt for the raven-haired beauty cuddled next to her. All Olivia had done was kiss her, well, she also began playing with her nipple, and Natalia

came. They scrambled to the bed and within minutes Olivia pushed out an orgasm that probably was heard in the next county. "You're incredible."

"Huh?"

"You, you're incredible."

Natalia rolled partially on top of her. "You certainly are the noisy one in this relationship." She gave Olivia a playful rub on the nose. The other woman paused; her iridescent green jewels a deeper shade of dark.

"Morning, soldier boy." Paul grinned; for some odd reason he liked calling Rafe that.

Rafe got right to the point. "Your dad walked out?"

Paul busied himself around Rafe's tray, filling the water bucket, putting out a new box of tissues. "My ma threw him out; he was a hothead. Got hot around her one too many times."

Rafe chuckled at the insinuation. "Did your ma have help?" Rafe wanted to know everything about Paul.

"Yeah. My grandmother's sister helped. My granddad wanted nothing to do with any of us."

Rafe chimed in. "I don't know much about my grandparents. 'Cept that they weren't too happy when my ma told them she was pregnant." Rafe idly fiddled with the blanket hem.

Paul continued to busy himself; wanting to leave but being pulled to Rafe like a magnet. He would wind up telling him the truth, that he and Rafe were related. That would blow the top off the can.

"We give thanks for this new week. Bless this family and the food we eat. Amen." For the first time in a week, the Spencer-Rivera clan, minus Rafe and Ava, were all seated at the breakfast table. Emma was playing hide the spoon on Francesca, and the little one was frustrated, babbling and whining.

"Jellybean, give your sister her spoon," Olivia told her calmly.

Natalia, dishing up scrambled eggs turned to look at the commotion but Olivia's eyes signaled she had it under control though Emma continued to tease.

"Now!" Olivia's voice boomed.

Natalia quickly placed the dishes in front of everyone. Leyla hid herself at the bottom of the coffee cup.

"I'd like for you to listen when I ask you to do something," Olivia said. When Emma pouted, then went to excuse herself from the table, she continued, "Finish your breakfast."

"Why should I listen? You don't listen to me. You're still hiding something about daddy." Her tone was defiant.

Here came the brick to the head. Olivia was waiting for Emma to process their conversation from the other day. Troubled brown eyes met angry green. A moment of understanding crossed between the two women. Emma was still harboring resentment against Olivia for not telling her about her father.

Phillip had been accused and would likely be put on trial for an incident that was committed years ago. That Jeffrey was all too anxious to persecute infuriated Olivia and Ava. "I need more information from your father before I tell you anything."

The school bus blew its horn. Emma hurriedly grabbed her backpack and headed for the door. As Olivia pushed back her chair, Emma responded, "Don't bother." Olivia was wounded.

"Emma, don't talk to your mother that way." Natalia quickly threw down her napkin and closed the door, stepping in front of the testy young lady. "Wait right there, young lady." Natalia dismissed the school bus. "I'll drive you to school. I want to talk to you."

Emma fumed. She would be late for school yet again. When her mommy was sick with her heart; she was late. When Olivia was recuperating from her heart transplant; she was late. When Natalia was laying in that hospital bed recovering from her wounds; she was late. Emma was having a really crappy day and it hadn't even started.

"I'm tired of being late, Ma." Natalia quietly shut the pantry door. They sized each other up.

"I want to talk to you." Emma dropped her backpack and sat down on a small stool, her legs tucked under her chin. She grasped her knees to keep her balance.

"Emma, I'm surprised. I felt confident that we were okay." Just the other day they had a good talk. The old fun-loving Emma seemed to be back. Maybe it was just a case of hormones.

"Do you hear what you say?"

Natalia seemed startled by the question. "I want to talk to you." *What was the troubled youngster getting at?* Natalia wondered.

Emma was impertinent. "You always want to talk to me. Why don't you want to talk with me?" Emma teared up. "You talk to me, or at me, but never with me."

Natalia sat dumfounded. Emma was right. Recently, it was Natalia or Olivia doing the talking, or reprimanding, or just telling her what she had done wrong.

Natalia reached for her blindly. "My Jellybean, I'm so sorry." Emma threw her arms around Natalia's waist, grabbing tightly for any solid connection to her other mommy.

"I want it to be the way it was...back when you and Mommy and I were a family. Here together, in the farmhouse. Now it's all scary and confusing."

Natalia gave Em a kiss on the head and rubbed her back. "Come on, we'll get you to school on time."

Both women were happy to go to work; they both needed a distraction. "She's scared and confused, Olivia," Natalia said as she closed the conference room door.

Olivia mumbled under her breath. Natalia stood across from her. "What's that?"

"I said, she's not the only one." Olivia stood, a worried look on her face.

Natalia quickly came to Olivia's side. "Querida, I told you what Emma said...try not to worry."

Olivia blew a tendril of hair out of her eyes. She sounded off, "Just when I think everything is getting better; it's not. Phillip is being framed; I just know it. And Emma, she's still a little girl and I feel her slipping away."

Natalia ran a hand down Olivia's arm needing a connection. "And you, you've been so brave...you know, not hearing from Rafe." Her voice cracked. "I should be comforting you."

"We'll comfort each other. We're a team, remember?"

It had been a hellish afternoon; there was one crisis after another at the hotel. Natalia was exhausted and happy to be heading home. First, she'd pick up Olivia and then they'd head to the new Chinese restaurant for take out.

"Mel, how have you been?" Natalia said as she noticed the counselor on her way towards the elevator from Olivia's office. "It's been a while."

"Hey Natalia," Mel replied in greeting. "Olivia might need you right now. This case with Phillip is getting ugly."

"Thanks. Have a good evening." Natalia headed to her partner's office, quietly opening the door, finding Olivia standing against her desk, arms wrapped tightly around her middle.

"Hey you," Natalia whispered as she embraced her, nuzzling into her hair. "I saw Mel."

"Hey yourself." Olivia took Natalia's hand and together they went to the sofa. "Mel is going to defend Phillip."

"That's good news, isn't it?"

"Cyrus is upset with her." Olivia went on to complain about Jeffrey who was hell bent on getting a conviction. "Phillip warned Jeffrey that he will use the rape against him, to destroy him if he doesn't drop the charges." Olivia rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Natalia, it will be all over town. Emma knows Jeffrey hurt me, that he touched me without permission. I don't want her to know any more..."

"Don't think Emma doesn't know already, Mom," Ava said by way of announcement as she stood in the doorway. "Sorry. I knocked but no one answered."

Paul was eavesdropping; Certified Nursing Assistants had no business doing Grand Rounds with the docs and interns, but a bunch of them were hovering over Rafe's bed and he was desperate for information.

"We're not sure if it's complete," one doctor said.

Paul had listened enough to know that complete meant total loss of function. Rafe was scheduled for an MRI that afternoon.

"Want me to call your ma?" Paul sat on the edge of the bed afterwards.

Rafe shook his head vehemently. "No, I don't want her knowing until they know what it is."

"You're a crappy son." Those were fighting words and Rafe's eyes got wild as he struggled to swing his legs over the side.

"Settle down, Mr. Army man."

"Why you say that?" Rafe spat, both panicked by his situation and pissed that Paul seemed to know more than he was saying.

Chief Thorne, Eleni, and Anna huddled into the small interrogation room. "Okay, let's go over this one more time." Eleni walked them through the injuries and the evidence.

"Motive?" Thorne tapped his pencil on the desk.

Anna filled them in. "Well, we know that Phillip Spaulding and Grady Foley were bitter enemies, but whether Phillip pushed Grady off the cliff or Grady lost his footing and fell is up for grabs."

"The prosecution is going to push for a murder conviction," Chief Thorne said, recalling an earlier conversation with the District Attorney.

Blake knocked then stood near the door. She had stopped by Ross's office to drop off new custody documents but when her estranged husband continued to tap on his computer, she called him out, "Ross!"

He glanced up and calmly removed his glasses. He gazed at her with genuine confusion.

"You don't know what happened up on that cliff that day, Ross." Blake was losing patience. "Why are you trying to hurt Phillip? You hurt him and you hurt his family, Beth, and Lizzie." Blake's words seem to be falling on deaf ears. "And what about little Emma? She almost lost her Dad once. She needs her father."

He twirled his specs. "You've been editing too many of those romance novels, my dear." His voice held a touch of sarcasm.

"Don't mock me." Her blue eyes bore a hole in him.

"Blake, if I get this conviction I'll probably get to be mayor. My political career will be resurrected."

Blake stood, hands on hips. "I thought you wanted a family. You vowed that once the children came, you'd rearrange your schedule, prioritize your time...the boys really need you right now."

"That was years ago, my love."

"Don't call me that. You lost that privilege years ago," she said, seething.

Sundays were always quiet on the ward. It looked like Rafe was going to be in for a long stay. The MRI was inconclusive and another round of tests was scheduled for next week.

How messed up was all this? It's like he didn't learn anything from JV and going to jail. He thought joining the military would miraculously make him a man; whatever that was, he wasn't sure anymore. There were times he was so scared in combat, he wet himself. Now, he was laid up in this hellhole, paralyzed. He knew what paralyzed meant.

Frustrated, he tried to throw the blankets off his legs. *Don't cry. Don't cry.*

"Hey, Rivera." Paul pushed open the door and stuck his head in. "Got time?"

Rafe wanted to throw the water cup at him but he couldn't reach it.

"I got someone who wants to see you."

Episode 8: Reunited And It Feels So Good



Act I

Rafe raised his head from the pillows so he could see better. The bright sun shone through the open curtains, blinding him for a moment until he could turn and raise his arm to cover the overwhelming light and he watched as Paul held open the door and a shorter, graying woman hesitantly entered the room.

The overbearing antiseptic smell assaulted her senses - she knew that smell; it teased her nose every time she went to see Leo when he was at the VA.

"Who are you?" Rafe asked, not recognizing the older woman at first. Tilting his head, as he took in the woman in front of him and saw some resemblance; now that he thought about it, she kind of looked like an older version of his mother including her posture, and her voice was strong and confident.

"It's your abuela, Rafael."

A frown crossed Rafe's face. His abuela? His ma's mother? His grandmother? Now he was confused.

When Paul pulled up a plastic chair and gingerly placed the woman in it, Rafe noticed there was someone else who followed. He couldn't make out the woman; he'd never seen her before. Running a trembling hand through his curls, more from nerves than wanting to look presentable, he asked, "Paul, what's this about?"

Paul stooped and helped Rafe pull himself up in the bed. "Rafael Rivera. Meet your abuela, Carmen." He then turned to the woman standing behind Carmen's chair. "This is my ma, Sophia."

Rafe had heard stories, but he and his mother had never, ever really sat down to discuss the family. It seemed too painful for his mother so he just imagined what they all looked like; he imagined how it might have felt if he had known his family. So did this mean that Paul and he were...what?

Surprises were fine for kids, but he wasn't a kid anymore. Nine months in Afghanistan had jaded him. Here he had thought he couldn't see or hear anything worse than being locked up with a bunch of losers like him; but he was wrong. Prison was a cakewalk compared to the everyday struggle to survive in that inhospitable hell.

He jerked himself back to the present. Here sat the woman who had thrown his mother out of the house at 16, scared and pregnant. Pregnant. With him. How eerie was this? "We're related?" This was all he could think of asking. All three visitors nodded in unison.

"Mi nieto...I've only seen a photo of you," Carmen said, looking him over. "Your mother had a photo on her cell phone; you were much younger."

Rafe nodded his head in acknowledgement. "I'm twenty-one now."

"You have your mother's dark eyes and dimples."

"My ma's a beautiful woman," Rafe said as his eyes clouded over.

Paul brought bottles of water for everyone. Sophia, who had the dark eyes and chestnut hair of a Rivera, spoke. "Rafe, Paul is your second cousin." She may not be a Rivera but she had the same big dark eyes and thick flowing hair as his ma. He yearned for his mother.

Rafe struggled to make the connection. He knew his mother had a sister, Leyla and a brother, Leo. Was Leo married to Sophia? Is Leo Paul's father? The father who ditched him?

"So, Leo is the hothead?" Rafe smirked as Carmen looked sternly at Paul.

Paul let out a loud harrumph. "Hey, that's between you and me." He glared at Rafe who looked rather amused.

"Mijo, is that what you called your father?" Sophia messed Paul's hair, only to have him shirk back a little. "Impetuoso, you said so." As his mother continued to mess with his hair, Paul brushed her hand away. "Hey, I'm too old for that."

"Be lucky your ma is here," Rafe chastised him.

All eyes were on Carmen when she spoke. "Nieto, why don't you want to see your mother?"

Rafe wasn't sure he knew how to answer that question.

With Francesca tucked in for the night and Emma was on a sleepover at Jodie's, Olivia sighed. It was rare that Olivia allowed Emma a Sunday night sleepover, but she felt it would help Emma to keep up a familiar routine. Olivia wondered what 12 year olds did on a sleepover, as she had never asked anyone to stay over at her house when she was young because her mother could be so unpredictable. She knew what a sleepover entailed when Emma was eight, they'd watch, eat popcorn, then curl into sleeping bags on the floor and whisper about school, boys (*ugh*), and their favorite ice cream until the wee hours of the morning. Hopefully, they were still doing that. Hopefully, they weren't smoking, or putting on too much makeup, or whispering about boys, or asking questions about...what did it mean when someone touched you without permission? A soft whimper escaped the anxious woman.

"What are you thinking about?" Natalia asked, seeing the worry lines etched across Olivia's forehead. Her partner was already in bed, her arms tucked under her head against the backboard.

"Emma, growing up too fast. Can we put a chastity belt on her until she's 30?" Olivia smiled as Natalia gave her a loving swat on the arm. "And deny a Facebook page? Seriously, Natalia. What Ava told us the other day, about her knowing about Jeffrey and what he did, makes my head and my heart hurt."

Natalia had already locked up downstairs, now she went through their room and closed the drapes, adjusted the screens to allow the flaccid breeze in, and turned on the ceiling fan.

"Maybe the three of us should sit down and come up with a plan." She pulled back the sheet and light blanket; all that was necessary in the month of June. "Olivia, not that I'm complaining, but why don't you ever get our room ready?"

"Ready? For what, bed?" Olivia's asked, incredulously.

Natalia stood, hands on hips. "Yes, there's a lot of preparation."

"Not in my world. Shower, brush teeth, jump in bed. Find beautiful woman. Make love. Done."

"You are so not funny, Olivia Spencer."

When Natalia climbed into her side of the bed, the sheets still crisp and cool, Olivia gave her a big grin and picked up her hand kissing it tenderly. Natalia rested her head against Olivia's shoulder; she loved this time of the evening, when they could just be together. It had taken her so long to find this, this...bliss.

Olivia turned toward her capturing Natalia's lips in a torrid kiss. "Let's see. Showered." Her eyes danced.

"Check." Natalia flicked her wrist.

"Brushed teeth?"

"Check." Natalia snuggled a little closer.

"Jumped in bed?"

"Check."

Olivia dimmed the light. "Used my GPS to find the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Guess that's a check." Natalia loved when Olivia talked all mushy to her.

"Guess there is just one thing left to do, then...," Olivia said huskily.

If sitting quietly cuddled up next to Olivia was bliss, a spiritual joy, then their lovemaking was divine. Divine was close to heavenly, and that is exactly what she felt when Olivia touched her. Her body tingled thinking about Olivia's fingers running down her side, dragging a nail over her nipple, or rubbing her warm and wet center into Natalia's thigh. To think she was afraid of this.

"Natalia, honey, where did you go?" Olivia cupped her partner's face with both hands, leaned in and tenderly kissed her nose, then her lips. It wasn't a passionate, fiery kiss but one that filled her with hope and promise. A kiss filled with tenderness. It was a kiss that meant forever. It was a kiss that she felt to her core, and a kiss that made her want to weep.

Natalia leaned back from Olivia, her eyes heavy with tears.

Olivia had straddled her, but hesitated and moved back, away from Natalia with an alarming look on her face.

"Sweetheart? What's wrong?" Ordinarily, Olivia prized herself on being able to read Natalia's moods, but for the past six months all bets were off. She replayed the past ten minutes. Did she say or do something wrong?

"I need you under my skin." Natalia tugged at her lover's ass pulling Olivia as close to her as she possibly could. She felt Olivia breathe an inward sigh as their breasts pressed together and Natalia allowed the softness to wash over her. Her fingers moved to Olivia's center.

"Hold onto me, and let me love you." She had done her homework; certain sexual positions caused more of a stress on the heart, thrusting and pumping could have lethal consequences. But this position would allow Olivia, when she came, to fall into Natalia's open arms. Olivia grabbed onto her shoulders for leverage and opened her legs wider.

Natalia gasped at the sight of her partner's neatly trimmed golden curls, she could smell Olivia's arousal. She teased Olivia open, sliding two fingers up and down her shaft, tapping on Olivia's swollen clit; that left Olivia biting down on Natalia's shoulder causing her to whimper.

"Natalia, please." Olivia's tone was syrupy sweet, like honey rolling off the back of a spoon.

Natalia fell in love with that voice the first time she met the woman. Natalia took two

fingers and slid them into Olivia, pumping in and out; she held pressure on her partner's clit, alternating pressure.

Olivia sucked on Natalia's shoulder as her climax built, finally tumbling over the edge with a muffled scream.

The full moon's light, sneaking through a break in the curtains, created shadows over the two draped bodies in the bed. Resting in her favorite place, Natalia's head lay on Olivia's shoulder; a hand placed on her chest directly over the fading pacemaker scar.

"I love you, Natalia Rivera." Olivia gently kissed her hair.

"Olivia." Sleep was claiming her, but she needed desperately to share this bit of news with her partner. "Olivia, I didn't need for you to touch me tonight." Natalia knew Olivia had wanted to give her pleasure but she didn't need the physical touch. When she noticed the hurt on Olivia's face, she realized she needed to explain. "What you gave me tonight was intangible."

Olivia tucked another pillow under her head. "Yeah?"

"Umm, it's hard to explain. When you kissed me, the first time it touched me so deeply. That kiss sealed the open fissures in my heart. Since the kidnapping I haven't been whole, you especially know that." Natalia watched as Olivia pulled up onto the pillow to get a better view of her. What she was saying was crucial. "But that kiss was all about the future, the depth of our love. The depth of love I have for you and our family." Natalia brushed her thumb at the few tears gathered in the corner of Olivia's eyes. "God has reentered my life over the past few weeks, baby steps but I can feel it. That's why I believe that Rafe is safe and he'll come to me when he's ready, I believe that we will work out the issues with Emma, that our family will remain strong and thrive." She kissed Olivia on the cheek. "I have faith. And, I'm ready to move on."

Company was deserted; the breakfast crowd had ended and the mad dash for lunch was an hour away.

"Hey Buzz, haven't seen you around in a while," Doris said as she went behind the bar and poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Well, I'm spending much of my time making sure Frank gets the support he needs. He's still struggling." Doris laid a hand on his shoulder in solidarity. "My hip is giving me trouble. Might need surgery." He frowned and went back to filling the salt and pepper shakers.

"Hey, Buzz...," Blake said as she came through the door like a whirlwind. "Guess what?" She dumped her bag and other paraphernalia behind the bar. "One of the books..." She caught Doris's eye for the first time. "Oh. hey, Doris. I didn't see you at first."

"You seem all excited about something? I'm sure it's not me." Doris meant it as a joke, but Blake gave her a cold stare.

"Don't say things like that. Don't demean yourself." Blake said with determination and Doris threw up her hands in surrender.

Excitedly, Blake spoke to both of them. "One of the books I co-edited has been chosen for the New York Times Bestseller list. How about that?" Blake had continued with her publishing business even though Ross had hinted that she wouldn't have to work any longer now that he was back. Everyone in town knew that the twins were out of control, and Clarissa was entering her teenage years. Ross had insinuated that if Blake wasn't working two jobs, she could be a hands-on parent and a better disciplinarian. Blake had fired back that if her supposedly dead husband had left her better off financially, she wouldn't have had to work two jobs. Besides, putting the boys in boarding school was Ross's idea; that cost a bundle and they got expelled anyway. Blake had made it clear she had no intentions of giving up her career.

"Great news." Doris gently rubbed the small of Blake's back. "You're good, Blakey, really good." An awkward moment settled between them and Doris realized her actions, withdrawing her hand as if it had touched a hot poker. "Look, I have to run." Doris grabbed her briefcase. The words came out before she had a chance to put the brakes on them. "How about a drink to celebrate?" She held her breath.

Blake's eyes turned a deeper shade of blue. "I'd really like that."

Since Doris left the invitation open-ended, Blake took the initiative. "Tomorrow at Bistro Arles, off of route 4. Be there at 6:00."

The Grady Foley murder case had begun to effect the lives of many Springfield residents. Cyrus was still giving Mel the cold shoulder; he just couldn't understand how his lover could defend his brother's murderer, and that Phillip Spaulding was home on bail, preparing for his defence instead of remaining behind bars.

"Murderer is a strong word, Cyrus; be reasonable. You've already got the man convicted, sentenced, and rotting in jail for the rest of his life," Mel said in her defence. The prosecution had to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Phillip murdered Grady Foley, and she did not think they had the evidence to prove it.

On the other side of town, Jeffrey and Ross huddled in the small conference room. Ross had painstakingly put together a scenario of what happened that fateful day.

"It certainly could have happened that way." Jeffrey bit on the edge of his pencil. "We need something more..."

Olivia had dropped Emma off at the mansion after school since Phillip was desperate to see his daughter after what went down at the mansion last week.

"Daddy!" Emma squealed as she jumped out of the car.

He picked her up and twirled her around a few times. She was getting heavier; it wouldn't be too long that he couldn't do that anymore. She was becoming a young lady.

"Em, why don't you see if there are any cookies in the kitchen?" Olivia ushered her towards the house.

"You want to get rid of me, huh? Grown-up talk?" Recognizing the dismissal for what it was, Emma sulked as she stalked off to follow the cookie crumb trail.

Olivia waited until her daughter was out of ear range before she turned to her ex-husband. "Phillip, you can't threaten Jeffrey over the rape." Olivia was defiant, pacing, her high heels clacking loudly on the pavement.

Phillip had seen her like this before, focused and resolute. She was a formidable woman when on a mission.

"It will be all over town, I don't want Emma to find out what that word means from some kid in the schoolyard." She was near panic when Phillip led her over to the bench at the edge of the garden. "And Ava! This will be devastating to her. Ava's trying really hard to face a future without this albatross around her neck." Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose. "He's her father, but their relationship is strained already."

"Olivia, Jeffrey may go through with the trial to save face, but the evidence is flimsy." Phillip squinted into the sunlight. "I'm sure it will all be okay."

"How do you know that? You can't know that. I don't care about Jeffrey's face, or whether you did or didn't murder Grady Foley. I care about my daughters!"

Phillip tried to console the furious woman, but she would have none of it. It had been a long time since they had words; he felt uneasy and a little sad about it.

Olivia picked up to leave. Her tone brokered no argument as she spoke, "You need to fix this." She left him with a stony glare.

Phillip stood dejectedly hands in pockets, staring at the tight derriere swaying down the walkway. Olivia Spencer in high heels and tight skirt was a sight to behold. He went somewhere he should not have gone. He went to the first time his eyes took in Olivia, the sway she held over him. Lust, love call it what you will. He couldn't resist the woman. He let out a low sigh, turned and walked dejectedly back towards the house.

Act II

"Soooo, Emma knows about Jeffrey?" Olivia asked her eldest daughter after the Towers waiter had taken their drink orders. "How do you know she knows?" Her eyes were on Ava. Her daughter had been known to stretch the truth; hell she was a chip off the old block but Olivia was not going to lose her temper; nor say things out loud that she couldn't take back.

"You both looked upset the other day when I mentioned that Emma knew that Jeffrey hurt you."

"Upset?" Olivia clenched her jaw and cocked an eyebrow. "Can you think of a better word?"

Ava shrugged. "Surprised? Shocked?" Ava was getting annoyed with her mother's sarcasm. She threw up her arms.

"Keep trying; you'll get there." Olivia began rearranging the silverware.

Natalia glanced at her. Those words were engrained in her memory from the My Two Mommies fiasco. She gently nudged Olivia's knee under the table, trying to keep her rooted firmly in place.

"Does she know what the word rape means?" Olivia tapped on the table with her finger. Ava jerked in her seat. The word had a chilling effect on all three women. "Back off."

Ava's eyes were blazing. "I was the product of that evening."

Olivia was relentless in her questions. "Well, does she?" She sighed as her daughter sat silent. "How did you two happen to have that conversation? Did she ask why or how Jeffrey is your father, or if he was the man who hurt me?"

"Olivia...," Natalia reached out, not for her partner but for the young woman sitting across the table. "Think about what you're saying." Natalia grabbed Ava's sweaty hand.

Olivia glanced toward her partner; Natalia's face was unreadable, but Olivia knew immediately she had stepped over the line. For all the times she and Ava had talked about the past, for all the times she had told Ava that she had forgiven Jeffrey, for all the times she truly believed she was over the hurt and pain of the rape, Olivia knew in her heart she would carry that wound for the rest of her life. Her hope was that Ava wouldn't carry all of her pain, but now the haunted look on Ava's face was proof that the wound was as raw as it had ever been.

"Let me ask you the questions," Ava started. She needed to take control of the conversation since she did not like where it was leading. She noted her mother nodding before settling back in her seat, resting her head against the booth leather. "Emma knows you put me up for adoption, right?" Ava asked and noted Olivia's nod. "Does she know why?"

"I told her that I couldn't take care of you. I told her that I was very young, and I had my brother and sister to raise."

Ava continued. "She knows we found each other again after twenty years and she also knows that Jeffrey is my father."

"Who told her?" Natalia asked.

"I did. She was talking about Phillip and she asked who my daddy was. I told her; I couldn't lie to her."

"I'm glad you didn't lie to her." Olivia sighed as she reached for Ava's hand. If this was hard on her, she couldn't imagine the turmoil raging inside her daughter.

"She asked me why you didn't marry Jeffrey then?" Ava watched as her mother cringed.

Thank God the waiter brought their drinks or else she'd have broken down right there. "I told her you were too young and she'd have to ask you."

Natalia sensed that Olivia needed some alone time with Ava so she excused herself to visit the bathroom.

"Ava, I don't know how to handle this. Any suggestions?" She would make Ava part of the solution.

"You're asking me?" Ava asked, taking a big gulp of her iced tea. "That's unusual."

"I need your insight. Natalia and I go around and around, because I'm so damn afraid that Emma..."

"Afraid of what?" Ava asked as she stared down at the table.

It was hard for Olivia to voice her fears. A deep sigh cleared her mind. "Afraid she will think less of me, or less of you. I don't want her growing up being afraid of people, being afraid of men because all men are not rapists."

Ava's eyes glistened. "Fear paralyzes you; running away from a problem makes it worse. I should know."

Olivia grimaced remembering too well how Ava broke down after Max died. She noticed the

tears in Ava's eyes; tears of sadness, but there was also something else radiating through the tears. There was a defiance; an inner strength that she hadn't noticed before.

"I no longer want to be a victim, Mom. This is never going to go away, but I'm trying not to let it control me."

Olivia nodded in agreement, then asked about Emma.

"We'll tackle this together. We're a family, right?" Ava said, grasping onto her mother's hands.

"Yeah, we're a family. Thank you, Ava." Olivia eyes glowed with appreciation and love. Perhaps, with them both on the same page now they could move forward.

The farmhouse felt a lot more cheery over the past few days. Natalia seemed to have found the inner peace that had eluded her all those months and she and Emma continued with their tai chi, while Olivia began a yoga class at the Beacon. Leyla had organized it, and a good number of Beacon employees took advantage of the discount price. Olivia wasn't sure she would be comfortable in a class with her employees watching her every move, but it was convenient and she felt less stressed and oddly more energetic. The only uncomfortable moment was when she struggled with a forward bend and got a little stuck. Maria, in housekeeping helped her untangle herself and they all laughed afterwards, but it was an embarrassing moment for her. Olivia Spencer detested embarrassing moments.

"You're home early? Did Olivia fire you?" Leyla joked with her big sister when she entered the kitchen, noticing Natalia chopping vegetables and tossing them into a container.

"The boss gave me the afternoon off. I had to take Francesca to the doctor earlier," Natalia said. Noticing Leyla's concerned expression, Natalia continued with a smile, "She's fine and growing like a weed."

"One of these days you have to sit down and tell me what really happened between you, Frank and Olivia. My favorite soap opera went off the air a few years ago, but I'm sure your 'soap' makes them look like amateurs."

"It's so complicated." Natalia said with a bemused grin.

Leyla wondered if today was the day that Natalia would confide in her.

"You know everything until the time Olivia moved into this house, around Christmas, 2008. We fought about everything; Olivia decided they would move back into the Beacon after New Year's." Natalia put the veggies in the fridge. "Come with me." Natalia grabbed Leyla's hand and dragged her into the pantry. There stood her most prized possession, the piece of molding with Rafe's height markings from her old apartment in Chicago. "A piece of wood, Leyla. A piece of wood to everyone else, but this meant the world to me." Leyla rubbed her hand over the worn surface. "I gave her a set of keys that day. We fought, we made up, and we got close...closer than I've ever been to anyone, Leyla. I really don't know how it happened, but I found myself having strange feelings when I was around her." Natalia blushed. "Long story short, I slept with Frank thinking I'd forget how I felt about Olivia. It didn't work. Want some advice? Never sleep with someone to forget someone else." Leyla chuckled at her big sister's revelation. She understood that advice because she had done it, more than once.

Natalia reverently rubbed her fingers over the worn numbers and looked directly at Leyla. "I have never loved like this."

"Private Rivera, how you feeling today?" Dr. Yamato asked as he and his team made their Grand Rounds.

Paul was lurking somewhere at the end of the queue trying to get bits and pieces about Rafe's condition. He was still on probation so he treaded carefully.

"We're going to take some pictures of your spine and see if there is any damage," the doctor continued.

Rafe knew there was some damage; hell, he couldn't feel his legs. He was agitated and tired of being used as some specimen under a microscope. "Dr. Yamato, no offense, sir, but obviously there's damage; otherwise I'd be able to get up and walk out of this dum...er, place." Rafe eyes blazed. "I've been here for three weeks and no one knows what's wrong? I know what's wrong. Not too many smart people around here." The medical residents were shocked by this patient's tongue lashing.

"Rafe, you didn't make any friends just now." Paul stated, as he helped the frustrated man settle back into the bed. He watched as the doctors made their way to the next patient. "They're your ticket out of here, man, you've got to watch your mouth."

"Fuck you. You're not lying in this bed." Rafe turned his head to the wall.

"Fine, I'll go fuck myself." Paul filled the water pitcher and left the room in a huff.

Leyla watched her sister move comfortably around the kitchen. She was so young when Natalia left home, now she found herself wanting to know everything about this woman who stood up to her parents regardless of the consequences.

"How's the tai chi coming?" Leyla pulled down a bowl for some ice cream. Natalia smiled.

"Good. Really good. I'm liking it. Especially the days when we break from routine and do some boxing." Leyla laughed, glad to see her sister happy again. "You should see Olivia at the yoga class. It's hilarious. She's pretty limber, but sometimes she gets stuck in a position and one of the 'hired help' has to help her out."

Natalia wasn't sure she liked the tone of Leyla's comment. "Olivia's a hard task master, but she's very good to her employees."

Leyla heard the defensive tone in her voice. "Sis, I know she's a good boss, everyone likes her, although a few call her the Leona Helmsley of Springfield." She dove into the mint chocolate chip decadence.

Natalia's eyes widened, affronted by the comparison to her partner. "Leona Helmsley! She's a witch. Besides, she's dead. Who calls Olivia that?"

"Easy tiger, defending your love?" Leyla quickly responded, and though she thought Natalia's behavior was adorable, Leyla changed the subject. "When are you two going to get married?" An innocent enough question, Leyla thought.

Natalia silently finished scrubbing out the sink. "After what happened, I wonder if Olivia still wants to marry me."

Leyla put down her spoon with a bang. "You got to be kidding me? The woman adores you; why wouldn't she want to marry you?"

Natalia took out a bowl and scooped some ice cream for herself. She sat down at the table and ritually opened the laptop. "So much has happened since our last wedding day. I had left Olivia once before and it almost killed her. Then, not to show up on our wedding day, well..."

"That wasn't your fault." Leyla pushed her plate away. She got up and hugged Natalia's shoulders. "Olivia knows you had no control over that."

Natalia grabbed onto her sister's hands tugging them around her. When had she and Leyla ever been this close?

"I want to marry Olivia as much as I want Rafe's voice and image to show up on the Skype account." Both women forlornly stared at the computer. Leyla rested her chin on Natalia's head and held her tight.

Doris signed on the wrong line for the third time. Damn it. Focus, Wolfe. Her mind was not on next year's budget figures; it was a million miles away. To be honest, her mind was just a few miles across town where Blake was holding a meeting with a woman who had a story to tell.

Closing her document book, Doris leaned back in her chair. The other evening had been exhilarating, that would probably be the best way to describe it. She had called ahead for a bottle of Dom Perignon to be chilled and a quiet table away from the crowd. Blake looked radiant as she walked in. Doris noticed over the last few weeks the other woman had been looking tired, defeated, but tonight she appeared vibrant and renewed. She wore black slacks, a pale blue silk top covered with a subtle print jacket. Being around Blake had pushed Doris to purchase an entirely new wardrobe. She admitted to herself that dressing up gave her a new outlook, but more importantly she didn't have to listen to Olivia's snarky remarks anymore.

They talked for hours, about everything and nothing. They caught up about the children and Blake's concern that Ross was neglecting the twins. "He's blaming me for their being expelled from school, and the incident with Emma."

Doris reached for her hand. "He has no idea what you've had to deal with all these years." She wanted to give Ross a swift kick in his ass.

The conversation turned to the future. Doris sighed, wondering how to approach her concerns. "What is it you want, Blake? Do you even know?" Doris clung to her hand.

"I know what I don't want," Blake stated firmly when the waiter came to refill their glasses. "I don't want to stay home and take care of the children. I want an equal partner in childrearing."

I can do that, Doris thought to herself.

"I don't want anyone to tell me I can't have a career," Blake continued, on a roll.

I will encourage your career, Doris added to her mental check list.

Blake renewed her grip on Doris's hand and smiled at the other woman. "I want someone who sees me. Someone who knows the new improved Blake, not the one from years ago."

Paul peeked into the darkened room to find Rafe resting; it had been a rough day for the soldier. An MRI, then a nerve probe of his lower back and legs indicated some major issues.

"I know you're here," Rafe said, noting that the nursing assistant hesitated before he approached the bed. Rafe croaked out an apology. "I'm sorry for before. You're my best friend in here."

"Maybe I'll be your best friend out of here if you watch your mouth. All I want to do is help." Paul dragged over the plastic chair to sit. "Abuela Carmen wants to see you again."

Hearing that news, Rafe fully awoke and pulled himself up on the grip bar the PT intern installed that afternoon. He could keep up his upper body strength and not feel so helpless.

"Know what I'd like?" Rafe asked, not expecting an answer. When Paul shrugged, Rafe continued, "I'd like for my mother and my Abuela to make amends. I know my ma misses her, but they're both too stubborn..."

"Why don't you call your ma?"

"Paul, remember what I said on Sunday? I don't want anyone talking to my ma until I know what's wrong. I'll call her when I'm good and ready." Rafe turned his head back on the pillow facing the opposite wall, feeling the lump that had resided in his throat since he'd met his grandmother for the first time the other day.

Olivia had made a decision; from now on she would be the only person at the Beacon to restock the wine cellar. Greg had done a respectable job, but it was summer, for God's sake, and the cellar was filled with robust reds made for sitting in front of the fire on a snowy evening. Sauvignon Blanc and a fruity Pinot Grigio would sell like hotcakes during the hot and humid summer months. She let out a harrumph as she took the elevator downstairs to the childcare center.

She followed the hallway down to the large playroom that led to an outside playground.

"Mommy!" Francesca's cherub face lit up when she saw Olivia enter the room and wrapped her arms around Olivia's knees. "Mommy, up. Up." Francesca continued her demands. "Up, please."

"Hi, Mommy...", Leyla's eyes twinkled as she watched the scenario unfold.

As Olivia sat down in one of the grownup chairs, Francesca still clung to her.

"Leyla, would you lift Sweet Pea onto my lap?" It nearly killed her not to be able to hold or lift up her little girl, but her youngest daughter was way too heavy for her now. Leyla lifted the little one onto Olivia's lap and watched the love fest continue.

She couldn't help comment. "You're a better person than I am, Olivia."

Olivia was cuddling Francesca to her chest, blowing raspberries on the laughing toddler's neck. "Hmm, what do you mean?"

"You know...Natalia and Frank...together." Leyla shuddered at the thought.

Olivia cringed trying not to remember that devastating day when Natalia told her she had slept with Frank. "Leyla, my love for Natalia transcends everything, and so does my love for my daughter," Olivia said, wrapping an arm around the now squirming child.

Leyla felt a pang of envy; how she wished she'd be able to find someone who loved her the way these two women loved each other. Deciding to bite the bullet and cover the same question she had with her sister, Leyla bluntly asked, "Olivia, when are you and Natalia getting married?"

Olivia gently bounced Francesca on her knee. She took a few moments to answer. "After considering what happened, I wonder if Natalia still wants to marry me." Leyla willed herself not to laugh. Those were Natalia's words almost exactly.

"You're kidding me! The woman adores you." Olivia smiled meekly. "Look, I don't like to meddle."

"Then don't," Olivia quickly responded then waved her hand and laughed.

"Natalia wants to get married. She told me so today."

Olivia's countenance turned sober. "Really? She said that? I want to marry her as much as I want Rafe's sand-graveled voice to crackle over the Skype account." She watched as Leyla again stifled a laugh. "I'm so tired of waiting."

Act III

"Look, Olivia," Natalia said as she grabbed her partner's hand and pulled her down on the couch, to watch the news. "Isn't that sweet?" With Pride events happening all over this summer, the national news was reporting on the number of same-sex marriages taking place in New York since it was legalized a year ago.

"Blame June weddings on the Romans. Juno, is the goddess of marriage." Olivia turned up the volume.

"Were you ever a June bride?"

Olivia puckered her lips as if she was sucking on a tart lemon. "You're kidding, right?"

Natalia acted innocent.

"I've been a bride much of the calendar year, except June," Olivia stated with some

amusement and observed as Natalia's pondered that statement. "Hmm, can't imagine how I missed June." She said sarcastically.

This brought up so much of her old baggage. How could she have married someone she so despised? Alan Spaulding came to mind. She and Alan were cut from the same cloth. Power and greed fuelled them both. Bill Lewis? Oh, god where should she start. Josh? There was love there, but the third person in their marriage doomed it from the start. And Phillip. Lust, love, and her image of Phillip as the white knight; the man that she thought would save her from not only Alan, but also herself.

Noticing that her partner had zoned out of the conversation, Natalia gently tugged on her hand. "Olivia? Where did you go, love?"

"Tell me about my uncle, Leo. He's my uncle, right?" Rafe asked as he slurped on the strawberry milkshake Paul snuck into the VA. "It's got Splenda, right?"

"Yeah, yeah...the aftertaste should tell you that," Paul said amused as he sat on the edge of the bed. "I don't know much about him. My ma got pregnant, he hung around for awhile, she threw him out, and then he joined the Army." Rafe didn't really know much about his family beyond what his mother had told him, which wasn't very much come to think about it. Hell, for the amount of time they lived in Springfield, he knew zilch about his father's family except that they were filthy rich. He also knew he could not continue down a path of delinquency. The pain he caused his mother when he went to jail would haunt him the rest of his life. By joining the Army he made a conscious choice to change all that. The Army gave him discipline and order. He looked down at his useless legs. Yeah, he had been injured, but that's the risk you take. He didn't need to continue to feel bitter and sorry for himself, he could do something with his life. Smirking, he looked over at Paul. Nursing wasn't his thing, but something else in the health professions might interest him. He admired the physical therapist that came today and set up his pull bar. Something so simple could give a person so much power. Now, all he had to do was get his paralyzed ass out of this bed.

Paul waited until he had Rafe's attention before he began to talk about his father. "He lost a leg in Afghanistan. Do you want to meet him?"

"Why would I want to do that? You said he's a dick." Rafe said with a bit of derision as he sucked the drink container dry. "God, that was good."

Paul ran his hand through his curls. "Yeah, he doesn't have much use for anything out of the 'norm'." He used air quotation marks to emphasize norm. Paul noticed his cousin's puzzled look so he continued. "A warning; your Ma and Olivia will fit into that category. He has no use for lesbians, or anyone else for that matter. I just thought what he went through with his leg and all, he could help you." Paul pushed off the bed. "Look, I've gotta run. Think about it."

"Natalia, next week I have to go to New York to check out some properties." Olivia had little time over the past six months to think about franchising the Beacon, however, two boutique hotels were coming on the market, and her investment team was in place, now all she had to do was find the time and energy to make it happen. She rubbed circles across the top of Natalia's hand.

This was the first time Natalia had heard this tidbit of information.

Olivia quickly thought on her feet. A sheepish look crossed her face. "Ah, it happened pretty quickly. The investor team contacted me yesterday; I just forgot to tell you."

That answer seemed to pacify the surprised woman, besides she had a more important question for Olivia. "You haven't answered me, Olivia. Where did you go just now?"

Olivia rose, shutting off the TV. Sighing, she turned to face Natalia. "Okay, okay I went to my dark place." Pinching the bridge of her nose, she knew that Natalia would ask her again until she said something. Because of the incident that happened last time they were to get married, her anxiety took over. "I want that.." She turned and pointed to the blank TV. "I want to marry you, I really, really do, but..."

"But what, querida?" Natalia was now on her feet, grasping Olivia's hands to her chest. "What are you so afraid of?"

"That it will all blow up in our faces again." Olivia hung her head, feeling powerless to push away the negative feelings. "That I was a failure in all my other marriages. Please, believe me when I promise I'll do right by you." She was crying now.

Natalia's hand gently cradled Olivia's chin bringing the crying woman's head to her level. "Look at me. Look into my eyes, what do you see?" Natalia pushed a renegade strand of hair behind Olivia's ear.

"I see someone who's loving and kind. Someone who has loved me for who I am." Looking over at her partner, she smirked slightly, "Someone who doesn't try to change me." The tears rolled down her cheeks even as she acknowledged that Natalia has changed her, but only for the better.

"Olivia, my love. We came back from that nightmare. The fact that we're here, together, more in love than ever proves it. I want to marry you. And soon." Natalia wrapped her woman tightly in her arms. "I love you so much."

Olivia sniffled, wiping her eyes on Natalia's shirt collar. "How about after this trip to New York, we begin making wedding plans again?" Pulling back far enough to see Natalia nodding, feeling her partner's soft hand running down her arm, Olivia continued. "I really want you with me in New York."

Olivia knew that she was taking a gamble in asking Natalia to leave the children. It felt like an eternity since they had heard from Rafe. Olivia had to believe he was alive, although why she thought that she couldn't fathom. Not Ashlee, nor any of his other friends had heard from him lately. One of her employees at the Beacon, whose brother had been in Iraq in 2006 at the height of the troop surge, was out in the field for two months. They never knew if he was dead or alive. Communication is absolutely forbidden if there is a classified engagement going on. It was that thought that gave Olivia hope.

"So, will you come to New York?" Olivia's watery eyes did her bargaining for her.

Natalia took her time in answering. How could she refuse? She didn't want to refuse.

They hadn't been away together for months except that day trip to the spa. "Who'll take the kids?"

Olivia had covered all her bases, telling Natalia that Ava would take care of Emma, while Buzz and Lillian would take Francesca. Olivia wasn't sure that Buzz was up to it, but Lillian said it would be a welcome distraction.

"What about Frank?"

"I understand Frank went to visit Harley. He'll be back in two weeks. We'll have the computer so we can keep any eye on Skype. From New York we can fly anywhere at a moment's notice...that is, if we have to." Olivia wanted Natalia to feel secure that she had thought about all the what ifs. They would leave Friday in early afternoon and come back

early Sunday evening. She felt Natalia wrap her arms tighter around her waist and she rested her head on Natalia's chest.

Natalia felt so safe in her lover's arms. The visceral reaction that stirred deep in her belly threatened to overflow. She could feel her need, but Emma needed help with her homework, and Francesca needed a bath. Everyone's needs satisfied except her own.

Olivia slid out of her arms only to push her up against the doorframe. "Please come with me, sweetheart." Olivia leaned down and kissed her thoroughly. "I don't want to do this without you." Natalia moaned into the kiss. Finally they broke hearing the squeaky step on the stairs.

"Well, I think you're right. We need some time away. Sounds like a plan," Natalia said as she nuzzled under Olivia's ear sending shivers down the older woman's spine. She caught Emma out of the corner of her eye coming down the stairs. "You've thought of everything."

Olivia Spencer was going to get married. For the sixth time. Thinking back on all her other marriages, there was only one that meant anything to her; her marriage to Josh. So, in her heart, she was only getting married for the second time. She couldn't understand why this bothered her so. She knew it could have something to do with the person she had been; manipulative, greedy, and hurtful. Perhaps she should talk to Dr. Tremain about this. *Later*, she thought, *right now I have a wedding to plan*.

She had barely a week to pull this off, the 30th of June. They'd both be June brides. She grinned at that. Olivia thought ahead and filled out the Marriage Application online. There was no way this could be a total surprise since both she and Natalia had to appear at the City Clerk's Office. She had Doris working on ways to get around that hitch, but Doris wasn't about to do anything illegal. Well, maybe she could call in a favor or something.

Olivia smiled. The ducks were lining up; Doris had happily agreed to marry the couple. When she had asked Phillip for use of the private jet and when he asked where she was jetting off to, her answer was vague.

Phillip had ventured a guess. "Does this have something to do with a certain someone? New York in June, hmm...the bells are ringing for me and my gal." He got a swat on the arm and promised to keep mum.

"Just take care of what we discussed." Olivia's stern reminder annoyed him. "And, Phillip. Thank you." She kissed his cheek. Her charm again won him over.

"Mom, I'm really happy for you," Ava said as she laid out the crème colored pant suit Olivia was going to wear.

Olivia also tossed three different colors of camisoles into the suitcase. She'd decide which one suited her when they got to New York. Breezy and light she thought. Formal would be later when they got married in Springfield.

"How are you going to pull this off?"

"Natalia thinks we're going to New York to check out hotels for franchising." Olivia grinned as she turned to Ava with two pairs of pants in her hands. "We will look at two properties so it's not totally a fib."

"Emma's going to be upset because she can't be a flower girl," Ava mused, envisioning her little sister's pout.

"She can be a flower girl when we get married in Springfield. By then, she'll be able to be a bridesmaid." Olivia rolled her eyes for emphasis. "Doris has a few friends in New York. I told her what I wanted. She's making the arrangements for the ceremony."

Most of the weekend was planned. They had reservations for Friday night dinner at the Tribeca Grill. She knew Natalia would be happy with whatever they did; she had never been to New York. Olivia imagined her lover all wide-eyed with excitement, her dimples coming out to play as she surveyed the wonders of the Big Apple. Afterwards, they'd head to the Oak Room at the Algonquin Hotel and listen to some jazz. The Algonquin was getting a facelift and Olivia wanted to see the results. The idea of a jazz supper club at the Beacon was something she had floating around in her cluttered mind.

"Where are Mom and Ma going?" Emma was finishing off the Mint Chocolate Chip ice cream.

"They're off for a well deserved mini-vacation to New York." Ava wondered if she could survive an entire weekend with a precocious 12 year old. "Just you and I, kid. Anything special you want to do?"

"Hang out at the mall and ogle the boys." Emma grinned up at her older sister.

A loud chuckle arose from Ava. "I'm a little too old to ogle boys, Em. Tomorrow, we'll go to the mall; I need to do some shopping. Then I'll take you to Company for some Buzz burgers."

Emma made a face.

"What? What? Now you don't like Buzz burgers?" Ava gave her an incredulous expression.

"They are so last week." Emma knew she was pushing Ava's buttons and was enjoying it. She'd push to see how much she could get away with since her mommies were going out of town. What she didn't know was that Ava had already been informed of her recent 'adventures', so there were going to be limits to her pushing.

The flight plan was all squared away, and the bags were loaded when she and Natalia took their seats. There would be champagne to settle the nerves on the two and half hour trip. Flying was not Natalia's forte. She had flown to San Cristobal with Olivia, but that plane was a Boeing 737. This plane looked like a miniature child's toy and that frightened her even more.

As there was some turbulence as the plane climbed to reach its cruising speed, Natalia groped for Olivia's hand. She was pleasantly surprised when Olivia handed her a glass of champagne.

"Fasten your seat belt, darling, it's going to be a bumpy ride," Olivia remarked with amusement, then laughed as Natalia gave her a guarded grin when she wagged her eyebrows. They toasted. "To a pleasurable trip. This is good practice for when we go on our honeymoon." Olivia settled back in her seat.

Natalia couldn't help but feel a pang of remorse; Paris had beckoned six months ago, and instead she was kidnapped and almost died.

Doris had arrived in New York early to make the arrangements. The Pierre Hotel that overlooked Central Park was one of her favorites, and she liked it even more since Olivia was springing for the suite. *Knowing Olivia, she got a deal; knows somebody who knows somebody.* It was elegantly appointed, had a well-stocked bar, king-size bed, and sunken tub. There was only one thing missing: Blake. How she yearned to have Blake at her side, having dinner then maybe a walk in Central Park, or taking a buggy ride. Lying across the big bed, she closed her eyes to force back the tears that threatened. *I'm going to fight for her, that's what I'm going to do.*

Act IV

Natalia swooned when the New York City skyline came into view; the word that quickly came to her mind was majestic. She wanted to see everything. And, she wanted to see the world with Olivia at her side.

Olivia pointed out the Chrysler Building, the UN and the Brooklyn Bridge. "The World Trade Center used to be down there," Olivia said as she pointed to lower Manhattan.

Natalia nodded solemnly. They wouldn't have time to visit Ground Zero this visit, but it is something she wanted to experience. "Is that Central Park?" Natalia was practically bouncing in her seat.

Olivia nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, we're staying directly across from the park on 5th Avenue."

Natalia grabbed onto Olivia's shoulder and gave her a hearty squeeze. The plane set down at JFK with a timid thud.

"Restricted number?" Olivia commented as she looked at her cell phone's screen, wondering who was calling. Directing the driver attendant to put the luggage into the trunk, Olivia teased Natalia about the two large suitcases for a 48 hour trip. It brought back memories of the first spa trip when they were trying to figure things out. "I need to take this. Could be something with Rafe or the kids." She waited until Natalia climbed into the back of the limo.

"Hey, sister dear," the voice on the other end

"Sam?! Where the hell are you?" Olivia asked as she adjusted her Bluetooth device.

"Toidy, toid and toid." His mocking New York accent made her laugh. "33rd St. and 3rd Ave. I just got into my hotel."

"We're on our way into Manhattan. The Pierre," Olivia said, trying to hear her brother's voice. It was so hard to hear with the cacophony of noises surrounding them. Then she jerked slightly in surprise. "Wait. You're in New York?"

"Yeah, look. Why don't I call you in about 30 minutes or so? You should be at your hotel room by then and I'll give you the details. Ciao, sis!"

Olivia looked somewhat surprised at the quick disconnect, but understanding her brother's nomadic nature, she'd learned to live with it over the years.

Natalia twirled around the Park suite bedroom until she was dizzy. Then she ran to the windows to see the bustling humanity of Central Park and Fifth Avenue.

Olivia followed her, wrapping her arms tightly around the petite woman's waist. "Isn't it grand?"

"Oh, Olivia. I love it." She nestled against Olivia's chest. "It's like a fairytale."

"My bosom or the city?" That quip earned her a playful slap on the arm. Olivia's phone went off. "Let me just take this; it's probably Sam."

"Sis, are you settled?"

"Yeah, sure. What's up?" Olivia asked as she started to put her outfits in the closet.

Sam indicated that he was in town for 48 hours, enough time for an interview. "Look, can we get together at some point?"

"Interview? Where?" Olivia was excited for him.

"CNN, they need a photographer. It would keep me in the States a few months a year. Look, I have to run. Can we get together?"

"Sure, be at the Wagner Cove tomorrow at 3:50 pm. It's in Central Park. Wear something presentable." She paced. "Yes, be there! Don't be late." She let out a disgruntled sigh and hung up.

Doris had to admit that the little hole-in-the-wall restaurant that the concierge had suggested was perfect. Dining alone in Springfield was one thing, but dining alone in a Five Star restaurant in New York was another. She felt so conspicuous, but looking around she realized that there wasn't one person in the restaurant who was interested in her story and she relaxed a bit. The one thing she loved about this city was the anonymity; there were just too many people with their own issues to care about one little mayor of small town U.S.A. Pulling out her iPhone, she reviewed the preparations for tomorrow's festivities; Wagner Cove had been the perfect place for an intimate ceremony. Her friend, Chloe, who worked in the New York City Clerk's Office had agreed, with some prodding and a gift card to Bloomingdales, to bring the marriage license to the ceremony. The surprise would be intact. Doris smiled to herself; Bloomingdales...some people are so easily bought.

She was just ready to take a bite of the aromatic cannelloni when she realized someone was hovering over her table and she glanced up. Blue inquiring eyes met dancing blue ones. "Blake?"

"Olivia, the seared sea scallops were out of this world." Natalia said, patting her belly while they waited for their driver.

"A little overdone." Olivia kept her eyes peeled for the car amidst a sea of chaos on the sidewalk. "But, the wine choice was spectacular."

"Really?" Natalia's voice had a hint of amusement in it. "And how would you know, Miss Tuna Noodle Casserole aficionado?"

"I can cook, Natalia. Remember?" Olivia retorted with a grin; it was an old argument that they'd taken in good humor. "And I grew up on an island - I know seafood, especially well cooked seafood."

"Ah, that's right and you're going to do a lot more of it when we get home."

The ride up 3rd Ave took forever on a Friday night. "Olivia, can we skip the Algonquin and head to our hotel?" Natalia was exhausted and honestly, after the five-bell noise level of the Tribeca Grill she just wanted some alone time with her partner.

The driver let them out a few blocks from the hotel. It was a spectacular evening, warm and balmy with little of the suffocating humidity that Olivia detested. Tomorrow would be more of the same. The two women ambled slowly, arm in arm across town from Columbus Circle to the Pierre.

"Where is this property we're looking at tomorrow? And what time?" Natalia asked while pointing at the horse carriages lined up along Central Park West.

Olivia had totally forgotten about their noon meeting with her investment group at the Eventi Hotel in Chelsea, as she took in the electric atmosphere of the city with her partner.

"Olivia, can we take a carriage ride?" Her eyes danced.

"It's a little late now, maybe tomorrow?" Olivia suggested. After our wedding. Olivia smiled.

"Blake?" Doris asked, surprised. She threw down her napkin and pushed back from the table. Remembering her manners, she stood and greeted the other woman with a kiss on the cheek. "Blake." Still, it was about all she could muster.

The concierge had given Blake all the information she needed to find Doris, and at Doris's gesture of invitation, Blake joined her. They sat quietly as the waiter immediately brought another setting and poured Blake a glass of the buttery chardonnay. The women toasted then sipped their wine.

"You seem happy to see me?" Blake asked.

All Doris could do was nod. Doris's eyes were shimmering, with tears of gratitude and joy.

"I ran into Ava and she told me what was happening."

Ava had been at Company while Blake had the breakfast shift and the younger woman was so excited that she spilled the beans about the impending marriage. She had told Blake that Doris was already in New York and doing much of the preparation. Blake grinned,

continuing her story. "So, I called Ross and told him I was headed out-of-town and he had to take the children. He was not amused." She winked at Doris. "The hotel was booked solid so I told them I'd be staying with you."

It was just like Doris had imagined in her moments of fancy and hope. After dinner, she and Blake walked arm-in-arm down Fifth Ave until they reached Times Square. It was bedlam so they turned quickly around and walked up 6th Avenue, finishing up the evening with an after dinner drink in the Pierre Hotel.

"I confess," Natalia started as she kicked off her shoes and took out her earrings. She padded across the room to where Olivia was standing taking in the view from the 38th floor.

Not quite the presidential or honeymoon suite, Olivia mused, but it sure is lovely. She felt Natalia rub her shoulders, her hands dragging lightly down Olivia's sides, over the curves of her breasts making the older woman shudder. Olivia loved being pursued like this, the idea that Natalia wanted her made her body tremble with a rush of the pleasure that was to come. "What do you need to confess?" Olivia asked, in between moans.

"I confess that I want to relax here with you rather than listen to jazz in some stuffy room," Natalia said, barely above a whisper as she dropped kisses to Olivia's shoulders.

Olivia shivered, turned slowly and took Natalia into her arms, kissing her desperately. The rush of unadulterated lust caught Natalia completely off guard. Why should she be surprised? It had been this way between them right from the beginning. They moved toward the king-size bed, shedding clothes as they stumbled across the room.

Afterdark - Natalia's Point of View

As we stumbled into the bedroom, stripping as we moved towards the bed, I realize that I've wanted this all evening. Watching Olivia as she stalks onto the bed on all fours, she looks like she's on the prowl and I shiver with the predatory look in her eyes. Deciding to join her in the game, we circled each other on all fours until one of us was captured and it sent the adrenaline coursing through my body.

Olivia outmaneuvered me, pushing me onto my back and hovered, her breasts swayed a hair's breadth from my lips, taunting me, arousing me to new heights. As I raised my knee,

pushing deep into her center, I felt the need to kiss her. Pulling her down against me, I took her face in my hands, driving my tongue into her mouth, hungry for more. Holding my head in place, we continued until the need to come up for air broke us apart.

I could feel her hands all over, skimming my back, arms chest so that sensations continued to build. As I suck on her nipple, she pinches mine and I slap away her hand, admonishing playfully with a finger. In one of my more seductive tones, I tell her, "No, my love, let me love you," before rolling her over, control mine for the moment. Moving my fingers slowly down her stomach, I lightly brush down her thigh, pushing her legs a little farther apart. She grabbed for a pillow, tucking it under her hips which delighted me as it allowed me better access. I twirled my fingers through the soft dark hair and gave a gentle tug, before taking my middle finger and draw it slowly down - liquid bliss. My heart raced and breathing increased as I realised how aroused I was by her excitement and I teased her a little, pushing my finger just a little bit into her opening, which responded by constricting. I could feel her pulsating and she pleaded with me now to enter her. Sliding first one finger in, I paused before adding another, as I watched her clench her eyes shut in ecstasy.

"Olivia, look at me." I wanted to see the desire in her eyes. I could feel and smell the desire between her legs and her moaning let me know that I've found her sweet spot. My fingers moved in rhythm with her body movements, creating a delicious enery.

Somehow managing to grab onto my breasts, Olivia tugged and pinched my nipples and heightening my arousal to the point where I can feel my own body's gushing, and I know she wants us to come together.

Olivia's face contorted as she waited for the first surge to hit. "Deeper, don't stop," she says.

I could feel myself ready to let go and I coax her along with me. Her groans get louder.

"Take me, take me..."

"Come with me, Olivia." I pumped furiously into her now. "Yessss," I hissed loudly as we both tumbled over the edge.

"That was intense," Olivia said as she opened her eyes a little. "I felt like you turned me inside out."

I ran my tongue up my fingers sucking her juice. With a sly grin, I murmured, "Sweet reminder."

Olivia rolled over onto her stomach, allowing me to stretch myself out on top of her. Pushing my breasts into her shoulder blades, I rubbed my mound into the crack of her ass, and I could feel her shudder. "I'm so not done with you."

"Is everything ready for tomorrow?" Blake asked as she opened her overnight bag, pulling out a pale blue silk dress for the wedding. When Doris nodded in the affirmative, Blake held the dress up to her and asked Doris for her opinion.

Doris smiled, appreciating the delicate form of the dress. "You will look beautiful, I can guarantee that."

Blake hung up the dress, and then approached Doris who was sitting and rubbing the back of her neck.

"It's been a long day," Doris said as she tried to work out a kink of muscle.

"Here, let me." Blake took the chair, urging Doris to sit down on the floor between her legs. She began to knead Doris's tight muscles.

Doris tried to slow down her racing pulse, she wondered if Blake could sense the change in her body chemistry. "Blake." Doris grabbed her hands to stop the slow torture. "Either I come up there or you come down here."

When Blake moved down to the floor, Doris's pulse revved up. This was not working for her. "Blake, honey..." Doris started then paused to collect her thoughts; her frustration showed. "I don't know how to be with you right now." Doris couldn't stand the intensity of Blake's eyes on her. She lowered her head and sucked in a breath. Once she asked the question she realized she better be ready to hear the answer. "Why did you come?"

Blake's hand grasped Doris's, pulling the other woman closer to her. Looking directly at Doris, she uttered the words Doris had longed to hear, "Because I know where I belong. At your side. I want to be with you, Doris Wolfe."

It was a hot and muggy Saturday in Springfield and Ava felt a surge of excitement run through her as she waited for 4 pm. Olivia had repeatedly asked Ava to come to New York,

to stand up for her and although the young woman was flattered, thrilled that her mother asked her to witness this sacred event, she refused. She felt her place was with Emma, so that Olivia and Natalia did not have to worry about their rambunctious daughter.

The coffee didn't taste at all like the delicious brew Natalia made, but, she sipped the bitter java anyway, enjoying the solitude of the early morning. Emma was still asleep, and that gave her a few extra moments of peace before the tornado that was Emma Spencer blew through.

Her mother and Natalia were getting married. Married. She had to give her mother credit for taking the plunge for the sixth time. Yet, she knew that except for that one man, her mother did not marry for love. That sour thought brought up another surge, a surge of sadness that for much of her adult life, Olivia had been searching for someone to love her. She had to admit that when her mother loved, she did it with such ferocity, such intensity that nothing you did could shatter that love. That was a blessing. A blessing for her, because for the first time in her life, she felt that she had Olivia's unconditional love.

Ava was hoping that this weekend she and Emma could talk about anything that was on Emma's mind, though she didn't want to push. Later, as Emma sat, scoffing down her cereal and juice, Ava took a deep breath and spoke to her sister. "Em, you know you can talk to me about anything." "Are Mom and Ma getting married in New York?"

"What?" Ava asked, surprised, as that topic wasn't one she thought would come up. She shook her head, realizing how intuitive Emma was at twelve; what would she be like at sixteen?

Ava couldn't deny it. "Yes, Mom had it all planned." She noticed the disappointment on Emma's face was palpable. "Honey, Mom and Natalia will be getting married in Springfield in the next few months. You can be the flower girl or the bridesmaid, whichever you want."

"Why New York?" Emma asked. Ava explained that it was legal for same-sex couples to wed in New York. With a grin she added, "New York is much more enlightened than the state of Illinois at the moment."

Emma concurred. "I knew before they even did." She noticed her sister's puzzled look. "My Two Mommies, silly."

So grown up; yet, still a child. Ava sighed happily. Emma put her dishes in the sink and went upstairs to get dressed.

"Em, are you ready?" Almost an hour had passed. Ava knocked, then entered the young girl's room. She walked in front of the full-length mirror blocking Emma's view, and plopped on the bed. Emma gave her a scowl, and then continued with her primping.

There is so much more than meets the eye, Ava thought, as she stared at her younger sister. A flash of anger ran through Ava, anger that she had missed so much of growing up with a little sister, anger at her mother for giving her up, anger at that bastard Jeffrey for damaging her mother beyond repair, and anger at herself for continually playing the broken record. How does one heal from something like this? Then she remembered her words to Olivia. She would not be the victim; easier said than done, but she was determined to try.

"You're wearing that?" Ava asked, standing with her hands on her hips as she surveyed Emma's shopping attire. The shorts were a little too short for her taste, and certainly too short for a 12 year old. Ava wiped her hand over her face. "Let me start again. Got anything else in the closet?"

With the end of school, Emma was looking forward to some summertime shopping, and was only too happy to have her sister there with her. Olivia had called three times already to check up on them; finally, Ava told her to just get married already and leave them alone. Everything was fine.

In the lingerie department of HSN, Ava browsed with a bored Emma in tow. However, when they got to the bra section, Emma's face lit up.

"Wow!" She held up a vivid hot pink strapless bra and tried to wrap it around her tiny body. "Ava, look at me."

Ava gave a cautious smile.

"This could fit Mom," Emma grinned.

I doubt it, Ava mumbled under her breath. "Hmm, maybe."

"Ava, what do all these numbers mean?"

Ava patiently explained the sizing, telling Emma that she would probably begin with an AA, just like she had.

"That's a battery size," Emma said, looking puzzled.

Ava could feel a headache developing between her eyes.

Emma shrugged and put the bra back onto the clearance table. "Ava, look!"

Her sister had spied a sundress, looking as if it had just stepped out of the 1960s. It had small daisies all over it, and Ava had to admit it was cute. Looking at the price tag, she tilted her head, *expensive, but cute*.

Four bags later the two Spencer women sat down at Company for a Buzz burger. Ava chose a booth in the back, but she hadn't noticed that Jeffrey and Ross were sitting a booth away talking about the Phillip Spaulding case.

When they arrived at the Eventi Hotel, Olivia looked at the surroundings, liking what she saw immediately. Chelsea had a large gay population and this hotel catered to a gay clientele.

"You look beautiful," Natalia said as she admired Olivia's crème colored pant suit with the robin egg blue camisole, and the mid-heel beige sandals. "You look just like a business mongrel." She let out a giggle.

The investment team did a walk through of the hotel making notes, with Olivia and Natalia following behind. "It's only been open a year," Olivia offered. "With a strong management team, we could double the profit in the first two years."

After a detailed tour through the hotel and meeting with the current management, Olivia was impressed. When they left the premises around 2:30 pm, she asked, "What do you think, Natalia? You didn't say much." Olivia was terribly nervous, watching the time. She had everything planned down to the millisecond.

"It felt good to me. I noticed a number of things I'd change, but I like the fact that it's only operating a year which means management isn't set in their ways; and...I like the fact that we could offer comfortable and safe accommodations to the gay community."

"Ava, there's your daddy," Emma noted, pointing to the man with the goatee. She paused and

frowned as she caught a few words that caught her attention, and not in a positive way. "He's talking about my daddy." Emma rose from her seat and tried to listen further.

Ava stood up over the booth trying to catch Jeffrey's attention. She shook her head at him and pointed down into her booth.

"Hi, you two," Jeffrey said in acknowledgement. A few tense moments passed until Jeffrey and Ross rose from their table, paid their bill and left the restaurant.

Emma sat silently for a few minutes nursing her strawberry milkshake. Furrowing her brow in contemplation, she asked, "Ava. Your daddy hurt our mommy; how can you like him?"

"Finally," Natalia said, flashing a dimpled smile at Olivia as the driver helped both women into the horse-drawn carriage. The driver asked where they wanted to go, and Olivia told him to drive deep into the park. The two women listened as the driver talked about points of interest and gave a little history of the park.

"Wagner's Cove, please," Olivia spoke up in response to the driver's further inquiry of their destination.

The driver cocked an eyebrow, immediately understanding the request. He smiled knowingly to Olivia and turned the carriage in the direction of the Cove.

"Oh, Olivia, look!" Natalia tugged on her arm, pointing at the rustic wood shelter setting near the lake. "Someone is getting married!"

The driver pulled up the horses and jumped down off the carriage. "Yes, miss... someone is getting married." He offered his hand to Natalia. Olivia asked the driver to wait and slipped him a \$100 bill.

"Oh my God. Oh my God." Natalia clamped her hands over her mouth as she took in the scene. There was a handsome young man, resplendent in a pair of jeans, flip-flops, and a white V-neck tee shirt with a makeshift tie. It looked a little like the sash that matched Blake's dress. Doris and Blake stood side-by-side, smiling broadly. There were two violinists playing a tune that Natalia couldn't identify.

This was the conversation Ava was both waiting for and dreading. She would do this right; she would find all the right words. She would make Olivia proud to have her as a daughter.

"Emma, you know what the word struggle means?" Ava took the girl's hand.

"I'm...I'm not sure. I know it means something hard to do."

"Yeah, that's right. It means something or someone can be challenging, it's a problem that might be easy or hard to solve." Emma's eyes, so much like her mothers, were riveted on Ava. "Well, that's what Mom and I feel about Jeffrey. We struggle with how we feel about him. On one hand, he's my father." Ava pushed back her hair off her face giving her time to find the right words. "On the other hand, he hurt Mom so it's hard to have good feelings about him."

Emma sat quietly for a few minutes picking at her burger. "Mom got hurt, but she got you. That's good, right?"

Ava wasn't sure where the conversation was headed. She could tell that Emma was trying to figure out the details of the situation and she pondered what to say next.

"I didn't think it was good at first, Em. It was hard for me and for Mom," Ava said, noticing her sister's sadness. "Em, growing up can be hard. I know. But, you've got Mom and Ma, and me and Leyla and all your aunts to help you when it gets rough." Ava stroked her little sister's cheek. "Will you let us help?"

As Blake handed both women a bouquet of Gerber daisies, Natalia gasped and clung to Olivia's arm. Spotting Olivia's brother, Doris pulled Sam towards the back and then went to fetch the two women. She'd arranged for Sam to walk them both down the white runner that marked the pathway between the small grouping of chairs.

"You could have dressed up a little," Olivia said, glaring at her brother before sweeping him into a big embrace.

"Can't wait to give you away, sis." He smiled and kissed the bride. "Natalia, you're a brave woman." He gave Natalia a kiss on the cheek. The strains of *Ode to Joy* swept through the Cove.

Doris stood at a makeshift podium clutching a Bible in her hand. She was nervous, but elated to be performing the ceremony. Blake stood next to Natalia, while Sam stood tall next to her sister.

"Under this beautiful blue sky, with a balmy breeze and a full June sun to warm the moment, we come to celebrate the marriage of our dear friend's, Olivia Spencer and Natalia Rivera. It's been a long time coming."

Amen, Olivia muttered under her breath as she and Natalia listened intently, and they intertwined their fingers.

Doris continued. "Love. Love comes in all shapes and sizes. Love has no boundaries, love can get us through the rough spots, love wraps us up in its arms and holds us tight." Doris looked intently at both women who were gazing at each other. "Olivia and Natalia, I feel confident in saying that you two are very much in love." Blake let out a muted sigh and smiled warmly at Doris.

One of the violinists stepped forward and began to sing "*Unexpected Song*. It was a song Olivia had chosen it because of how the lyrics rang so true for them. Olivia leaned over and wiped a tear from Natalia's eye.

"Ladies, it's time for your vows." Doris paused as Olivia raised her hand. "Yes, Olivia?"

"I'm going to burst if I don't go first." The nervous tension in her continued as Sam tapped her on the shoulder and handed her the ring. Taking Natalia's ring finger in her hand, she held on tight. "I had an entire speech written, and now the words can't convey what I'm feeling right now." Smiling over at her partner, she noticed Natalia biting her bottom lip to hold back the tears. "You've given me such a great gift; you've given me a life filled with joy. I promise to cherish this gift and you. I will honor and protect you for all the days of my life." Olivia kissed the ring and slipped it onto Natalia's finger.

Natalia's wiped her tears, before taking the other ring from Blake. Grasping Olivia's left hand, she then opened her mouth but nothing came out. She stamped her foot and began again, "I never imagined I'd be standing in this beautiful place, promising myself to a beautiful woman." She shrugged and her dimples came out to play. Taking a moment, she

proceeded in a soft voice. "Test all things. Hold onto those things that are good...and Olivia, I will hold onto you forever." She slipped the ring on Olivia's finger.

Doris beamed at the two happy women. "Olivia and Natalia, by the power invested in me by the State of New York, I now pronounce you wife and wife. You may kiss your bride."

The small group crowded into two carriages and rode through the park. They wound up at the Pierre, where Doris had made reservations at La Caprice.

Sunday afternoon came too soon. It had been an eventful weekend that neither would ever forget. Staring out the window as the small jet ascended into a cloudless sky, Natalia ruminated on how blessed she was. Twisting the thin platinum band wedding ring, she admired its simplicity of design; the three small diamonds catching the last bit of light from the setting sun. She gazed over at her wife who was snoozing, her head resting on the plush headrests. Her wife. One part of her wish had come true. Now, all she needed was to hear from her son. Of one thing she was certain; with her wife by her side she could handle anything. Gently, she slipped her hand into Olivia's as they headed back to reality.

Episode 9: When One Door Closes



Act I

Getting away from Greg in full party preparation mode was like extricating yourself from the human octopus, Olivia mused as she closed the door to her office in the man's face. Whoever he was dating, she felt sorry for the poor guy. She could still hear Greg mumbling in the hallway as he talked up Kiera about color palettes and matching hers-and-hers wedding

toppers that could be designed in an exact replica of Olivia and Natalia, if the price was right.

Olivia dropped her forehead to the door and sighed.

"Rough morning, querida?"

Olivia jumped at the amused sound of Natalia's voice behind her and turned around. "God, Natalia! Cardiac patient, remember?"

Walking from the corner where she'd been standing when Olivia came in, Natalia sauntered over to her soon-to-be wife. Well, Olivia was already legally her wife. She smiled as she still hadn't gotten over the fact that Olivia had surprised her with a trip to New York City on a whim to get married. She sighed happily at the warm feeling she got in the pit of her stomach thinking of Olivia as her wife.

When she reached the taller woman, she stood on her toes a little, pressing the length of her body against Olivia, pushing her into the door, to kiss her on the lips. Breaking apart with a pleased hum, Natalia smiled. "Don't worry. I'll sooth your aches, my wife." Natalia kissed her soundly again.

Olivia broke the kiss and grinned saucily at the brunette in her arms. "I think it turns you on to call me your wife."

"Good thing for you." Natalia nodded and kissed her quickly but with no less of the passion.

Olivia nodded in return. "Very good. I should have married you ages ago." Natalia's kisses were coaxing her desire, and with a quick glance at the clock on the wall, she flicked the door lock closed.

Natalia didn't have to be told twice what Olivia wanted. As soon as she heard the door lock slide in place, she reached around and began unbuttoning Olivia's blouse. "As far as I'm concerned, we've been married far longer than we realize. I think a part of me fell for you the moment we met."

Sobering at the comment, Olivia leaned back and nodded, reaching for the hands opening her blouse. She pulled them to her lips and laid gentle kisses along the knuckles, eventually opening one and peppering the palm with kisses, lingering over Natalia's wrist. When she

heard Natalia gasp, she looked up at the complete abandon in her wife's dark eyes. She cupped Natalia's face, staring into the endless depths of her eyes.

Finally, Natalia could take the look no longer and her voice came out in a choked whisper, "What?"

Olivia brushed a thumb over Natalia's sweet lips. She shook her head, endeavoring Natalia not to worry, even as her bottom lip trembled with emotion. "I just want to make love to my wife."

Natalia's answer was a slow, deep kiss as she reached for the light switch against the wall behind Olivia.

Looking up the hallway, Doris tapped her foot waiting for the court session to start. Since her return from New York, her case for self-defence for Kathryn Howard just gotten tighter. The medical documents that she'd requested on Kathryn's behalf finally arrived.

Bureaucracy. It had taken an affidavit from Kathryn and a court order for each hospital or medical center to release any medical records. It had taken Doris much of one late evening and lots of caffeine before she'd put together a time-line and escalation of abusive actions that required professional care. Unfortunately, that didn't count the times where Kathryn had been injured but was able to take care of it herself. However, they were in a better place than before.

The offer of housing and employment from Buzz Cooper was another positive for the young woman that Doris would present to the court. It certainly beat being evicted from her home with limited options available. A manslaughter charge certainly didn't help matters when it came to finding employment.

Looking over at her client, sitting on the wooden bench that lined one side of the hallway, Doris sighed, but at last their waiting was over as the court clerk came out to get them. Filing towards the front of the room, Doris lay her briefcase on the table and directed Kathryn into the second seat. She was just waiting for the prosecuting attorney to take his place, and Doris had been relieved that she wouldn't be facing off against Jeffrey for this case, though it had been a bit of a surprise to hear he'd recused himself, given how much of a name he wanted to make for himself prosecuting in his words an *easy conviction* that would improve his bid for election for District Attorney, instead of his current Acting

District Attorney position. Needless to say, her strengthened case, coupled with a young up and coming attorney in the prosecutor's office, made Doris even happier. Finally, the bailiff announced the judge's presence.

Judge Davis banged his gavel on the stone block, bringing the session to order. "I see that Ms. Wolfe is representing the defence," he said, nodding in her direction before turning his attention to the prosecutor. "Mr. Thomas, is it?" The young man nodded. "Well, sir, are you ready to start?"

"Yes, your honor," Carl Thomas started as he glanced down at his legal pad. "Your honor, Ms. Howard is charged with the fatal shooting of her husband. The photographs in evidence of the crime tell of a violent act and one that needs harsh punishment. The post-mortem indicates that Michael Howard was shot at close range, and that their daughter was also present at the time of the shooting. Mr. Howard was an upstanding man of his community, a man who owned his own business and cared for his family. Ms. Howard has also removed their daughter from their home several times, crossing state lines on more than one occasion without the permission of her husband. The evidence, I believe your honor, speaks for itself."

Doris rolled her eyes. *Really? That's all you can come up with?* But she was spared voicing that thought when the judge spoke up.

"Thank you, Mr. Thomas. I'll keep that in mind." Judge Davis nodded and turned to face the defence. "Are you ready, Ms. Wolfe?"

"Yes, your honor. While the defence will contend that my client, Kathryn Howard, did kill her husband by shooting him, we will stipulate that there are extenuating circumstances, particularly the pattern of escalating violence towards her and the threats of physical and sexual assault on an eight-year old girl." Doris looked directly at the judge, before handing over copies of the medical records to the bailiff to pass to both the prosecution and the judge. "Your honor, I present here a copy of the records from each of the hospitals and clinics where Ms. Howard sought medical attention following an abusive attack from her husband over the past few years. I also ask you to look at the results and photographs of Ms. Howard taken at Cedar's Hospital the night of the attack." Doris handed the second bag of evidence and the accompanying paperwork to the bailiff. "A positive rape kit done the night of the attack was performed and matched against the deceased. As you will notice, there were heavy bruises and tearing of the pelvis and vaginal wall, as well as bruising on Ms. Howard's thighs." Doris paused and looked over at her client, whom she noted was pale and

tired. Reaching a hand down to the young woman's hands which were near white as she gripped the table, Doris tried to give her as comforting a presence as she could before returning her attention to the judge. "Your honor, since Ms. Howard is the sole guardian and provider for her daughter, and has not proved to be any flight risk since she was charged, I ask for continued leniency as you decide on her fate. Thank you."

"Thank you, Ms. Wolfe. I have these along with the police statements provided and the witness statements. Ms. Howard, you are still released in your own reconnaissance; I do advise that you do not leave town. I will make my decision soon and will inform the court. We will take a recess until that time, or until I have need to question the defendant further. Court is adjourned." Judge Davis banged his gavel, then gathered the paperwork and evidence in his arms before leaving the room.

Doris sighed; she hated waiting but she had a good feeling about this case and its outcome. Reaching out her hand again, this time to Kathryn's shoulder, she indicated the young woman to stand as they were escorted out of the courtroom.

"Ms. Wolfe, will my daughter have to testify?" Kathryn asked nervously. It was bad enough that she had to go through the trial, but she didn't want to put her daughter through more than she had already endured.

"No. The judge and the prosecution have a copy of her statement, plus the psychological evaluation reports from Dr. Tremain. The judge will look those over but the case is strong. He may have some questions for you, but I wouldn't worry. Just answer them honestly." Doris gave the young woman a confident smile. "Look, it will probably be a while, so why don't we go get a bite to eat."

Kathryn looked down at her hands which had been nervously fidgeting with her blazer hem. "I don't know if I can eat; my stomach is a bundle of nerves."

"You'll be okay. Now, come on, we'll go down to the cafeteria. There's usually some decent sandwiches in there. And tea or coffee." Doris led them down the hallway, passing the young prosecutor along the way. The poor man looked worse than her client did as he paced the hall, his cell phone held to his ear. As she waited for the elevator, she grinned as she heard the young man say, *'But, Mr. O'Neill, there's not much I can do with all that evidence they provided.'* Doris had to agree. The prosecution's evidence to the contrary was really rather pitiful, which again had surprised her, given how gung-ho Jeffrey had been to get the case. She would have thought he'd pull in a tighter case. She shrugged, maybe with the finding of Grady Foley and the murder case against Phillip Spaulding had redirected his energies, but

still, she wondered. At any rate, she needed caffeine, so once the elevator door pinged, she and Kathryn were on their way downstairs to the small cafeteria.

"Okay, Greg needs to step back from all this wedding stuff or I'm so going to have to bitch slap him," Ava Peralta grumbled with a slight grin as she slipped down into the booth by the far window at Company. "Now he wants to hire some guy to make ice sculptures of Olivia and Natalia's heads for the buffet table."

Leyla choked slightly, her eyes going large with suppressed laughter, nearly gagging as she tried to finish swallowing her sip of iced tea.

"He thinks it will be romantic. Seriously? Can you imagine it? Help me, I'm meeeellting...I'm meeeellting!!" Ava drooped lower in the booth as if wilting, laughing as Leyla waved her hands and frantically tried to gulp down the drink in her mouth while giggling at her antics. She sighed as she finally got her mouthful of fluid down and could take a breath.

"Let me swallow before you do stuff like that," Leyla gasped, tossing her scrunched-up napkin across the booth at the other woman, as Ava just laughed at her harder.

"Ah, timing is everything, Rivera. Don't you forget it," Ava said, straightening up as their server arrived with a jug of ice water and a menu. Already knowing what she wanted, Ava waved the menu off and they both quickly ordered their fully loaded Buzz Burgers before slipping back into their conversation.

"So are you ready to hit the mall this week with the Bean?" Leyla asked, stirring the ice in her drink with a straw. "I almost dread what type of bridesmaids dress we'll have to wear."

"All I can say is thank God Emma's moved out of that horrid Barbie pink stage," Ava shuddered. "As long as she doesn't move straight into that gothic black and moody stage right away, I'll be happy."

"Well, no guarantees there either," Leyla sighed. As they both well knew it had been a war zone the last little while at the farmhouse. "Emma has a good handle on the moody part already, I'm sure the black clothes and piercings aren't far behind. I guess it's all a part of growing up, pushing the envelope with parents."

Ava shrugged, slipping into thoughtful silence. Her adoptive parents had been lovely and it still broke her heart sometimes that they never lived to see her grown into adulthood.

Although she did have Olivia and Jeffrey to turn to now, it really wasn't the same as being with the people who raised her. And the baggage that came with her biological parents was sometimes wearing.

"Emma asked me about Mom and Jeffrey," Ava said quietly, not meeting Leyla's eyes as they snapped up at her admission.

"Jesus, what did you tell her?" Leyla shifted in her seat. She knew Olivia had been upset with Emma's outbursts lately but hadn't realize Emma had figured so much out. The girl was bright, almost too smart for her own good sometimes. Her heart went out to Ava, as she ran a hand through her short hair and sighed.

"Basically that it's complicated, but that we'd figure it out as we go along...as a family," Ava sighed, taking a long sip of her water to collect her thoughts. "To be honest, there have been days I've hated both Olivia and Jeffrey, and then there are days that I don't know what I'd do without either of them."

"Like any parent," Leyla snorted. "My Dad is an asshole, and I have no clue why my Mom has put up and stayed with him all these years and that pisses me off, but y'know what? I still love them. I know Natalia does too, and they treated her like shit." She shook her head. Their mom hadn't been much help, hiding away at the local church helping 'those less fortunate' while life at home was falling apart. It was all such a mess. Leyla gave herself a mental shake and brought herself back to the here and now. "At least Olivia and Jeffrey are a part of your life now, both of them trying to build a decent relationship with you."

"It's a struggle some days, especially with Dad being a real jerk lately, but I've done nothing wrong in all of this and I refuse to be a victim," Ava said quietly, tears welling in her dark eyes but a thread of pure steel backbone ran through her words.

"Hey, you're not alone in this," Leyla automatically reached out across the table, her fingers wrapping around Ava's thin wrist and squeezing her hand as their eyes met and held. "To hell with what anyone whispers around this dinky little town. Everybody's family is dysfunctional one way or another. Your mom and your dad love you, which is a hell of a lot more than some people have and that's what really counts. Plus you have all this extended family now too. So you just need to remember that your family has your back," Leyla smiled softly as Ava glanced up at her, offering a small lopsided grin.

"And this time, we're not letting you go."

Natalia quirked her mouth to the side and tapped the top of the pen against her cheek as she looked over the list of names on the page.

"I keep feeling like we're missing someone," she said, continuing to puzzle over the page.

"You've got Sam, right? I know he was with us in New York, but I'd still like to send him one. Though we may have to send it by carrier pigeon," Olivia joked and finished drying the last plate before placing it on the shelf in the cabinet. They'd talked about inviting Natalia's family before, but then Natalia had been kidnapped and her parents could have changed their minds in light of that. She bit her lip and turned to look at her wife who was oblivious to her train of thoughts. "Maybe we should invite your parents again."

Natalia dropped the pen to the paper and sighed, leaning back in the chair before sliding down and pouting. "They didn't come the first time. Why should they come now? Even Rafe won't be here. We have no idea what's going on with him, and I'm worried sick that he's hurt or...worse. You told me how you'd arranged for him to be on the computer so he could be present the last time. Now I can't even have that. I just want this to be a happy day for us."

Resolutely, Olivia tossed the towel in her hand to the counter and walked over to Natalia. She got down on her knees and urged Natalia to turn to look at her. When the younger woman did, Olivia reached up and brushed back the hair from her eyes. "It will be a happy day. Every day that I'm with you is a happy day, even when there are crappy days." She smiled at the hint of a grin on Natalia's beautiful face. "As far as your parents are concerned, how will we know if we never try?"

Natalia tilted her head and regarded the woman she loved. "Is this really THE Olivia Spencer having...faith?"

Olivia smirked and leaned forward to kiss the brunette quickly and playfully. "I learned from the best." She stood and pointed at the paper. "Put 'em down there. We'll keep at them until they cry for mercy."

Smiling, Natalia picked up her discarded pen and wrote down her parent's names. After pausing for a moment, she added Leo and Sophia's names too.

Detective Anna Li sorted through some more files on her desk and cross-matched them with notes she'd already added to her laptop, hoping to find some indication of where her father might have disappeared following the actual death of Edmund Winslow. Since Chief Thorne had taken on the death of Grady Foley's investigation, it had left her more time to investigate her father's dealings with Edmund, and her own hunches. She'd contacted her father's home on the Winslow estate on San Cristobel but he hadn't returned there, or if he had, they weren't saying. She'd put out feelers with colleagues at Interpol for information on Hung Li, but there hadn't been much. His passport hadn't been flagged, so she was guessing that he was still using Edmund's private jet and underground contacts for the time being. What he was threatening them with, she didn't know, other than the fact that he had killed Edmund. Possibly the threat that they could be next worked more efficiently to get them to hide him.

But that was just it, really, Anna thought; her father never used to hide from anything. If nothing else, he was proud of the work he had done for the Winslow family. Security and protection were things he held high. So, why was he being elusive now?

She'd been working at her laptop for longer than she'd thought and when she sat back and rolled her neck, she could feel the popping as she stretched in her seat. Fighting the tension in her muscles she stood and stretched, suddenly realizing that she hadn't eaten in a while when she heard her stomach growl. Putting her laptop in standby mode, she put it into her desk drawer and locked it up along with her notes.

Looking over at her colleague, she tossed a scrunched up paper ball over at Remy. "Hey, Boudreau, I'm headed out for lunch. You want anything?"

"A decent coffee!" he exclaimed, laughing back at her.

"Will do." Anna turned towards Sgt. Keri Stapleton, the new officer that had transferred with the Chief. "You want anything?"

"If you can get me a large chai latte and a chicken salad sandwich, I'd owe you big," Keri said, with a smile.

"Not a problem. I've gotta stretch out anyway. Making a run over to Company. If anyone needs me, I've got my cell phone," Anna said as she headed for the exit, bumping into Eleni coming in.

"Hey, can I talk to you later?" Eleni asked her friend, wanting to check with her on something.

"Sure. Just going for lunch. Give me 45 minutes or so?"

"No problem. See you then," Eleni said, headed down the hall to her office.

Natalia was busy, lost in dusting off the coffee table for the twentieth time and making sure the magazines on the table were angled exactly the same when a pair of strong but feminine arms snaked around her waist startling her out of her mental meanderings. She was spun around until she gazed into amused but sultry green eyes.

"Stop," Olivia stated sweetly. "It's just Josh. He's been here many times before, and he's definitely seen this house with an occasional speck of dust."

Natalia blew out a frustrated sigh and dropped her head to Olivia's chest as the older woman soothingly ran her hands up and down her back. Gradually, she relaxed and nuzzled into Olivia wrapping her own arms around the other woman.

"I know." Natalia sighed. "Do you think he has any idea what we're going to be asking him? This is kind of a big deal to just spring on someone, especially your ex-husband." Natalia had pulled away as she spoke, her arms flailing in the air at that last statement. She turned and nervously bit at a finger nail. The depth of Olivia's feelings for Josh didn't seem to be helping matters for Natalia. They had a history, a very long, torrid...passionate history. Maybe it would be too awkward to ask this of him.

Olivia tilted her head to the side, practically able to read the reservations written across her love's beautiful face. She walked over and took Natalia's hands into her own, stilling their nervous movement, and brought them to her lips to kiss gently. "Don't do this to yourself. Josh has moved on. He's madly in love with Reva and always has been; even when I didn't want to accept that as true, I knew it was. And don't forget the most important thing..."

Natalia instinctively leaned in closer to her mate as Olivia left her words hanging in the air. Breathlessly, she whispered, "What?"

Olivia dipped her head until her lips caressed Natalia's lightly, teasing the younger woman closer. "I chose you." She closed the barely noticeable gap with a kiss. In mere moments, the

clasped hands were dropped as both women lost themselves in the kiss, wrapped up tightly in each other's arms.

A knock at the door broke the moment and Olivia pulled back with a groan. She moved to answer the door, but raised a finger in Natalia's direction as the younger woman got her bearings. "Don't forget where we left off."

Natalia blew out a slow breath and fanned her face. "Don't worry. I won't!" Whatever concerns had lurked in her mind before evaporated with that fierce kiss. She was so gone that she could hardly remember why Josh was coming by the farmhouse.

She walked into the kitchen just as Olivia opened the door to let Josh in. He quickly and smoothly embraced his ex-wife in a hug then turned to Natalia and did the same. Natalia could certainly see why Olivia had been attracted to Josh. He was charming and handsome in a guy-next-door kind of way. He was most definitely the marrying kind; the type you would be proud to introduce to your parents. If there wasn't Olivia and they hadn't been soul mates, Natalia could see Josh being someone that she would have gravitated towards. The fact that he was a spiritual type of person would have been a bonus.

She gestured to the living room and asked Josh if he wanted anything to drink. When he declined, Natalia felt a little awkward for a moment. It would have actually been nice to do something instead of standing awkwardly in the kitchen looking at each other. After an odd moment of deciding who would go ahead of whom, all three made their way to the living room and sat down – Olivia and Natalia on the sofa, Josh in a chair.

"So, how have you beautiful ladies been?" Josh ventured for casual conversation. He had no idea why they asked him to come over. On the phone, he had asked Olivia if she needed some handyman work, but even the flirtatious tone that seemed to come out whenever he was in the woman's presence didn't manage to get details out of her.

Olivia and Natalia looked at each other then at Josh. Olivia spoke first, "Good." Then Natalia at almost the same time, "Okay."

Josh chuckled a little. Whatever they wanted him there for had completely flummoxed both of the women. "Is it 'good' or is it 'okay'?"

Pressing the bridge of her nose with her fingers, Olivia decided to do what she does best and jump in head first. "Good. Everything's great. In fact, Natalia and I got married in New York."

A bright smile took over Josh's handsome face. "So I heard! Congratulations!"

"Thanks," Olivia said, relaxing a little as she got her thoughts together. "But, you know, there's still so much not done, that was missing from the ceremony in New York. There were some things we realized we wanted in our lives, that we wanted to have the experience of. Our friends...our family."

Josh watched as Olivia lovingly took Natalia's hand in her own, his ex turning her head to lock eyes with the woman she had chosen to live the rest of her life with. Then, for some reason, the oddest thought came to mind and he felt a wave of panic mixed with excitement. Certainly, they wouldn't ask him to...

"Marry us, Josh," Natalia finished as she turned to look at him, the look of adoration and awe she had from being in Olivia's presence faded at the ashen expression on Josh's face. She reached out. "Josh, are you okay?"

"What?" Josh jerked back to the present, not really hearing what the two women were saying to him.

Olivia reached over and squeezed his knee. She had seen that freaked out look on his face before. "What did you think we were going to ask you?"

"Ummmm," Josh stalled, unable to look either of them in the eye.

Leaning back into the sofa, working hard to hide her amusement, Olivia chuckled lightly. "Oh my God. Josh!"

Natalia looked back and forth between them. "What?"

Olivia leaned over to her partner and whispered, "I think he thought we were going to ask him to be our baby daddy."

Natalia's mouth rounded into an "o" and she turned to Josh incredulously. "Really?"

His embarrassment mounting with each passing second, he looked down and nodded. Clearing his throat and straightening up, he tried to gain a sense of composure. "So, if it wasn't that, then what did you want to talk about?" He saw Olivia hiding her amusement behind her hand. "Shut up, Olivia," he grouched.

She threw her hands up in the air. "What? I didn't do anything!"

He teasingly glared at her, finding humor in the moment now. "Yet," he deadpanned. He clapped his hands together. "So, seriously, what's up?"

Natalia shook her head and looked at her partner's scruffy ex-husband. "We'd like for you to officiate our ceremony."

Josh smiled broadly. "Really?" Both women nodded. "I'd be honored," he added.

Natalia stood suddenly. "Well, with that out of the way, I think I need some coffee."

When she was out of the room, Olivia scooted over to Josh. She bit her bottom lip nervously. "I need you to do a favor for me. Actually, two. Do you think we could meet soon and talk about it?"

He shrugged. "Sure...as long as it doesn't involve babies."

Olivia teased her ex by laughing heartily before leaning over and slapping him on the shoulder. "Not yet, but you never know."

Act II

The living room was still spotless as Leyla made her way downstairs quietly the next morning, a bonus they all enjoyed due to Natalia's need to clean when anxious about something. She wandered into the kitchen and opened the fridge, pulling out a carton of orange juice. Pouring it into a large glass, she put the carton back and slid down into one of the wooden chairs around the table and took a big sip of the cold juice.

Leyla sighed tiredly; another dream about Ava had woken her and left her restless during the night. The first time it happened had been a few weeks ago, and it hadn't take Leyla long to realize that despite her self-denials, on some level she was attracted to the other woman. It was the only answer that made any sense but it didn't give her any comfort. She swirled the orange juice in her glass as her thoughts wandered.

All that tension between them had a low level sexual vibe to it, at least, that's what she had been feeling on her side of it anyway. The dreams had been a wake-up call in more ways than one. Leyla had at least figured out what she really was feeling for Ava, which was a

good thing and at the same time it made life more difficult. Now that she had admitted to herself that she has attracted to Ava, she found herself tongue-tied and awkward around her. However, their friendship and their family dynamic was what was most important and that's what Leyla was determined to focus on.

Now, if only the dreams weren't so damn hot.

Leyla whimpered slightly and looked up as Natalia entered the kitchen, who flashed her a warm smile complete with dimples before heading towards the stove.

"Hey, you're up early," Natalia said bright and chipper as she pulled out a frying pan from under the stove and opened the freezer door to start hunting for a package of turkey bacon.

"Yeah, haven't been sleeping very well lately," Leyla sighed and ran a hand through her long dark hair. "Funny dreams. Probably just something I ate." Or want to eat.

"Oh," Natalia glanced over, a little frown furrowing her brow. "What about?"

Leyla's shoulders slumped and she shifted in her chair. How was she supposed to tell her sister that she was having erotic dreams about Ava? What did that make her to Leyla, her step-niece? It was all rather tawdry and incestuous, yet oddly titillating at the same time.

"Ava," Leyla blurted out, shocking herself slightly. It was the truth of the matter; however the details could be glossed over. Natalia paused in cracking eggs into a bowl and glanced over at her.

"Are you two fighting again?" Natalia looked at her sister, concerned. They needed to nip this bickering in the bud if it was causing nightmares. She'd had her fair share of them since the kidnapping and knew how it could be draining not getting decent sleep and certainly wouldn't help with the snapping at each other. "Is this about that cop you two are dating?" Leyla squirmed a little, finally deciding to stand and do something to help her sister. It comforted her, reminding her of when she was small and she would help their mom in the kitchen, telling her how her day at school went. She sighed and squirted some dishwashing detergent into the sink and pushed the plug down to stop the drain.

"No, we've been getting along well actually. The dreams aren't really important. I think it's just from the on-again, off-again, weird tension between us," Leyla flipped on the tap and began to run some hot water into the sink for dishes, as Natalia poured the eggs into the

frying pan. "I want to be supportive and be there for her, try to have a decent friendship, but just when I think we are getting closer, something happens and it sets us off again, attacking each other."

"Now what happened?" Natalia asked, almost afraid of the answer. She wanted their families to get along, but she knew like anything else there would be some adjustment, personalities that needed to flex around each other. That's what being a family was about, putting up with each other's stuff and loving each other anyway. Still, outright arguing was always trying for all concerned. She chewed her bottom lip and idly wondered if there was any cleaning product left.

"Nothing, we are actually in a good place right now, considering we're sort of seeing the same guy, but I keep waiting for the shoe to drop, y'know?" Leyla sighed. To be honest, Mike Thorne wasn't really who she was interested in dating. She had just kind of fallen into it, to bug Ava. The guy was nice and all, and his daughter was adorable, but there were no butterflies.

On the other hand, Leyla's dreams about Ava had been rather explicit, but she didn't want to rock that particular boat. Their friendship was fragile enough without laying unwanted affections into the mix. Ava was very definitely into men so her little unrequited crush on the straight girl would die eventually and turn into a good friendship in time. It happened often enough in the past, but it still kind of sucked.

Leyla chewed her lower lip and looked over at Natalia, who was quickly stirring the eggs and adding a touch more milk to the pan, realizing that if anyone could understand her feelings, it just might be her big sister.

"Natalia, there is something I've been meaning to mention to you," Leyla pushed her hands into the hot soapy water, avoiding her sister's eyes. "I think I'm bi."

Natalia froze for an instant. Did her sister just say what she thought she said? She turned to look at the young woman. It hit her, not for the first time, just how much she had missed of Leyla's life. To be able to actually talk about something so big and advise her on it was a huge honor.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm bisexual, maybe. I'm not sure," Leyla sighed and looked over her shoulder at her big sister. "I've suspected for a long time... there were some girls in high school I really liked. And well, I sort of hid it I guess, buried it deep inside, what with Dad being so controlling and Mom practically dragging me to church and introducing me to any breathing male within a quarter mile."

Leyla smiled sadly as Natalia nodded, clearly familiar with the routine of their parents. "And I've had boyfriends, too, but after everything with Jonathan and now dating Mike, I've come to realize that I'm just not that into guys, at least, not right now. There's been no real chemistry with either of them, and the one person that I do seem to have sparks with..." Leyla let the sentence die, not wanting to admit all her dark secrets and make things more awkward than they already were. "I guess I'm not sure what I want anymore."

Natalia removed the frying pan from the hot element and came over to her sister, wrapping her arms around the girl's narrow shoulders and giving her the biggest hug. Her heart nearly burst open when Leyla turned in her arms and pulled her closer still. She felt Leyla's breath against her skin, as the girl released a long, sad sigh.

"Oh, sweetie, it's going to be okay," Natalia murmured into the girl's thick dark hair; they were more alike than she even realized. She pulled back slightly and ran her fingers through the long dark hair, like she had always wished their mother had done for her, reassuring and loving. "I know how hard that is to say out loud, thank you for sharing that with me. I know this is going to sound clichéd but I know there is someone out there who will be lucky to have you, man or woman. There is no need to figure it all out right now. Heaven knows I took my sweet time to sort things out." Natalia dropped a gentle kiss to her sister's dark head and then moved away again to look into her dark troubled eyes. "So how long have you had a crush on Ava?"

"H-how...?" Leyla's eyes bugged out and her mouth dropped open, looking very much like a fish out of water. She ignored Natalia's bark of laughter. "How did you know?"

"Heh, are you kidding? I'm not blind. Besides, you two remind me of how Olivia and I were with each other at the very beginning," Natalia grinned and moved back towards the stove, pulling the fry pan back onto the burner to finish cooking their eggs. "You are either going to try to kill each other for eternity, like Olivia and Reva, or you are going to kiss each other senseless. Personally, I'm hoping for the kissing." Natalia couldn't resist the naughty wink, enjoying the flush it caused on Leyla's cheeks.

"Ok, well," Leyla pinched the bridge of her nose, embarrassed. This wasn't exactly the conversation she was hoping to have with her sister. "I don't want to mess things up with our various family members, so my little crush is going nowhere, and that tidbit of information stays between the two of us, okay?" Leyla had visions of Olivia finding out and killing her, very slowly.

"Of course," Natalia chuckled, pleased beyond words at this sister bonding moment. "In the meantime, if you want to keep the peace with Ava, then you need to stop antagonizing her by pushing her buttons. If Mike Thorne means nothing to you, then let him go."

"Just step to the side and let Mike have free reign?" Leyla snorted. Her guts churned at the possibility of missing an opportunity with Ava. "But what if he and Ava...?"

"I know," Natalia interrupted and smiled sadly, understanding all too well the fear. She had wanted to kill Matt Reardon once upon a time too for taking Olivia out on a date. "But God works in mysterious ways. If it is meant to be with Ava and Mike, then it will happen. And if not, then so be it. You just need to have a little faith and let nature take its course."

"Just like that?" Leyla cocked an eyebrow, very skeptical.

"I didn't say it would be easy," Natalia said gently, as her heart went out to her little sister. "But if your relationship with Ava is important, then you both need to figure out what you want and deal with it. God will take care of the rest."

They stared at each other a moment longer, Natalia's words sinking in.

A thud sounded over their heads, with Emma's feet hitting the floor practically at a run. And on the stairs they could both hear Olivia shuffling her way down, like a zombie looking for fresh coffee instead of brains.

Leyla nodded as Natalia smiled and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly one last time before moving to greet her wife with a tender morning kiss. Leyla cocked her head and watched them together, living their happily-ever-after.

God certainly took care of Natalia and Olivia in the end. It wasn't perfect, but it was good. Damn good. Maybe she just needed to relax and have a little faith too.

When Anna returned from Company, her arms were laden down with two bags of food and a tray of drinks. Handing out the orders to Sgt. Stapleton, and one of the office clerks, and a coffee for Remy, she took her own lunch and headed down to Eleni's office. She hadn't had much opportunity lately to talk with her friend and she missed that connection. Knocking on the door, she headed in where she caught Eleni's attention.

"Hey, I didn't know if you'd had a chance to grab a bite to eat, so I picked you up a chicken wrap and an iced coffee," Anna said as she held up the brown paper bag.

"Great, thanks. I didn't have time this morning to grab a bite in between running tests and a meeting with Frank and his therapist. I thought I was going to have to raid the vending machine." She laughed lightly at the wince on Anna's face, and she couldn't help but agree that the police station's vending machines left a lot to be desired.

"You were at a meeting with Frank and his therapist? How's that going?"

"Slowly improving. The medications seem to have been leveling off for him so that he's getting a good therapeutic effect from them. And talking about his issues and mine with regards to Marina have been helpful, I think."

"That's good. Has he given any thought about what he's going to do now?" Anna wondered. Sometimes forced time off was a blessing and other times off it was a curse, depending on one's personality type. She got the feeling that Frank liked to keep busy with working at the station or at Company and he'd been doing neither for a while as he worked towards healing.

"I think we're going to take a few weeks and go to see Harley over in Greece. With Daisy out west in college with Ashlee Wolfe, and things going fairly well for Company at the moment, Frank wants to see his sister. I think this will give both of us a much needed break, figure out what's happening with us."

"What's the therapist's thought on that?" Anna asked as she started to dig in to her own sandwich.

Taking a sip of the iced coffee to clear her mouth, Eleni then smiled. "He seems to think it's a good idea. I've got some reports to clear up on the Foley case, but other than that, things

are looking good here. Dr. Kennedy is covering for me in that time that I'm gone. She's good; she was in medical school with me and knows her stuff. Coming over from Boston."

"Sounds good," Anna said. Smiling, she added, "I've never been to Greece. It's kind of on my bucket list of things to do."

"Go. I know you'll love it." Eleni turned back to her computer as a beep had signaled one of her tests had been completed. Pleased with the results, she set the file to save and turned her attention back to her friend, noticing her distracted state. "Hey. Something bothering you? You just seem a little off."

"That obvious, huh?" Anna commented with a wry grin.

Placing a hand on Anna's arm, Eleni caught the other woman's attention. "For one, I'm a doctor; I notice things like that. And for two, I'd be a pretty shitty friend that I didn't notice that something was wrong."

Sighing, Anna started. "It's my father. I've tried just about every legal method I can think of to try to find him, including placing inquiries with friends at Interpol and contacting various police agencies, but nothing has turned up. US Customs and Border Protection haven't had his passport come up flagged and there's been nothing from the Transport Safety Agency either. Until I have credible evidence of his role in Edmund Winslow's death, I can't go to a judge to order an arrest warrant." Her hands fidgeted with the condensation that was collecting on her ice tea bottle. "There's been no sign of him showing up at the Winslow estate on San Cristobel, either."

"What about checking with Mallett? He might have some off the book contacts that he's used for locating people."

"Mallett?" Anna asked surprised, moreso because she hadn't thought of that. Certainly he'd have contacts within his security work. She had his contact information at her desk and she smiled; the information certainly put her in a better frame of mind. "Thanks. Will do."

Eleni held her arms out. "What else are friends for?"

Anna pointed at her with a finger and a teasing grin. "You. Me. Beer. Later."

"I think something can be arranged." Eleni laughed. The idea sounded great and she was quite looking forward to a bit of relaxation time. "Call me later when you hear something."

"All right. Later," Anna said as she picked up the remainder of her lunch and pitched the empty wrapper into the bin just inside the door.

Mid-afternoon, the judge's clerk had called Doris to ask them to return to the courtroom as he had a couple of questions regarding her case, so she and Kathryn headed back upstairs to the small room. Doris watched as her client nervously looked around the courtroom and up to the empty galley above them. She placed a hand on the younger woman's arm and gave her a nod of reassurance, but she noticed it did little to calm Kathryn's anxiety.

As the bailiff announced the judge's presence, they stood and waited for him to be seated before taking a seat. Even then, Doris could see her client's fidgeting with her watch, casting quick glances at the judge and back to her.

"Thank you for your prompt return. I just have a few brief questions for Ms. Howard," Judge Davis commented as he set his paperwork out in front of him. Sorting through the file, he pulled out a sheaf of paper. Acknowledging both the defence and prosecution, he continued, "Ms. Howard, you've been charged with the death of your husband by means of firearms. You've written in your statement to the police that the gun in question belonged to your husband, and as far as you know, it was registered to him?"

Kathryn nodded.

"You'll have to speak up for the record, Ms. Howard," the judge said, though conceded that her nervousness likely accounted for her lack of verbal response.

"Sorry, your honor. Yes, the gun was his," Kathryn said.

"And you knew where it was kept?"

"I did. But that day, I didn't have to go get it from its usual locked cabinet. He had taken it out earlier that day, taunting me, threatening my daughter."

"I see. Now, according to your statement, following the taunting, and after your daughter got off to school, your husband proceeded to drag you into the living room and proceeded to physically and sexually assault you. Correct?"

Kathryn took a heavy sigh, and after a moment, she responded, "Yes, your honor."

"Your medical records are quite extensive, Ms. Howard, going back several years. With that pattern of abuse, was there no other recourse available to you to get out and leave permanently, without resorting to shooting him?"

Doris stood up, prepared to object to the judge's questioning; he had all this information in front of him, but the judge waved her down. Silently she sat back down, but not without giving him a pointed glare that she would object further if he continued to upset her client.

"Your honor, I did try to leave him several times, occasionally with the state's help, and sometimes on my own. I'd get enough saved with whatever work I'd find, after food and shelter were looked after, and I'd move. I'd have to uproot Dani from her day cares, pre-school or school each time. Sometimes we'd only be in one place a few months and he'd find us. He has buddies on the police force so he'd search for us, even though I tried to keep us hidden as much as possible." Kathryn sighed. She knew she was talking quickly, but she wanted to get this ordeal over with as soon as possible, one way or another.

"Businesses want police checks for employment purposes. And most places need proof of identification for banking, lodging, pretty much anything. I didn't have the kind of money to create a new identity for us each time we moved. It's just been me and Dani for the last few years. When he'd find me, he'd beat the shit out of me and try to bring us home. Until he'd go out with his buddies for a drink and I had enough saved up, then Dani and I would disappear again." Kathryn looked down at the table and sighed. Folding her hands together, she looked up at the judge. She could feel the hot tears rolling over her cheeks. "If there was another way out of that mess of my life, that would have also protected my daughter and me, I would have taken it, your honor."

The judge nodded and looked through the report from Dr. Tremain about her psychological progress, and he made a couple notes on a pad in front of him. "Your psychological reports are showing improvements, but you're still having nightmares?"

"Who wouldn't?" Doris muttered under her breath, much to the chagrin of the young prosecutor at the table next to hers.

"Do you have something to add, Ms. Wolfe?" Judge Davis asked.

"Except that that's stating the obvious," Doris said somewhat exasperated. "Anyone in my client's position would have nightmares; that was a horrible situation for her and her daughter to be facing on a continuous basis. Yes, she's having nightmares, and will likely continue to do so, unfortunately. What my client went through was torture for her and

unfortunately for her, she took the only method out that was presented to her that afternoon."

"Your honor," the prosecutor said as he stood up for the first time since the session started. "The defendant has killed a man. That needs to be punished."

"She's already being punished, your honor," Doris responded heatedly, glaring at the young man across the aisle from her. "Every time she remembers what happened to her. She will live with that for the rest of her life. On that day there was a gun, lying on the counter, after the deceased placed it there before belting her across the face with his fist. She picked it up and she shot him. It was not premeditated; it was very much in self-defence."

Judge Davis looked over at the young woman in front of him, acknowledging the damage that had already happened to her before returning to his paperwork. "The defence has noted that you have an offer of lodging and employment, is that correct?"

"Yes, your honor," Kathryn said quietly. "At Company, and my daughter and I will be staying at the boarding house until we can afford something more."

"As I have looked over all the statements and medical records, and taking into account your responses today, I am hereby acquitting you of the charge of manslaughter in the first degree based on self-defence. Your life and your daughter's life have been put at risk and threatened multiple times. You have sought recourse in other ways but remained at risk from the deceased. While I am acquitting you on this charge, this court will recommend continued counselling for you and your daughter."

Kathryn remained quiet, stunned until Doris pressed a hand on top of hers.

"The court frees you, Ms. Howard. Go take care of your daughter and yourself," Judge Howard said with a sincere smile. "This court session is now adjourned." He banged his gavel then stood with his clerk and left the room.

"Jeez, everyone should go out and kill someone and have a home and job to return to," the prosecutor mumbled as he packed up his files and put them into his briefcase.

"Tell me you didn't just say that out loud," Doris rounded on the young man. "My client has been through hell and back. You try having the shit beat out of you on a regular basis, facing what she did, and then we can have a little chat. Go on. Tuck you tail between your legs and wander back to Mr. O'Neill and wait for your next case. If there is one." Without any further

glance back in his direction, she turned to her client and placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go get your daughter. Company for food, my treat."

"Thank you, Ms. Wolfe," Kathryn said gratefully. "For everything."

Doris simply nodded and guided the younger woman out of the courtroom.

Natalia cuddled back into Olivia's waiting arms as they snuggled up on the couch. Ava and Leyla were working late at the Beacon, and Emma was talking on the phone in the kitchen with Jodie. In a few minutes, the young girl would be heading to bed but she had to talk to her best friend first.

Natalia sighed and tilted her head up to look at Olivia. "When are Eleni and Frank coming back with Sweet Pea?"

Olivia looked down at the woman in her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Nine o'clock. Why? What are you up to?"

The brunette giggled and gave her wife a quick but sweet kiss. "Just curious."

"Uh huh. I don't believe you." Olivia squinted jokingly in distrust.

Natalia shrugged slightly. "I thought you would want to look over the brochures for planning our honeymoon."

"I guess Paris is out," Olivia grumbled. She really had wanted to take the younger woman there. She would have loved the Eiffel Tower and The Louvre.

"Yep, bad luck. And definitely not San Cristobel. Been there, done that," Natalia added.

Olivia nodded and leaned her head over to rest against the top of Natalia's. "Agreed," she said with a sigh. She loved her home island though, but they'd already made wonderful memories there. "Okay, so should we get out the computer and look up some places?"

"No need." Natalia sat up quickly and leaned down to reach around the end of the couch. She sat back up with a manila envelope and a huge grin. "I stopped by to see Blake the other

day and she gave me a bunch of brochures she had from her travel agency work. Tons of amazing honeymoon spots."

Olivia watched in amusement as Natalia opened the envelope and dumped an ungodly amount of brochures on the coffee table. She didn't know one manila envelope could hold so much paper. "Excited much?"

Chuckling lightly, Natalia shrugged. "A little, I guess." She reached down and spread out some of the brochures with her hand. "I feel like God's given me such a wonderful gift, and He's given it to me many times over. First our friendship, then Gus's heart to save you so I wouldn't lose you forever. Then this home and Emma, Francesca, and us...together. I almost lost you, then us, and I almost lost my life. We're still here though. We're still strong, and I just...I want to relish every moment."

The tears threatened to fall from Olivia's eyes, but she swallowed hard and pushed them down. Lightening the mood, she laughed. "You know the vows aren't until the wedding, right?" Natalia playfully slapped her leg and she reached down in mock shock. "Ow! Seriously, though, I completely feel the same way. I want this honeymoon to be unlike anything else we've experienced."

Natalia picked up a handful of brochures then flopped back into her wife's arms again. "You've been all over the world, Olivia. It's going to be hard to outdo all you've experienced."

"But I haven't experienced them with you," Olivia said seriously.

Natalia looked up at the tender green gaze staring unabashedly down at her with adoration. "Smooth talker," she whispered and placed a slow, gentle kiss on Olivia's full lips. The brochures fell from her hand onto the floor as she moaned at the sensation and reached up to tangle her fingers in Olivia's sunlit tresses. As soon as she tilted her head to deepen the kiss, a knock on the door startled her. She put a hand to her chest as she pulled back from Olivia. "Jeez! That must be Frank and Eleni."

She stood and walked to the door. Behind her, she could hear Olivia telling Emma to hang up and get her bath. Opening the door, she greeted Eleni and Frank then quickly took a sleeping Francesca in her arms. They followed Natalia back into the house where Eleni set the toddler's bag down on the coffee table.

Emma came around the corner with Olivia right behind her. The girl looked a little grumpy but cheered quickly when she saw her sister. She walked over to Natalia and gently gave the

sleeping toddler a kiss on the head before giving Natalia a kiss. Emma said her goodnights to everyone and headed upstairs.

Eleni pointed at the table with the brochures, amused at the amount there. "Making honeymoon plans?"

Olivia hitched a thumb at Natalia. "Someone got a little carried away."

"What? Be glad that I'm excited to go," Natalia said nudging her wife lovingly. The two couples fell into an awkward silence, and it gave Natalia time to realize that she had never been excited about going anywhere with Frank. It was so different now. Maybe he and Olivia were remembering that too. She quickly moved to another topic. "So, are you two going to be able to make the wedding?"

Frank shuffled his feet and looked up nervously. "Um, no, actually."

Natalia was surprised. She had hoped that with time, and especially with Eleni being back in his life, that Frank would be over his issues with her and Olivia being together.

Frank could almost read her face and clarified immediately. "I think I'm going back to Greece. I really liked being there with Harley, and I think we need it." He looked over at Eleni who smiled at him with understanding.

Olivia smiled and felt genuinely happy for them. "That sounds like a great idea! Sometimes you have to get away to get perspective." She saw the amused glance Natalia tossed her way. The irony of it wasn't lost on Olivia either.

Looking back at the pair, Natalia asked the obvious, "When do you leave?"

"In two weeks," Frank answered.

"When will you be back?" Olivia followed up with her own question.

He shrugged and looked at the three women, then down at his sleeping daughter with a sigh. He loved his daughter fiercely, but he also knew she was in good hands. The last few months had taken their toll on him, and if he was going to be worth his salt as a father to Francesca, he needed to get his own life together first. "I don't know. I don't have a round trip ticket. I think we're going to play it by ear."

Natalia looked down at the sleeping child in her arms and suddenly felt tears prick her eyes. Obviously, not for Frank leaving but for her daughter who had yet to really know her father. "You'll visit?"

He reached out and brushed his fingers against the curly hair of his child. "Of course."

"And our door will always be open if you want to visit Greece," Eleni added.

Olivia, feeling the emotion of the moment and the wave of sadness coming from Natalia, caught Eleni's eye and mouthed, "Thank you."

Nodding in acknowledgement, Eleni got Frank's attention. "We should go, Frank. I'm sure they want to get to bed." She looked at the two women and added, "I'll get you the details of where we're going to be living in case you need us after we leave."

"Thank you," Olivia said as she walked them to the door and said her goodbyes.

Act III

"What is taking Olivia so long? Did she have to go kill a model in Milan to find something to wear to the mall?" Leyla muttered under her breath, flipping through the latest entertainment magazine. Bridesmaid dress shopping was not something she was necessarily looking forward to, but she had to admit it would be fun to spend time with the Spencer girls. She felt Emma plop down on the couch beside her, like a big gangly cat, sprawling over her.

"Hey, what 'cha reading?" Emma asked, looking at the magazine. "Ooh, nice dress."

"Yeah, except for that plunging neckline, it would look good on you, Bean." Leyla said, smiling down at the young girl. She was getting taller, willowy like Ava. She would be quite beautiful one day.

"You think?" Emma asked a little shyly.

"Sure, the boys will go wild," Leyla elbowed her, getting a grin to appear.

"It would be better in black though," Emma sniffed, and Leyla bit her lip. Maybe that gothic phase wasn't so far off after all. Leyla flipped the magazine page, finding pictures of Angelina Jolie's latest tattoo.

Emma scrunched her nose up and leaned in to take a better look, not quite sure she liked what was there.

"Are you still going to get that tattoo you were talking about?" Emma asked, leaning back to blink up at Leyla once again.

"Yes," Leyla smiled, glad to have finally made up her mind about it. "But I'm waiting until after the wedding, since it takes some time to heal."

"Cool!" Emma said wistfully, clearly wishing she could get one too. They both looked up as Olivia came down the stairs, carefully putting the back on an earring as she descended. She was perfectly attired, Leyla had to give her that. Hitting the bottom step, Olivia cocked an eyebrow and stared at the two of them on the couch.

"No." Olivia said almost immediately. Leyla smirked as Emma began to pout.

"I didn't even ask yet," Emma grumped, crossing her arms.

"You don't have to, I know that look," Olivia smiled and grabbed her purse from the side table. "Let's get a move on girls, or Ava will think we've gotten lost." Emma hopped up and followed her mother into the kitchen, heading for the back door and grumbling under her breath the whole way. Leyla tossed the magazine onto the end table and followed behind them with a sigh.

Oh, today was going to be just a ton of fun.

The ding of the bell over Company's entrance alerted Blake to the new arrivals and she looked up as Doris, her client, Kathryn, and the young woman's daughter arrived. She smiled at them before nudging her step-daughter in their direction. The lunch crowd had just started to arrive and things were picking up.

"I'm going," Dinah responded with a grin. Though looking over at the mayor, she grinned widely before turned back to Blake. "But I'm thinking Doris wants to see you."

Not having seen Doris in a couple of days, Blake caught Doris's happy expression as the taller woman headed in her direction and smiled in response. Shooing Dinah out of the way, she approached Doris, placing a hand on her love's arm. "It went well?"

"Yeah. The judge acquitted her on the charge," Doris said with relief. She'd been sure of her work on the case, but anything could happen in a courtroom. Especially in Springfield.

"Today we just had to go down to the courthouse to fill out some additional final paperwork. Then I decided to take them for lunch."

"That's great news," Blake responded happily for her friend, then sighed. "That's one hell of a thing for a person to go through. As much as I loved my father, he did some pretty shitty things to my mother. She was no saint either, but no one deserves to be raped. Shaking her head to clear her memories, she focused on the woman in front of her; something more pleasant to do. "So, what are you doing now?"

"Right now? Taking my now former client and her daughter out for supper. Later? You, me, some chocolate and a bottle of wine at my place, perhaps?" Doris responded with a grin.

"Mmmmm. You're on. I'll see you later." Blake leaned over and placed a kiss on Doris's lips, pleasantly surprising the taller woman. "Now, go back over and celebrate your win."

Doris sighed happily as she returned to her table. Since their return from New York, Blake had been very determined that Doris was who she wanted to be with. And she didn't really care who knew.

Obviously, Blake knew her sons were going to be upset with the change, but they were going to have to get used to the fact that she was not going to be staying with their father. Clarissa, on the other hand, while a little disappointed by the fact her parents weren't getting back together, was happy for her mom and Doris. She liked seeing her mother happy.

Dani Howard was a happy little girl. She really didn't understand a lot of what was going on with the court and her mother's trial, but she knew that her mom wasn't going to jail for

killing her daddy. He was a bad man and she really didn't feel sorry for him, even though she supposed she should have. Reaching over, she gave her mom a hug.

"Hey, sweetie. What's that for?" Kathryn smiled down at her daughter, thinking she was a very lucky woman for not losing this joy in her life.

"I love you and I'm glad you're not going to jail." Dani rested her head against her mother's shoulder.

"Oh, so am I, sweetie. And I love you, too." As Kathryn looked down, she noticed her daughter eyeing the menu then back at her. "What would you like, Dani?"

"A Buzz Burger Mini and fries?"

"All right," Kathryn responded. "But get some lemonade or some milk. No soft drinks, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy." Dani was looking forward to this. Usually her mom didn't let her eat much in the way of junk food; keeping her eating as healthy as she could. So she appreciated when she got something different. A thought caught in her mind and she turned to her mother, and with a hopeful glint, she asked. "Mom, if you're going to be working here, can we eat here all the time?"

"Not all the time. Though Mr. Cooper does make some good healthy food, too. We'll see what happens." Kathryn looked down at her daughter before looking up, only to see the man in question standing near their table.

"I hear congratulations are in order," Buzz said, then tilted his head. "But I suppose congratulations might be the wrong word. It's kind of hard. They don't make Hallmark cards for this kind of situation." Shaking his head, he continued, "I'm digging myself in further, aren't I? All the best to you. And if you want, you can start work in two days."

"Wow. That soon?" Kathryn asked. She acknowledged the oddness of the situation but let it pass. He was right, there are no good words or platitudes for what she'd been through. Still, it was a surprise that the offer of employment would start this soon after the case.

"Yep," Buzz said, looking over at Dinah who was returning to their table. "The riff raff needs to go back to her full time work, not that I haven't enjoyed your presence there, Ms. Marler."

"Hey, watch who you're calling riff-raff. I earned my reputation," Dinah said with a smirk.

Doris looked at Dinah and Buzz. "No comment."

"Hey, speaking of my regular employment, WSPR is doing a series on domestic violence. I don't suppose you'd like to tell your story?"

"Dinah, too soon," Doris warned.

Dinah put up her hand, in a calming gesture. "It's not going to be for a little while yet. But, let me know if you want to participate. And you can choose to stop at anytime. It's not something you should feel you have to do."

"I'll think about it, okay?" Kathryn responded before looking down at her daughter and sighed.

"Okay, Dinah, back to work," Buzz said happily then turned to Kathryn. "Oh, and none of this Mr. Cooper business. You're working here, you're family. You call me Buzz like everyone else."

"Yes, Mr. Co- , I mean Buzz." Sighing, she continued. "That's going to take some getting used to."

With a grin, he replied, "You've got two days." He chuckled as he headed back towards the kitchen, hearing Dinah take their orders. Life was starting in an upwards turn again. Kathryn's acquittal, Blake and Doris moving back towards each other again, Olivia and Natalia officially getting married, Frank and Eleni building a relationship again, and he and Lillian were great. About time for Springfield...which generally meant if things were going well, the shit was going to hit the fan sooner rather than later.

"They're disgustingly cute together, even over the phone," Leyla said, taking a sip of her soda. Ava and Emma followed her gaze from their table in the mall food court and glanced over at their mother.

Olivia stood to the side of the food court at the mall, the only place her phone seemed to have decent signal was right outside the cell phone store. A goofy smile was plastered on

her face and she was nodding her head. A quick kiss and the phone was tucked into her back pocket and she was all business again.

"How's Natalia?" Leyla asked.

"Fine. Her meeting with Greg and the team of florists is stressing her out, but I reassured her I had a great hiding spot for the bodies in the wine cellar at the Beacon and you girls have strong muscles, so we're set." Olivia grinned at the girls, who all just shook their heads. "So what's next on the agenda? I think we've hit all the highlights."

The bags at their feet were a good indicator that their shopping spree was a success. Adorable dresses for each young woman had been surprisingly easy to find. Even Emma was thrilled that her outfit wasn't so frilly but more in keeping with the other women's dresses, elegant even. She was going to be a bridesmaid after all, not a flower girl.

"I saw a great pair of shoes for you in that store, Mom," Emma piped up. "On sale, too." Ava and Leyla groaned, not another shoe store. Olivia cocked an eyebrow and smirked at the pair. They were certainly getting along nice for a change.

"You did?" Olivia ran her hand through her daughter's fine dark blonde hair. It had been a good idea and Natalia had been right. A day out with her girls was just what she needed. Retail therapy was something the Spencer girls could wholeheartedly embrace. "You know how I love a good shoe sale, Em."

"I know, right?" Emma's eyes seemed to twinkle as she grabbed her mother's hand and pulled her up from her chair. "Come on, you can try them on and see what you think."

"You girls coming? Or do you want to watch the bags while we check out the sale?" Olivia asked, already knowing the answer as she turned to follow Emma. She grinned as Ava glanced at Leyla and they both leaned back in their chairs and waved good bye. "Wimps."

Olivia could hear their laughter as she let herself be dragged away by an excited Emma.

Yes, today was a good day.

Back at her office, Olivia let out a long, frustrated sigh as she deleted the words on the screen again. The scene had been playing on repeat in her Beacon office for the last thirty

minutes, and she had lost count of the number of times she'd deleted the words on the computer screen. She and Natalia had agreed to work on writing their vows, but to do them separately so they felt more natural and organic.

Olivia dropped her head to her hands and grumbled, "Come on, Spencer. You're supposed to be a smooth talker."

Standing, she paced in front of her desk recalling the many moments she and Natalia had shared in that space. A smile formed remembering the arguments, kisses, and more that they'd shared in that office. None of it though gave her the feeling needed to put words to paper, or to keyboard as the case was for her. She was uninspired.

Walking around her small office space, she looked at the many pictures on the walls, on bookcase shelves, on the shelf over the bar sink, and on her desk. Faces of family and friends stared back at her – Sam, Ava, Phillip, Emma, Josh, and, of course, Natalia. Her eyes trailed back to Josh and a sudden smile brightened her face.

She'd had a long conversation with Josh the other day over drinks. While getting married in New York City was definitely unique and a once in a lifetime experience, she wanted to make the real ceremony beyond Natalia's wildest dreams. Josh, a bit of an incurable romantic at heart, had some great ideas, and together they'd come up with a plan. At the center of it all though were the vows she'd make to the woman she loves, would always love.

She knew without a doubt where she needed to be for the inspiration she sought.

On the other side of town, Natalia wasn't having any better luck. She sat at the kitchen table with a hot cup of coffee, an empty legal pad, and piles of balled up paper surrounding her. Dropping her pen to the pad, she slumped down in the chair and let out a low, frustrated growl. Of all of the places to be, she'd really thought the farmhouse would inspire her with the right words the best.

Pushing the chair back, Natalia stood and decided to do a load of laundry to clear her head. As she walked from the bathroom to Emma's room then the master bedroom picking up clothes and towels as she went, Natalia thought about all of the pivotal moments she and Olivia had experienced in their home – their first not-kiss kiss, the fight over that God-awful white Christmas tree, the almost confession at the engagement party for her and Frank.

There had been so many big moments she and Olivia had shared in their home. So, why wasn't she able to find the right words for her vows? While saying what was on her mind, especially when it came to her love for Olivia, wasn't always easy, there were moments when she couldn't hold it back, when it all came bubbling to the surface.

As she tossed a pair of Emma's jeans into the wash, an idea came to her. Quickly, she finished prepping the laundry. She'd actually start it when she got back. Right now though, she grabbed her purse, keys, and notepad from the table. There was only one place that held more meaning for her and Olivia than the farmhouse, and that was exactly where she was headed.

Thursday evening at Farley's offered a Ladies Night and Anna was more than happy to kick back with a couple beers, some pub food and relax. Waiting for her companion to arrive, she ruminated on the information that Mallett had told her, which in reality, wasn't much more than she'd been able to find out herself, but he had promised to put out some feelers for her and she was grateful. Hopefully between the two of them, they'd be able to find out something sooner rather than later. There wasn't much on Edmund's body when he had been dumped on her doorstep. She'd gotten Eleni to run as many tests as possible on skin and fibers, but in the absence of anything out of the ordinary turning up, Anna knew her father had to have had a hand in the man's death. He was good at what he did; it was one of the reasons that Edmund had hired him decades ago. Just when she thought she had something to tie her father to the death, the lead would go nowhere and frankly she felt that banging her head against a wall might be more productive.

"Hey, you look like you were miles away," Eleni said by way of a greeting as she pulled the other chair back from the table and sat down. "Sorry I couldn't make it last night. Frank and I were looking after Francesca and it was late by the time we got back from the farmhouse."

"No problem." Shaking her head, clearing the cobwebs, Anna smiled and continued, "Sorry, thinking of my father. You ready for a couple beers?"

"Definitely. You want to order a basket of wings to share?" Eleni asked. She grabbed a menu to check out the list of dipping sauces and smiled. "You up for some Caribbean Jerk sauce?"

Anna laughed. "Sounds good to me."

"I'll head to the bar. My treat this time." At the bar, Eleni ordered a bottle of Hillas for herself and a bottle of Sam Adams for her friend, and then placed the order for the wings. Heading back to their table, she sat down and handed Anna her beer. "Wings'll be about 10 minutes. So, what's up?"

"Not much more than earlier, only now I have the benefit of Mallett's resources on top of mine. I'll give it another couple of days before I make any more decisions." Anna took a deep swig of her beer. "It's just so damned frustrating."

"Look, I've got all the samples you gave me, and those I got off Edmund's body. I'll run everything again and put it through CODIS, as well as our police databases."

"CODIS? You can access the FBI database?"

"I have my methods," Eleni said with a smile. "Don't worry, they are all legal. Anyway, I'll run the samples again and see if I can get any hits. It may not be anything, I was thorough the first run through."

Anna sighed. "I know. I'm not saying you weren't, but it would certainly help. Thank you." Anna sat back in her chair, her fingers picking at the label that had already loosened with the condensation pooling on the bottle. Looking back at her friend with a hopeful glance, she asked, "Can we talk about anything else, please?"

"What about your love life?" Eleni joked with Anna.

"Oh, please. The only thing more depressing than this case is my love life, or lack thereof."

"No blind dates recently?" Eleni asked, remembering Anna telling her of her horrid bad date, and then of her late evening 'non-date' with Doris after that. "What about Doris?"

"What about her?" Anna asked on a sigh. "She and Blake are starting to get back together again."

"Sorry," Eleni replied, knowing Anna still had strong feelings for the mayor. "Something will come along when you least expect it."

They chatted away about relationships, films, and just about anything else for a while as they waited for the wings to arrive. When they came, they dug in, enjoying them and laughing about things irreverent.

"Hey, did you make your plans for Greece yet?" Anna asked, remembering their earlier conversation.

"We're still working out the bookings of the tickets, but I'm really looking forward to the break. It's been one thing after another since I came back to Springfield. Ready to kick back and relax."

"Yeah, for a medium-sized town, Springfield certainly has its share of criminal activity," Anna said, laughing. "Where is Harley?"

"The island of Aigina, primarily, though she does have a small apartment in Athens. She runs a bed and breakfast on the island."

"When are you thinking of leaving?"

"Next week, I think," Eleni said with a chagrined smile.

"Ouch, I can imagine the cost of the tickets this close."

Eleni laughed. "No kidding. About \$2000, each."

"But I suspect it will be more than worth it once you get there. Harley's place sounds great."

"Definitely. I'll have to email you some pictures from the last time I was over there."

"Great! Email me the details," Anna said before feeling the vibration of her cell phone in her pocket. "Hey, I need to check my phone. I'm expecting a call."

"Mallett?" Eleni asked.

"Uhm, no," Anna said as she looked at the caller id. "Just says Private Number and no message left. That's odd."

"Your father maybe?"

"Doubtful. I don't know. Look, I should get going. I want to check on a few things." Anna was distracted and her thoughts kept going back to the anonymous call, wondering what it was all about.

"Do you want to split a cab?" Eleni asked, concerned for her friend.

"Nah, I think I'll take a run. I want to clear my head for a bit. Thanks, though."

"No problem. I'm heading over to Company. I wanted to let Buzz know about the trip. It'll be a week or so before we head off."

Eleni stood up and gave her friend a hug before she headed out, watching as Anna put on her earbuds, and started running down the road into the town's main area. She hoped the other woman would find out the information to put this case to rest. Edmund Winslow was a pain in the ass to many of Springfield's residents and he certainly had what was coming to him, but when his death was likely caused by a family member of her friend, it got a lot more complicated.

Leyla sank back down at the table in the food court, sliding a fresh cup of coffee towards Ava. Thankfully, the line up at the coffee counter had been relatively short. She also slid over a chocolate croissant, which she had come to learn not that long ago, was one of Ava's favorite things.

"Ooh, thank you," Ava grinned, pleasantly surprised.

Leyla shook her head when Ava offered half to her, and then proceeded to watch as she dove into the chocolaty goodness. If she had some chocolate on top of the caffeine they would need to peel her off the mall ceiling soon. Besides it was much more fun watching Ava enjoy her treat. Leyla smiled, inhaling the scent of her own dark brew before taking a much needed sip. She flicked her wrist, checking her watch and wondered just how long finding the perfect pair of shoes could possibly take.

"Don't bother; we may need to send out a search party for them later tonight." Ava said over a bite of her croissant, leaning forward. "I think the shoe gene missed me."

"That might not be a bad thing," Leyla snorted.

A comfortable silence fell as they sipped their drinks. They had been talking about everything, from work to the upcoming wedding and everything in between. Leyla shifted in her chair. There was one thing she had wanted to discuss but wasn't sure how to bring it up.

"About the wedding," Ava suddenly began, scratching the back of her neck as she struggled to find the right words. "Have you thought about who you might be bringing to it?"

"Uh, well," Leyla blinked, taken by surprise as that was what she had been just wondering herself. She sighed and ran her hand through her long dark hair. Just let go, Rivera. "Actually, I've been thinking I might just go by myself. I mean, Mike is a nice guy and all, but you know what, our friendship is more important to me. So, if you wanted to ask him to the wedding as your guest, I think that would be great."

Ava stared at her a moment, before letting out a soft laugh and leaning back in her chair.

"I was going to say the same thing to you," Ava shook her head and looked out over the moving mass of people in the food court, the scents and sounds washing over them. Leyla waited, knowing that there was something still coming. Ava met her eyes and smiled softly. "For a long time, I thought that getting the man was the goal. That it was what would fix everything bad in my life and make me happy. I guess I figured it was the point of this whole game we all play. But with Max's death..."

Ava paused, glancing at her hands for a moment, fidgeting with her napkin and tearing little strips from it. Leyla stretched her hand out and stilled her fingers, squeezing her hand lightly, silently offering her strength.

"Well, it kind of messed me up for a bit," Ava shrugged a shoulder nonchalantly, but Leyla knew it was still a tough topic for her. "And then the more I watch Olivia changing these last few years, since knowing Natalia and recovering from her heart transplant and finding love, real love, I've come to realize that friendship and family are more important. I can't wait for a knight in shining armor to come in and fix everything. I have to do it myself, stand on my own with the support of those close to me and be myself, warts and all. And then, when I'm ready, I'll find someone who wants to share it with me, who wants to be my family too. After all, family is everything, in whatever shape or form that might mean."

"Amen," Leyla said softly, as their eyes met and locked, the world seeming to shrink away for an instant.

"Oh, my God, you guys will not believe what shoes Mom got me for the wedding!" Emma bounced into the chair beside Ava, her bag plunked down on the table. When she'd found her friend Jodie and her mother at the store, she'd asked Olivia if she could stay with them at the mall when her mom had to return to the Beacon. Jodie's mother had offered to drive her home, but Emma had spotted her sister and Leyla still in the foodcourt and she had said

she'd get home with them. Their intense moment broken, Leyla shifted slowly moving her hand from Ava's and leaning back in her chair.

"They aren't God awful Barbie pink, are they?" Ava asked, finally pulling her attention away from Leyla's dark eyes and glancing over at her little sister with a smirk.

"No!" Emma glared at her sister. "They're off white. But they have a two inch heel."

"Dear Lord, girl, you won't be able to walk in those kick ass shoes." Ava teased, laughing as Emma frowned at her.

"Ah, you might be surprised. After all Emma here is a Spencer; it was time she had a pair of power heels," Ava said, looking over at Leyla, looking back and forth then back at her sister. "Well, as much fun as it's been to empty out mom's bank account, I think it's time for us campers to head home. Who wants to drive?" she grinned, pulling out her car keys and dangling them. Her feet were tired after a good shop and it was time to be chauffeured home.

Emma's eyes widened excitedly, her hand just starting to move towards the keys.

"Not you!" Ava and Leyla said at once, laughing together as Leyla snatched the keys and they all stood, gathering their purchases. Emma shook her head, taking her shoe bag and moving to her sister's side, looking up at her forlornly as Ava slid a comforting arm around her thin shoulders.

"Aw, I never get to do anything fun."

Act IV

In a corner booth, Doris and Blake sat side by side as they poured through photographs that they'd taken of Olivia and Natalia's wedding in New York. Blake sighed as she looked at the happy couple as they'd arrived by horse drawn carriage and the absolute surprise that radiated from Natalia's face at the surprise that awaited her.

"They look so happy," Blake said, smiling. "I can't believe you and Olivia pulled this off so quickly, and without anyone knowing." She mock slapped Doris on the arm. "I thought you had to wait a while to get the marriage license certificate at the courthouse. How did you manage to get around that?"

"That's me, stealth ninja wedding planner at your service," Doris grinned broadly. With a saucy expression on her face, Blake fired back, "I'll have to keep that in mind for future reference."

Doris grinned. "Everything actually went better than planned as we didn't know Olivia's brother was in town. That was a bonus. I know their girls wished they could have been there, but really, Olivia and Natalia needed this time together on their own this time, and they do have the wedding here soon that both girls will be there for."

"Has anyone heard from Rafe yet? I know Natalia would want him there for their wedding." "Nothing yet." Doris sighed; she knew the lack of any information from Rafe or about him was making his mother and Olivia constantly worry about his safety. She'd fired off another email to the governor the previous morning but as of yet hadn't received a response. "Keep your fingers crossed and pray for the best."

"So, Ms. Wedding Planner, what's on the go for this upcoming wedding?"

"I get to enjoy this one from a spectator guest perspective as I'm not officiating the ceremony. Olivia and Natalia have asked Josh to perform that duty."

"Then you'll be my date," Blake responded assuredly as she rested her head on Doris's shoulder. When the door bell rang, Blake looked up to see Eleni enter and head to the bar and she nodded a greeting to the other woman. She smiled, realizing that Eleni and Frank made each other happy, which in turn made her happy; they both deserved some good in their lives.

.

"Maybe we could get them matching bracelets, or necklaces," Ava said, taking a sip of her soda as they continued wandering down the mall hallway. Twice in one week was almost her shopping limit, but this was important and she was having fun hanging out with Leyla and Emma, instead of working all hours. "We could have the various stones set into them for all our birthdays."

"It needs to be something special," Emma said, slowing down to look at some shoes in a store window. "The wedding is the joining of our families, too, after all."

"Sam sent some money, and I can put in for Francesca," Ava said as she subtly herded Emma from the store.

"And I can cover Rafe and my brother Leo, for our side of the family," Leyla offered, liking the idea. "Did we want to do parents, too?" She chewed her lower lip, knowing that a call to her mom might be in order if that was the case.

"Whatever," Ava shrugged. "It might be a nice gesture. I know when Mom's parents were born, I can double check with Sam and we would just include their birthstones too."

"Hey, is that the tattoo design you're thinking of getting, Leyla?" Emma asked, her finger pointing into the display window of a small hole in the wall tattoo parlor. They all stopped to look at the intricately swirling design of a cross advertised on the glass window.

"Yep, Bean, that's the one," Leyla grinned, as Ava moved closer to get a better look at it.

"It's so awesome," Emma smiled back. "I wish I could get one, too."

"Over your mom's dead body, although with that ticker of hers you never know..." Leyla sassied, not surprised as she was suddenly whacked on both shoulders by the sisters. "OW!"

"Leyla!" Ava gasped, although somewhat amused by the bad joke. Emma just crossed her arms across her chest and glared.

"Kidding! I was kidding!" Leyla laughed as the two continued to gawk at her in shock. "You know I love Olivia. Come on!"

"Not funny," Emma grumped, frowning at Leyla. "I never want one in that case." Ava smiled and wrapped an arm around Emma's shoulder in sisterly solidarity.

"So, where is the tattoo going to go?" Ava asked, trying to change the subject before Emma blew a gasket. "Or don't I want to know?"

"Her lower back," Emma supplied before Leyla could even open her mouth.

"Really?" Ava glanced down at her sister, who nodded.

"Hello, standing right here, people..." Leyla muttered under her breath. She was shocked into silence as Ava reached out and tugged her black tank top up, to expose the soft skin of her lower back and the waist band of her low rider jeans.

"Hm, yeah, it would look good there," Ava said, their eyes meeting as her thumb drew a small circle across the exposed skin. "I'm a little surprised you're going with a cross though." Leyla swallowed hard as Ava released her tank top and the material slid back down, covering her back. The skin still tingled from her touch, as the three of them started wandering off deeper into the mall.

"Well, like Natalia says," Leyla said softly, her eyes once again meeting Ava's over Emma's head. "Sometimes you just gotta have a little faith."

Walking behind the bar, Eleni poured herself a cup of coffee. As she wanted to head back to her office for a little while before retiring for the evening, she figured the extra bit of caffeine wouldn't keep her awake too much that evening. And she figured the alcohol from the earlier beer and the current caffeine infusion could battle themselves out in her system. And both perhaps dimmed her slight nervousness about broaching the topic of taking Frank off to Greece for a few weeks to Buzz.

The man in question came through the kitchen door carrying a serving plate of food and headed over to Blake and Doris's table. After sharing a few words with the women, he returned to the bar.

"Hey, Eleni, how are things going?" Buzz asked as he gave his former daughter-in-law a hug.

"Pretty good. Keeping busy." Eleni sighed before continuing, "Listen, I just wanted to say that Frank and I are heading over to Greece to see Harley for a few weeks. We started talking about it now that his therapy sessions are going well, and his medications are at a good level. I think seeing his sister and the kids would do him a world of good and Frank's psychiatrist agrees."

"Wow. How come Frank didn't say anything before this?" Buzz asked, quite surprised.

"Truthfully, I think he was nervous. He didn't know what you'd think." Eleni shrugged her shoulders.

"It sounds like a great idea, for both of you." Buzz smiled and wrapped her in another hug. "When are you leaving?"

"Probably end of next week. We just need to clarify some dates with Harley."

"That is soon," Buzz said laughing. "All the best. Now, can I get you something to eat with that caffeine source?"

Joining Buzz in laughter, Eleni said she'd have a bowl of the chili to take back to the office. With Frank taking an evening out with Rick, Josh, and Matt, there wasn't going to be anyone home for a while, and she'd have some time to rerun the tests on Edmund Winslow's clothing and blood samples. Perhaps she could find something to give Anna some lead in her investigation. Maybe there was something she missed first time round, though she didn't hold out a lot of hope in that regard. Lost in her thoughts, she missed Detective Li coming in the door looking like she hadn't run the three and a half miles from Farley's to Company in the early evening summer heat and she didn't even look like she'd broken much of a sweat.

"Can I get you a bottle of water?" Eleni offered.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Anna nodded. "That sounds great."

"Did you get your head cleared?" Eleni asked as she grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge under the bar, handing it to her friend.

"Thanks," Anna said as she shook her head. "Still no idea what that phone call was about, but the run did help. I think I'm going to head into the office and see what I can come up with."

"Well, if you want to hold on a few more minutes, I can go over with you."

"Sounds good." Anna looked around the bar, finding Doris and Blake sharing a plate of nachos. With a sigh, she turned back to Eleni. "Do you mind? I want to talk to Doris for a minute; let her know what's going on."

"Not a problem," Eleni said. "See you in a few."

While she waited for Anna to return, Kathryn Howard returned to the restaurant.

"Is Mr. Cooper...," Kathryn started and sighed. "Sorry, is Buzz available?"

"Sure, Ms. Howard," Eleni responded. "I'll get him."

Before Eleni could head back to the kitchen, Kathryn responded with a smile, "Since I'm going to be working here, you might as well call me by my name. Kathryn mostly, but sometimes I get called Katie, too."

"Which do you prefer?" Eleni asked.

"Kathryn."

Extending a hand to the younger woman, Eleni smiled. "Well, Kathryn it is, then. Welcome to the family."

Tilting her head to the side, Kathryn was surprised by the response. "Family?"

"I'm Eleni Andros. I was married to Buzz's son, Frank. Plus, Buzz tends to think of his employees, related or not, as family. I'll go get him."

"Thank you." Kathryn turned around and watched the atmosphere of the small family-run restaurant. She liked it, a lot. Now that she was no longer under the threat of a conviction, she thought things were finally looking up for her and her daughter. When Buzz came out, she smiled at him. "I can start tomorrow, if you like."

Extending a hand, Buzz grinned. "Come in at 9:30am and we'll walk you through the routine."

"Thank you, Buzz," Kathryn grinned. "I won't forget this."

"Go on, I'll see you in the morning. Have a good sleep."

"Thanks." Kathryn headed out the door and up the stairs to the boarding house rooms that she and her daughter were living in. She couldn't believe her fortune and she was determined to make a difference with her life.

Inside, Anna returned to the front of the restaurant, meeting up with Eleni.

"Everything go okay?" the forensic pathologist asked, noticing her friend's tired expression.

"Yeah, I guess," Anna responded. Rotating her neck, stretching the muscles, she sighed. "I think I'm just going to head home. I'm whipped and I don't think that at this point I'm going to get any further. Maybe just kick my feet back and watch a movie...or tv series on Netflix." "No problem. Come on, I'll walk out with you." Eleni extended her arm towards the door, gesturing for Anna to go ahead. "Anything particular that you're interested in watching?" "Yeah, a friend of mine got me hooked on this British series, *"Wire in the Blood"*. It's really good." The evening air was still pretty muggy but the heat of the day had passed as the sun went down. "I think I'll just walk home. It's a nice evening." Eleni reached over and gave her friend a hug. "That it is. I'll see you tomorrow." "Night."

When Natalia exited the bathroom, she came up short at the end of the bed, her breath stopping in her chest. The lovely view of Olivia stretched out naked across the bed greeted her. Olivia's glorious and firm ass peaked out from the sheet as the older woman dozed on her stomach, her hair splayed out over her arm and pillow.

Natalia sighed and smiled mischievously before biting her lip, feeling the rush of emotion their earlier lovemaking and pillow talk had caused.

Natalia curled into Olivia's arms as they faced each other, lightly touching and kissing while their bodies calmed from the overwhelming power of making love. Breathing deeply, Natalia nuzzled along her partner's jaw, enjoying the contented sigh in her ear. The utter hopeless romantic in her loved these intimate moments where they simply enjoyed being close and connected.

She was lost in the salty taste and sensual heat when Olivia spoke above her. "I wish I could get you pregnant."

Natalia stopped her ministrations, not sure she heard correctly, and pulled back to look at Olivia, who was pressing her lips together and unable to make eye contact. She raised her hand to Olivia's cheek and made her look up. "Where did that come from?"

Olivia shrugged. "I know it's crazy and obviously impossible. I just wish I could give that to you sometimes. Share that experience with you."

The raw and open look in Olivia's beautiful eyes pulled at Natalia's heart. She closed her own eyes against it and shook her head. "You already have, querida. I've told you that. Francesca was created because I was so in love with you and you were there...in my heart."

Olivia became choked up but pushed it down to say what she had been feeling for a while now. It had been sitting there in the back of her mind from the moment Natalia came back pregnant after leaving town, and then got stronger when she showed up at Natalia's ultrasound. Ever since the other day though when Josh had mistakenly thought they wanted him to come over to talk about having a baby with them, the thoughts and images had been constantly playing her head.

"That's not what I mean. This isn't about Francesca. I love her. God knows I do. I just..." Olivia let out a long breath getting her thoughts together. "I wasn't there though. We weren't making plans about who the donor would be and how we'd do it. I just...God, Natalia, I just want to know what it feels like to be with you in that moment when our baby is created, to stress over waiting for the pregnancy test to show that silly smiley face."

Both of them giggled at that thought.

Natalia sobered quickly. "I had no idea you were thinking about this."

"I know. I sprung it on you. But I guess with all that's happened to us in the last two to three years and all the emotions of getting married, I couldn't hold it in anymore." Olivia chuckled, feeling a little silly about it all.

Natalia brushed Olivia's hair back. She knew that self-conscious laugh and quickly kissed her wife before easing her worries. "Yes, it's sudden, but it's not like the thought hasn't occurred to me too."

"Really?" Olivia asked with surprise but clearly pleased that Natalia had thought of having a child with her.

Natalia smiled tenderly and confirmed, "Really." A quick sigh followed before she continued, "I still want to take some time to think about it though. No rash decisions."

Olivia couldn't help but chuckle a little at the very typical approach from Natalia. Her partner wasn't known for being rash. "Of course not."

Walking around the end of the bed until she was standing to the side, closest to Olivia, Natalia shook slightly as a wave of awe and gratitude came over her. She had struggled with writing her vows, trying to find the right words, but all of it suddenly became so clear. It was as obvious as their love. Climbing into bed next to her naked lover, she wrapped the

sleeping woman in her arms, knowing exactly the right thing to do. Their wedding day couldn't come soon enough.

In the dimly lit apartment, Anna sat on her couch, a glass of Mountain Dew and a semi-empty bowl of popcorn sat on the table as Anna searched her laptop for new emails. On the tv screen was the most recent episode in her viewing list. She'd only partially been paying attention though to the tv. There were a few work related emails that were in her box, which didn't require immediate answers, so she closed up the laptop and started to watch the episode with more focus.

The sudden beeping of her cell phone startled her just as she was getting to a particularly intense scene. But this time it wasn't a call, but rather a text message: *'The Forbidden City is no longer forbidden territory as it secures the man of the hour. Trust in your instincts and they will take you far.'*

"What the hell?" Anna asked aloud as she searched the text messages to see the origin, but only a few numbers of the originating user data header appeared but with no obvious identification of user. Picking up her laptop, she opened her cell phone provider's website to get a list of text messages to her phone and copied them down, then she opened her email and started a message to Eleni.

To: Eleni Andros

Fr: Det. Anna Li

Re: Strange message

Got a really strange text message tonight. Sending you the relevant information.

Message read: 'The Forbidden City is no longer forbidden territory as it secures the man of the hour. Trust in your instincts and they will take you far.'

I'm assuming it's about my father but who sent it? Any ideas? I can't discern much from the origins. Any suggestions?

Anna

Anna sighed; finally there looked like there might be some kind of break in the search for her father. Now distracted from her viewing she shut off the TV; the rest of the episode would have to wait for another day. She grabbed her half-empty soda glass and the remains of the popcorn and tossed them out. She was just about done when she had a ping from her phone. Picking it up, she read the message and smiled.

A, not sure about origins myself, but I know someone at Quantico who owes me a favor. She's a genius at that kind of thing. Will send on, ok? E.

Anna smiled. Some things were looking up. Snagging her laptop from the coffee table, she brought it up to the kitchen counter and typed out a Request for Leave letter, ready to bring in to Chief Thorne. Hopefully she'd get some more information in the next day or so from Eleni's contact. Checking that all the locks were bolted, she turned off the remaining lights and headed into her bedroom. Before crawling into bed, she quickly fired off a response on her phone.

E, Thanks for that. See you tomorrow. - A

Episode 10: These Three Remain



Act I

The warm breeze of the late August day had turned surprisingly cool as the sun began to dip below the horizon. The sunlight cast colors throughout the room as it shone through the glass. Olivia watched the colors change as each minute passed marvelling at the fact that only four short years ago she was ready to give up. With her failing heart, her failing hope wasn't far behind. Emma had been her only bright spot and the only reason she held on, but even that hadn't been enough anymore. Like a miracle created especially for her, Natalia swept into her life and into her heart, changing everything for the better.

As the words and emotions came to her, Olivia made quick notes on her phone to add to her vows later. With the wedding only a week away, she had been panicked that she'd never find the right words for her vows, but sitting here in the place Natalia loved the most, only second to the farmhouse, the words flowed easily.

She smiled at what she'd written thus far and decided that she had enough for now. Standing, she walked as quietly as possible on the wood floors in her heels, careful not to disturb an elderly woman praying a few pews back. She had one more stop to make, one more place of inspiration to visit, before heading home.

Natalia stretched her legs out after sitting down on the bench. She had walked the long way around the park to the gazebo - their gazebo - to get in the right frame of mind for writing her vows. Looking around the small space, she smiled remembering the surprising snow that had fallen that fateful day, how gorgeous Olivia looked standing in the snow with her eyes bright and hopeful, and the nervous shiver she felt as Olivia pushed her to return to the church and the way she couldn't hold back her feelings anymore.

This gazebo had seen their lives irrevocably changed in an amazing and wondrous way. It held a special power to her - mystical and beautiful like their love. With a contented sigh, she looked down at the notepad and began to write.

From across the park, Olivia smiled as she leaned against a tree trunk. For the last few minutes, she'd been watching Natalia excitedly scribbling on a notepad and taking breaks occasionally to look up, deep in thought, a pen tapping against her chin.

"She's so adorable," Olivia muttered seemingly to herself.

"You always had wonderful taste," Josh quipped behind her.

Olivia whipped her head around at the familiar sound of her ex-husband's voice behind her and smiled. "And you are living proof," she teased the handsome man. "How are you?"

"Very well. Thank you for asking." Josh smiled back fondly and stepped up next to Olivia. "You'll be glad to know I have everything ready for the ceremony, just as we discussed."

"Wonderful. Thank you," Olivia said sincerely. She hoped Natalia would be pleased with her plan.

Noticing the pensive and slightly nervous look on Olivia's face, Josh set her mind at ease. "She's going to love it, Olivia. Stop worrying."

Turning her head back around, she watched her wife longingly for a moment before nodding in acquiescence. She shifted the subject away from her temporary concerns. Every time she and Natalia tried to move forward it seemed like something was always slowing them down. "How's Reva?"

Josh couldn't help but chuckle. Olivia was so not interested in knowing how Reva was doing so he ignored the question. "You are such a goner. Love looks good on you, Olivia, but not the worry. Just enjoy the anticipation! It's all going to be fine."

She was unable to help the blush that spread up her neck and into her cheeks at being read so well. Quirking a smile at Josh, she admitted, "That obvious?"

He nodded his head and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "This love...this day is well-deserved." Olivia gave him a look that said she doubted that summation, but he stopped her before she could speak. "I need to get back to my girl. It seems I have this wedding to attend in a couple of days for a really good friend, and I need to get a new suit."

"Yes, you do." Olivia patted his cheek fondly. "A haircut may not be a bad idea either."

He stepped back. "Oh, nice! I love you too, Liv." He shooed her with his hand and said, "Go surprise your wife."

Olivia mocked him with a salute and he laughed before walking off in the direction of the parking lot.

Spinning around with a smile and a hop in her step, Olivia made her way over to the gazebo and snuck behind where Natalia was sitting. With a mischievous smile, she tiptoed closer until she was right behind the brunette's ear.

"Saying nice things, I hope," Olivia husked out, surprising Natalia.

The brunette squeaked in shock, the notepad in her hand getting tossed in the air and falling to the ground. Quickly, she grabbed it before Olivia could see anything and sat back. "Olivia! You scared the daylights out of me!"

Olivia leaned over the railing and kissed the younger woman's cheek. "You're so cute when you're flustered." When Natalia huffed, she chuckled and pointed at the notepad. "What do you have there, hot stuff?"

"Nothing," Natalia answered too quickly, shifting uncomfortably on the bench. Usually, she was the prepared one with every detail well-planned out. To wait this late to write her vows was not like her at all. She hated to admit that she hadn't written them yet. "It's just a grocery list."

Reaching over the railing, Olivia tried to take the pad. "Oh, I want to make fettuccine Alfredo tonight. I'll add the ingredients to the list."

Natalia pulled the pad away. "I've got it. I know what to get."

"Uh huh," Olivia murmured, watching her wife shift her eyes. Realization dawned and she walked around the gazebo to go inside and sit down by Natalia. "If it makes you feel any better, I just started writing mine too. In fact, that's why I came here. For some inspiration."

Relaxing back into the bench, Natalia smiled softly at the beautiful woman next to her. She put the notepad aside and reached over to take Olivia's hand, twining their fingers together, remembering some of the words on her notepad. "This is a pretty special place for us, huh?"

Olivia nodded, a sense of comfort and peace enveloping her. "We had some big moments here to say the least."

For a long moment, Natalia was quiet, looking down at their joined hands and tracing Olivia's fingers with her own. "What do you say to having another big moment here? Not that I don't love the farmhouse, but..." Olivia quirked an eyebrow as dark brown eyes glanced hesitantly up at her. "You want to get married here?"

Natalia nodded and hurriedly spoke, "It's crazy, I know. We already have everything lined up for doing it at the farmhouse. Greg has everything in order, but..."

"Consider it done," Olivia agreed even as Natalia tried to talk both of them out of it. "We'll do the reception at the farmhouse. That way all of Greg's prep won't go to waste."

"Yeah?" Natalia smiled giddily at her. When Olivia nodded, she threw her arms around the older woman's neck, kissing her soundly.

The look of panic in Greg's eyes as Olivia and Natalia told him they wanted to switch the location of the ceremony from the farmhouse to the gazebo was priceless. Olivia knew she should feel guilty, but that's what Natalia was for. When she whispered her idea of incentive for Greg into Natalia's ear and got a giggle and nod back, Olivia knew why she loved her wife so much.

Olivia waved a hand in front of Greg's face, which had turned a strange shade of green. "Greg, I have two words for you that will make it all worthwhile."

It took Natalia brushing his arm to bring him back to the present. "Huh?"

"Shopping trip," Olivia beamed. Greg was still non-verbal so she emphasized her next words, "A one thousand dollar shopping spree...in New York City. I'll cover the travel expenses, too."

The words finally sunk in and he squealed like a little girl getting a pony. Both women laughed at him as he perked up. "Oh my God, Mrs. Spencer! I'm...I'm...oh my God!" He paused, turned from them as if he had a thought, then swung back around. "I need some new decorations. Ohhhh, I have the perfect idea."

Olivia and Natalia giggled at the prim man being completely discombobulated as he walked away mumbling. Natalia turned back to her wife who was grinning goofily. "Quick thinking, querida."

Olivia shrugged and pulled Natalia close. "That's why I get paid the big bucks." She winked and pressed a sweet kiss to Natalia's lips. "Mmmmm, you know, the best thing about letting someone else plan the wedding is that we have plenty of free time for more...pleasant activities."

Her body hummed from the kiss Olivia gave her and she desperately wanted more. She asked breathlessly, "What did you have in mind, Mrs. Spencer-Rivera?"

Smirking, Olivia leaned in and brushed her lips tantalizingly over her love's neck before coming up to nip at her earlobe. "Meet me in Suite 403 and find out."

Natalia shivered at the erotic rush that ran down her spine. "Give me an hour."

The minutes seemed to tick slowly by as Olivia put the final touches on Suite 403. Stepping back, she bit her lip and looked around at the room.

"Perfect. Just like you," she whispered into the empty room. Pleased that she had everything in its place, Olivia went to the bathroom to change.

Natalia checked her watch again as she waited for the elevator to arrive. She knew vaguely what Olivia had planned, probably something romantic and sexy like the woman herself, and her body practically vibrated with anticipation. It didn't matter how many times they made love it always felt like the first time. Stepping into the elevator, she checked her watch once again and noticed her hand shaking slightly. She took a deep breath and tried to relax. The feelings Olivia gave her were wondrous and frightening. When Olivia whispered the suggestive encounter in her ear, Natalia had to resist the urge to race her up to the room. After all, the anticipation between them was as addictive and amazing as the actual encounter.

As the elevator came to a stop, Natalia shook her hands and cleared her head. In a couple of days, she would marry Olivia again in front of their family and friends. While it was already legal between them, even if the state didn't think so, the idea of marrying in front of the most important people in their lives was more frightening than the step they'd already taken.

Somewhere in Natalia's head and heart, she had felt married to Olivia already, even long before the trip to New York. As soon as Olivia had told her that she was in love with her, standing next to Gus's grave, Natalia had the image emblazoned on her heart of Olivia being her wife. That day in the church should have been their day. It never should have been wasted on Frank. At the time, the feelings had shook her to her core. Now, though, she was excited about the future -- the future she had with Olivia and their children.

The rightness of it settled her as she slid her pass key through the lock and the door clicked allowing her entry. The lights were dimmed as she walked in and closed the door behind her. A huge smile broke out on her face as she looked around the suite. She loved this sensual and romantic side of Olivia that no one but her got to see.

Taking a calming breath she looked around, rose petals in a multitude of colors - most the rich, deep red and creamy white of their ceremony colors - were scattered in a path on the floor to the king size bed. Across the bed, the covers already pulled down, were more petals caressing the soft sheets. At the end of the bed was a white shirt box, the name of the shop scrawled in gold across the top.

Natalia walked slowly over to the bed and ran her fingers along the gold script. "What have you done, Olivia Spencer?"

Lifting the top off the box, Natalia breathed in a shocked gasp, "Oh my God!" She ran her fingers along the edge of the soft lace of the vintage cream-colored lingerie until it reached the clasp at the dip. Tucked under the edge of the delicate fabric was a note card with a gold "O" embossed on it. She pulled it out and opened it, a smile teasing her lips as she read the note aloud:

A beautiful classic for a classic beauty. I can't wait to see you in this on our wedding night.

Putting the note to the side, Natalia gently scooped her hands under the arms of the material and lifted it out of the box. The sheer silk and lace flowed out below her and she raised it high. She shook her head in amazement. "Oh, Olivia, what am I going to do with you?"

As she took in the shimmer of the gorgeous negligee, a glimpse of something else in the box caught her eye. Carefully setting the gown aside, she noticed something dark hidden behind sheer paper. Lifting the paper, she chuckled and picked up the other note already open for her to read: *For Tonight.*

With not nearly as much care, Natalia picked up the purple silk negligee and held it to her body. Another shimmer of excitement ran through her body and she suddenly realized that it was now a few minutes past the hour they had set aside to meet. Olivia should have been there by now.

Shrugging her shoulders, she replaced the first outfit in the box, carefully folding and tucking it in before taking the purple one in her hand to the bathroom. "I guess I get to surprise you this time."

A few minutes later, Natalia emerged from the bathroom.

The sensual, lilting voice of Enya was playing, and Natalia knew that Olivia had to be there. Walking out further into the dim room, Natalia adjusted her eyes to the darkness and looked for her wife.

"I take it you like your wedding gift." Natalia spun around at Olivia's voice behind her.

"Sneaky! What is with you sneaking around today? You've been here the whole time?" Olivia smirked mischievously at the brunette, her eyes dancing over the voluptuous curves barely hidden underneath the sheer silk. Olivia nodded in response to Natalia's question.

"I love it. Both of them, actually," Natalia's voice was nervous but tender. "And I love you."

Olivia walked out a little further where the light was better. "Considering we're getting married soon, that's a good thing."

For a moment, Natalia had a hard time breathing. She had never seen Olivia look so gorgeous. "A very good thing. God, Olivia, you're absolutely breathtaking."

Walking over to her love, her bare feet sinking luxuriously into the thick carpet and feeling decadent, Olivia reached for Natalia and took her hand. She pulled the younger woman into her arms and to the beat of the music began to gently sway. "I know our wedding is in a couple of days, but I couldn't wait. I don't want to wait. I want to give you so much. I want to give you everything."

Natalia leaned back until she was looking into intense green eyes. "You have given me everything, querida. You've even given me things I didn't realize I wanted and yearned for."

Feeling Natalia's hands roam up and down her back, she smirked down at her playfully. "What have you yearned for?"

Natalia smiled and leaned in, kissing Olivia on the cheek. "This. This moment, this feeling, right here and right now. This deep sense of blessing and gratitude that my one true love is in my arms. You gave me your love. That's all I ever needed or wanted."

"Wow," Olivia's choked out through her tears. She pulled back and looked at Natalia again, not bothering to hide the tears in her eyes. She brought her hands up to caress Natalia's face. "You know, the vows were supposed to be saved for the wedding, right?"

Natalia chuckled, then gave her love a serious look. "I love you, Olivia Spencer. Until my last breath."

A tear fell down Olivia's cheek as she glanced down feeling surprisingly self-conscious. "Damn, you're good." Natalia tucked a finger under her wife's chin and tilted it upwards. "You have no idea," she whispered, her voice husky with desire as she leaned in to kiss Olivia.

It was slow and tender, full of love and meaning. When Olivia moaned and tilted her head, inviting Natalia in, all bets were off. Natalia pushed against Olivia, edging her toward the bed. Her nails dug in against the silk fabric along Olivia's hips and the older woman hissed at the erotic sensation, breaking the kiss.

"Natalia," Olivia whispered with a whimper as Natalia reached up to caress her breast, taking a swollen nipple between her fingers and tugging until Olivia moaned again.

"I love the feel of your breasts covered in silk," Natalia said as she bent down to bite playfully at the engorged nipple, leaving a wet mark as she broke away. "But I love it more without the silk."

Quickly, Natalia pushed the negligee up Olivia's sides and over her breasts, returning again to suck at the puckered flesh. She moaned at the soft feel of Olivia's nipple in her mouth and the smell of her skin. Desire clenched painfully between her legs, but she wanted to take Olivia to the brink more than she wanted to pleasure herself. She knew that sometimes Olivia liked to be suckled hard so she increased the pressure. When she felt Olivia's fingers dig in at the base of her skull and heard a deep, needy groan above her, Natalia knew she'd reached the ideal spot.

Olivia couldn't get her negligee off fast enough. Natalia's mouth was needy and incessant, demanding more of Olivia, as the younger woman sucked greedily at her breast. A sudden sharp tug and Olivia grabbed onto Natalia's head, holding her in place as she gladly offered herself to her wife.

They must have been moving, getting closer to the bed, but Olivia didn't realize it, distracted as she was, until she lost her balance and fell backwards.

Natalia moved with her, well aware of what she was doing. Her mouth let go of one nipple long enough to move to the other. Without letting Olivia go, she worked to push Olivia's underwear off, deftly spreading the other woman's legs as she did so and settling between

them. A thrust of her hips had Olivia clutching at her shoulders, tugging at the silk lingerie that Natalia still wore.

"Get it off," Olivia husked out as she looked down trying to find the hem of the top.

Natalia chuckled as she sat up. "But you wanted me to wear it. It's such a shame to take it off now."

Olivia sat up a little, reaching for Natalia and kissing her soundly. "Take it off or I'll rip it off. Your choice."

"There's no need for violence." Natalia smiled as she sat up straighter and pulled the sleek material up and over her head.

With her lover not able to see for a couple of seconds, Olivia took advantage of it and slipped her hand inside Natalia's underwear causing Natalia to squeak in surprise before she pushed down against Olivia's hand in welcome.

Natalia's insides clenched at the feel of Olivia's fingers against her. She adjusted her position slightly to give Olivia better access and the other woman got the message loud and clear as she pushed two fingers inside.

Natalia let out a sigh of appreciation at being filled by her wife. She closed her eyes and simply enjoyed the feeling, losing herself in it. "So good."

Her eyes opened as she felt Olivia scoot closer to her and began kissing along her collarbone, nipping at her hypersensitive skin. She braced her hands on Olivia's shoulders and swung one leg over the other woman's so she could straddle Olivia's thigh for better access. She wanted to give Olivia the same feeling she had. She wanted to feel it with her. Reaching down, she slipped her hand between Olivia's soaked thighs.

In moments both women shook as ecstasy overtook them. Olivia was pretty sure she screamed, but she was too far gone to care. Natalia curled into her side, her fingers playing across the sensitive skin of Olivia's stomach. As the younger woman drifted off to sleep, Olivia was sure she heard, "Waiting's for the birds."

For the first time that week, Doris's schedule was clear for the remainder of the day. Given that it was only 11 a.m., that was a rarity and she was determined to take advantage of it before all hell broke loose again. Stretching her arms above her head, she closed her eyes and sighed.

"Hmmm. Now that's a sight I like to see; preferably on my bed though," Blake said suggestively as she approached Doris, startling the other woman in the process.

"What the -," Doris exclaimed as her eyes popped open. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

Blake smirked. "No, I have better plans for you." The red head leaned against the desk. "But for now that will have to wait. Are you free for lunch?"

"You're in luck. My schedule for the rest of the day is pretty clear," Doris smiled, standing to move closer to Blake. "I need to drop some paperwork over to my law office, but other than that, we can head off." She grabbed a couple folders from her desk drawer and stuffed them into her briefcase before linking her arm around one of Blake's.

Heading down to Blake's car, "Everything all ready for Olivia and Natalia's wedding?"

"Pretty much. I got a slightly panicky email from Greg letting me know about the change of venue for the actual ceremony at the gazebo in the park." Doris smiled over at her partner. When Olivia and Natalia decided on romance, they never spared any detail. "For a conference planner, he really doesn't do last minute stress well."

It took Blake a moment to realize that Greg would have needed to get municipal permission for a ceremony on public property, and who better to give that than the mayor. And when the mayor happened to be best friends with his boss, it was best for him to go the most expedient route.

"Oh, hey, I forgot to mention, my mom's flying in for the wedding. She said she wouldn't miss this for the world." Blake smiled. She and her mother had an odd relationship because of personality differences, but things had certainly improved in the past several years.

"Any chance she can look after Clarissa after the reception?" Doris asked with a smile.

"Shouldn't be a problem. Ross has the boys that evening as they've got no interest in attending the wedding."

"All right. Off we go. We will need to come back at some point and get my car," Doris said as she climbed in Blake's van. "Where did you want to go for lunch?"

"There's that new tapas place just up the road from The Beacon that I've been meaning to try." Blake smiled as she reached over and put her arm on Doris's arm.

As was the custom every Tuesday after dinner, Hector Rivera took the garbage to the curb for pickup in the morning and checked the mail. He rifled through the mail paying little attention to what was there because Carmen always paid the bills for them. However, he stopped at the front door when he saw the familiar name of his oldest daughter. The envelope was thicker than usual and off-white, the calligraphy script giving the appearance of a wedding invitation.

Scoffing, Hector moved the envelope to the back and continued looking through the mail as he opened the door. He pulled out the sales ad for the local hardware store as he walked into the kitchen where Carmen was cleaning up from dinner.

Glancing up at her husband, Carmen smiled and asked her standard question, "Anything important?"

He hesitated and almost said something about the invitation from Natalia, but he remembered just in time that he wasn't supposed to speak of her anymore. Shaking his head, he said, "No. Just more bills."

Carmen wasn't fooled. She saw the strange look on his face and something in her gut twisted. She instinctively looked around for Rafe and caught a glimpse of him in the study sitting at the computer. Drying her hands on a towel, she walked over to the table where her husband had haphazardly tossed the mail and began to look through it.

Bill...bill...letter from the church...bill.

She froze when she saw the invitation. "Mija," she whispered. With reverence and a touch of sadness, Carmen traced the fancy script of Natalia's name.

Shaking her head to break the spell, she quickly found the letter opener and deftly opened the envelope. Inside was an invitation as she had expected, but also something else inside of it - a letter. She glanced at the invitation and realized it was for Natalia's wedding, *"For real,*

this time" as the invitation jokingly stated, to Olivia. Leyla had told them what had happened with the first wedding. While Hector had sneered that it served Natalia right for breaking God's law, Carmen saw the sadness and loss written across her husband's face. He hardly believed his own words, but he was too stubborn to cross his own line in the sand and accept Natalia.

Carmen put down the invitation and picked up the letter, assuming it was from Leyla or maybe Natalia. She found her reading glasses and pulled out a chair. Sitting, she opened the letter and was surprised to see it was actually from Olivia.

Mrs. Rivera,

I know you weren't expecting a letter from me, and Natalia doesn't know that I'm doing this. However, I wanted to ask two favors of you.

First of all, I would like to ask you to come to your daughter's wedding. As you know, because you raised her this way, Natalia is all about family. Family means everything to her and she gives her all to those she loves. I know she misses you and her father, but especially you. Not having my own mother around, I can speak to this personally. A daughter really needs her mother around when she gets married. She's never had that, and I know it would make her so happy to have you here. If you could convince Mr. Rivera to come as well, that would be a bonus.

Second, as with most wedding couples, Natalia and I will be taking a honeymoon after the wedding. I have something special planned, but I could use some help with the details...

Carmen read Olivia's honeymoon plans and found that by the time she finished, she was smiling. She mumbled quietly to herself, "You got a good one, mija."

"Who did?" She looked over in surprise to see Rafe watching her. "What has you smiling so big?"

Carmen picked up the invitation and held up both it and the letter to Rafe, who took it with a hint of hesitation. "This," she said still smiling.

A few moments passed as he looked it over. When he didn't respond right away, Carmen couldn't stand it. "Well?"

Rafe scratched at the back of his head and handed the papers back to his grandmother. "Are you going?"

She looked at him incredulously. "The more important question is, are you?"

He shrugged and mumbled, "She didn't invite me."

Carmen slammed her hand down on the table. "Ay ay ay!" She stood and began going into full-on Latina mother rant with her hands flailing out in front of her in frustration. "Eres tan terco como ese burro de marido que tengo en el otro cuarto! No puedo creer que no vayas a hablar con tu propia madre o ir a su boda! Qué pasa contigo? Tu mama te quiere, y es así como le pagas? Estos muchachos hoy en día..."

She wandered off muttering in Spanish as Rafe stood there stunned. "I would ask her to repeat it in English, but I don't think I want to." Instead, he ran his fingers over the ink on the card, tracing his mother's name. With a sigh of determination, he turned to go find his abuela.

Stretching out on the lounge chair in her hotel room at The Beacon, Holly Reade contemplated Olivia's marriage to Natalia. Only two years earlier, she'd sat in a similar room listening as Olivia told her about how Natalia had hurt her by leaving her, only to have her return but very pregnant. She recalled how heartbroken her friend had been, but she'd seen the love and resolve in Olivia's eyes that Natalia was the love of her life.

Hearing stories from Blake in the time she'd been away, Holly was thrilled when they'd tied the knot in New York, and when she'd heard that they were reaffirming their vows with family and friends at home in Springfield, she made sure to clear her schedule so that she could come back for the wedding.

She'd sent an email to Olivia earlier asking if she had time to meet her later that afternoon and now she was just waiting. She had a small present for the younger woman that she knew Olivia would love. It wasn't long before Olivia appeared, knocking at her door.

Giving the older woman a prolonged hug, Olivia smiled. "It's good to see you again, Holly." Separating, she waited for Holly to choose where she was going to sit, and Olivia sat opposite her on one of the chaise chairs. "So, how's life been treating you?"

"Not bad; a little of this and a bit of that," Holly said with a smile. "Can I get you some coffee? Or maybe a martini?" she added as she noted Olivia's nervousness.

"That bad, huh?" Olivia asked at the second offer. "Okay, so I'm a little nervous. When we got married in New York it was fun, surprising and a little nerve wracking at keeping it from Natalia until the time came." Olivia grinned. "This time it's with our friends and family...Natalia's family, if they come, that is. Our track record with her parents hasn't been the smoothest. Natalia's really missing Rafe; I know she would want him here for that. I wish we had some idea where he is."

"You'll be fine, Olivia. Once you see Natalia, things will work out just the way they should."

"We're getting married at the gazebo in the park," Olivia said with a big smile. Noticing the raised eyebrow from her friend, Olivia rolled her eyes. "I know. I'm a big sap when it comes to Natalia."

"Being in love suits you, Olivia. This is the happiest I've ever seen you." Holly stood and went over to her suitcase. "I have something for you." Removing a small jewelry box, she handed it over to Olivia. "A little unorthodox, but since when have either of us really followed any path but our own?"

Taking the box with reverence, she opened the lid to find a fine silver necklace with pewter pendant inlaid with an amethyst stone, and surrounding it were the birthstones of her three daughters, along with Natalia's and Rafe's. Olivia's voice caught in her throat, overwhelmed with emotion. "Holly, wow. This is beautiful. I don't..."

"Yes, you do deserve this. You have this life full of love that you've found with Natalia and your family." Holly took Olivia's hand, and smiled at her. "You deserve this."

Act II

Approaching the gazebo, Blake and Doris took in the decorations that Greg had hastily adorned around the wooden slats and the railings. Shaking her head, Blake headed toward the gazebo and tapped the anxious man on the shoulder.

"Need some help?" Blake asked, grinning at the other man's comic relief. "I've got it," she noted as she went to work fixing some of the bows and banting. "Go on with whatever else you need to do."

"Do we need to add wedding decorator to your list of jobs?" Doris joked as she leaned over and whispered into Blake's ear. "You know, Olivia joked about me being a wedding planner

when I set things up for them in New York. Who knows, if this legal business goes awry, we could go into business as wedding planners for the LGBT community." On seeing an excited gleam in Blake's eyes, she stopped for a second. "Okay, that wasn't a definite plan."

"No, think about it. You could use your legal practice to get things set up for legal and medical power of attorney arrangements, and other legal agreements for the LGBT community." Blake grinned as a myriad of things crossed her mind. She was always up for new challenges and opportunities. This would definitely be something in which she could wrap herself for some time to come.

With the gazebo decorations finished, Blake stood back and admired her handiwork. At Doris's press of hand against her side, they turned and headed over to the side of the park where other attendants had gathered. Over the course of the next half an hour, most of Olivia and Natalia's friends had arrived, taking their seats, leaving the first two rows for family and immediate friends. Doris had to grin, as four out of five of Olivia's ex-husbands were in attendance, three with their now spouses.

A blur of movement on one side caused Doris to turn to witness an excited Emma and Francesca arrive with Leyla and Ava. Doris smiled at the Spencer and Rivera family. Emma moved closer to Blake and Doris as Clarissa and Holly also joined in the small group gathered. As Josh headed up to the Gazebo to sort through his notes, Reva headed over to Blake and Doris's little group.

"Reva, come to join in on the fun?" Doris quipped with a grin, knowing the other woman's sometimes friendly, sometimes antagonistic relationship with Olivia.

"Oh, I'm just making sure it's all for real," Reva joked back before turning serious. "I'm glad Olivia's found her happiness. She deserves that."

"That she does," Holly responded. "Now, I think as the limousine is pulling up that Olivia and Natalia are here, we should take our seats."

Emma returned to where her sisters and aunt were standing as she waited for their mothers to emerge. Collective happy gasps rose from the guests as Olivia and Natalia walked up the aisle, side by side, arms interlinked, preceded by their daughters and sister. Reaching the gazebo, they stepped onto the platform and smiled at each other and out at their guests.

Looking out over the large gathering of townsfolk, Josh lowered his hands indicating for everyone to be seated. Everyone took the cue except for Ava, Emma, and Leyla with Francesca by her side who continued to stand before him. "We gather together on this glorious day to celebrate the joining of Olivia Spencer and Natalia Rivera in holy matrimony."

Behind Josh, Natalia scrunched her eyebrows together. She thought they had agreed to something non-religious. She looked at Olivia with confusion mouthing silently to her, "Holy?"

With a knowing smirk and a coy shrug, Olivia feigned being completely innocent. Natalia wasn't fooled. She bumped the older woman with her elbow not believing it for a moment. She leaned over slightly, whispering to her love, "You amaze me."

"I hope to...always," Olivia whispered back before tuning back in to Josh's words.

Josh glanced at the younger women as they stood nearby ready to give their approval in unison. "Who gives these women in marriage?"

"We do!"

The loud voices from the rear of the gathering made Olivia and Natalia look up in surprise, searching quickly for the source. When Natalia's eyes landed on the familiar, smiling faces of her son and her mother, she gasped.

Rafe smiled, glancing at his grandmother seated beside him, before speaking loud enough for the crowd to hear him, "I couldn't miss your wedding, Ma."

Natalia couldn't stop the happy tears as they burst through. She lifted the train of her dress and ran down the three steps of the gazebo toward her son. She noticed her mother stand up as Rafe remained seated and the surprised crowd parted to make way for her. She stopped short when she saw the wheelchair beneath her son.

More tears burst forth as she shook her head in shock, "No," she mumbled as the tips of her fingers quivered over her top lip. "Oh, Raphael. Mijo."

He pushed his chair forward with his hands. "I know, Ma, but I'm okay. No sadness today, okay?"

She nodded quickly but silently before stepping forward to hug him as best she could with the chair in the way. Natalia peppered him with kisses and ran her fingers in the thick hair that was growing back from his military buzz cut. "I'm just so glad you're alive. So glad. I was so worried."

"Me too, Ma," he whispered close to her ear as she held on tight. "I came here to do something though."

Natalia could feel him trying to pull back and she stepped away to give him room. She watched as Rafe motioned to someone nearby and a set of braces were handed to him. Murmurs surrounded them as it became apparent what he was going to attempt.

Pulling himself up and into position after a little struggle, Rafe smiled charmingly at his mother. "Mind if I walk you down the aisle?"

With a watery smile, Natalia smoothed his uniform then touched his face with the palm of her hand. She kissed his cheek and slipped her arm through his. "I would be honored," she said, smiling up at the handsome young man that still looked like her little boy. Turning, Natalia wiped at her eyes, careful not to smudge her eyeliner, and walked down the aisle with her son on her arm to marry the woman she loves.

As Natalia passed Olivia, who had followed her out of the gazebo, she noticed her wife's reddened face and something else she couldn't place. It almost looked like gratefulness. She'd have to remember to ask her about that later. She brushed her hand over Olivia's as she continued to make her way back to the gazebo. Behind her, she heard hushed voices. Turning she saw Olivia and her mother sharing a hug before Olivia offered her arm to the older woman.

With a smile of joy, Natalia ascended the steps to stand before Josh again, while Rafe took a chair at the end of the front row. Turning to the side, she watched as Olivia guided Natalia's mother to a newly vacated chair in the front row next to Rafe, then climbed the stairs to stand in front of her again.

"What did my mother say to you?" Natalia whispered as the crowd settled back down for the ceremony.

Olivia shrugged dismissively and took her hands again as they were before Rafe and Carmen had arrived. "She just thanked me."

"For what?" Natalia furrowed her brows together.

Olivia shook her head, not really knowing what to say. She had hoped someone from Natalia's family would come, but she had never dreamed it would be this wonderful of a surprise. Today, numerous prayers were answered. If life kept up like this, Olivia may just have to start believing in Natalia's God after all.

When Olivia didn't answer, Natalia knew her wife had a part in it. She smiled in complete adoration of this amazing woman. "You had something to do with this."

Seriously, Olivia looked up at her. "No. Something bigger was definitely at work here."

A look of understanding passed between them. Natalia squeezed Olivia's hands and took a shaky breath, feeling suddenly nervous. "Ready?"

"A million times over," Olivia whispered in reverence as she looped Natalia's arm through her own and turned them in Josh's direction.

Amazed at the events that had transpired, Josh could do little but acknowledge the obvious. "Blessings. That's what today is all about. An abundance of hope and love that is so overflowing that it brings joy to those around us. That, my friends, is what we have here today in this joining of Olivia and Natalia...a blessing."

Josh looked out over the gathering of friends and family, people he had known all his life. Some he had loved. Some he had fought. All he shared a special bond with, especially the two women standing behind him. With a happy sigh, he launched into the ceremony.

"Dearest friends and family, we are gathered here today before our Creator to witness the joining in holy matrimony of Olivia Spencer and Natalia Rivera." Josh smiled out at the crowd before continuing the formalities, "If any person can show just cause, why these women may not be joined together, let them speak now, or forever hold their peace."

When silence greeted his request, he turned to Olivia and Natalia and said seriously, "I require and charge you both, as you will answer to God, that if either of you know any impediment, why you may not be joined together, you now confess it."

Natalia looked to Olivia and smiled as she held back the tears that threatened to fall. She just knew she was going to look like a raccoon from the tears by the end of the ceremony. She had never been so happy as she was in this moment. She turned back to Josh. "Just get on with it, okay? I'm ready to kiss her."

Everyone in hearing distance chuckled. Josh raised his hands. "Hey, who am I to get in the way of two women kissing?"

"Joshua," Olivia warned but there was still a tinge of joking in her voice.

"Just sayin'." He couldn't help but smirk before continuing on, "The celebration of marriage has been a part of human society since the beginning of time as we know it. All cultures have their own unique views and ways of celebrating committed love. The Druids, for instance, supported and celebrated the union of any two people who felt drawn to and compatible with each other. It was a freely made choice that was as much a private promise as a public commitment. Long before European settlers tainted Native American beliefs, individuals who felt drawn to both their feminine and masculine spirits, and the unions of those individuals to each other, were not only held in high esteem in the community but were regarded as uniquely blessed by their Creator." Josh paused as he looked at the two women cheating glances at each other.

Smiling, Josh changed course slightly. "Our more current marriage traditions, however, as you are both aware, have a strong Biblical basis, but they are no less relevant to the union we're witnessing today. Of all the exhortations that Jesus gave His followers, the most important above all others was to love our brother as we love ourselves. Love is all that truly matters. True love frees us all from the shackles of sin. In fact, Corinthians 13 tells us plainly that if don't have love, we don't have anything. We can have all of the wealth in the world," Josh tilted his head in acknowledgement of Olivia's status, "but without love we have nothing. We can have faith that moves mountains," he smirked at Natalia, "but without love we have nothing."

Natalia couldn't help but smile with joy through her tears. She never thought she'd be able to stand before Olivia, their family, and even God having Scripture spoken as an exultation of their love. This was a dream come true and so much more than she ever hoped for.

From around the two women, the voices of their family spoke.

"Love is patient and kind," Emma started, her voice catching slightly.

"It is not envious or jealous," Ava added as a tear rolled down her cheek.

"Love is not proud or seek its own reward," Leyla smiled proudly at her sister. She then nudged the toddler beside her. "Remember what we practiced?"

Francesca piped up with a bright smile, "Oh yeah! Love never fails!"

The crowd chuckled at the absolute adorableness of the little girl as her dark ringlets bounced around her face. Olivia and Natalia were overwhelmed by the surprise that neither of them knew about and brushed away their tears carefully.

"Olivia and Natalia," Josh spoke, bringing their attention back to him, "this town...these people have watched your love bloom and grow right before their, our, very eyes. While some of us were surprised by it, most of us expected nothing less. You're two halves of a whole, perfectly complimentary, beautifully and wonderfully made by God and destined for the other. While my pearls of wisdom are not in a book somewhere, I can speak to what I have seen between you two and what I know. Olivia, my friend, your heart was so battered and broken from a lifetime of hurt and neglect that you needed a new one. Thank goodness that Natalia was there for she had so much love to give. There was enough to fill up all of your empty spaces, Olivia. So much that it's flowed over into your family. You two exemplify what we all seek - faith, hope, and love. But, the greatest of these is love."

With a big sigh, Josh leaned back and smiled jokingly. "Well, enough of that, you ladies ready to get on with the vows and such."

Olivia rolled her eyes. She knew her ex-husband could never stay serious for long. "Yes!"

"Wonderful! I believe you two have some things you want to say first." Josh stepped aside.

Olivia took a long, shaky breath before looking up at adoring brown eyes. The words she'd written and managed to memorize suddenly vaporized. A rush of panic hit her with such force that she felt lightheaded. Natalia must have noticed something was wrong, since Olivia was rarely speechless, because she squeezed her hands slightly, immediately bringing Olivia back to the present.

"You...are a miracle, Natalia," Olivia suddenly spoke. "My miracle. I never believed in anything greater than what I could create myself, with money or power. I thought that was all I needed, but you changed all of that. At the moment I was ready to give up. After I had exhausted all of my hopes and dreams, tried every tactic of self-preservation, and failed

miserably, you were there. Like an angel sent from heaven, just for me. Why me I'll never understand, but I am blessed every moment of every day that God, or whomever, grants me to have with you and our family. Your love and your faith saved me, and I want to cherish this life and love I've been given for as long as I'm breathing. I love you, Natalia Rivera. Forever."

Natalia bit her bottom lip to stop new tears from falling. "Wow! I think Charming should be your middle name." It wasn't what she intended to say, but she needed a moment of levity to keep from blubbering like a love sick fool.

Recognizing the attempt for what it was, Olivia rolled her eyes. "Wellllll," she drawled out before pretending to buff and shine her nails in a move of cool intention.

A light chuckle surrounded them as Natalia shook her head and settled in to say her vows. "Yes, Olivia, you are charming and beautiful and so incredibly smart. You're so much more than that though. In spite of the walls you put up around yourself, I saw past the anger, fear, and pain. Underneath the power suits and money is a beautiful soul and a tender heart. I saw it in the way you loved your children and in the selfless way you loved me. I saw your soul open and bare in this very gazebo, spilling your...our secrets to the cold, winter air. You were willing to break your own heart to save mine, and I knew in that moment that I could never be without you. Soulmates always find each other, and I know you're mine. I want to not only travel with you in this life together, but the one beyond as well. For today and every day afterward, for all eternity, I am bound to you, my love."

A soft silence settled around them as the moment stretched out, shimmering green eyes locked on their brown companions.

Josh joked as he stepped back up to stand before them again. "Well, I don't know how I can follow that! Oh yeah, I know! Emma, may I have the hand fasting cord?" Josh gestured toward the young girl who reverently handed over a long cord made from twined ribbons.

He held it up where it could be seen above his head by the crowd. "This cord represents an ancient Celtic tradition in the marriage rites called Hand Fasting. This cord was lovingly made by Olivia and Natalia's family. Emma, Ava, Leyla, and Francesca chose a ribbon that they felt represented Olivia and Natalia's love and their family. Leyla, as representative of the Rivera family, told me earlier that she had added an extra ribbon for her nephew Rafe. So, five cords of love have been joined together in honor of this marriage, to represent the joining of their families and their hearts."

Josh lowered his hands and spoke to the two women, "Olivia and Natalia, will you face each other and join hands?"

With a shaky breath, Olivia turned to fully face Natalia. Tears streaked the brunette's face and Olivia reached up quickly to brush the wetness away. "Are you okay?"

Natalia smiled and shook her head a little, not in negation but to clear her head. "I'm just so happy. You make me so happy."

Olivia brushed her fingertips over Natalia's cheek before dropping it back down to take her hand. "That's my job," she said with a wink.

As Josh draped the cord over their joined hands, he spoke, "Olivia Spencer, will you take Natalia Rivera to be your wedded wife to live together in holy matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others, keep yourself only to her, so long as you both will live?"

Olivia could feel her whole body shake as the enormity of the moment took hold. While their marriage was already legal, and she had taken great lengths to make their wedding in New York amazing, it didn't even compare to how this made her feel. It was completely different, and Olivia knew now, more than ever before, that their marriage was about so much more than a piece of paper. Nothing, no legal document, no paper, no words could contain this feeling. It was spiritual.

With a reverence that came from deep in her soul, Olivia whispered her promise to the only person that mattered in that moment, "I do."

Natalia closed her eyes as new but happy tears dripped past her eyelashes. She squeezed Olivia's hand as she opened her eyes again, watching as Josh wound one end of the cord underneath their hands and drape it over the top.

Looking up at the brunette with a tender smile, Josh continued the vows, "Natalia Rivera, will you take Olivia Spencer to be your wedded wife to live together in holy matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others, keep yourself only to her, so long as you both will live?"

Natalia squeezed Olivia's hands emphasizing her words through action. She had waiting for this moment for so long, and she wanted to stretch it out. But waiting and delaying with

Olivia was never a good thing. "I do." Then she whispered for only Olivia to hear, "With all of my heart and soul."

Josh wrapped the other end of the cord over the top of their joined hands so that one end rested across the other. He placed his hand on top of the two ends. "As you two have already exchanged rings and have been legally joined in marriage, you are now joined spiritually with each other, with your families, and with your community. May this union that has been brought together by a force greater than ourselves never be torn apart in this life or the next."

He removed his hand and tied the ends of the cord together. "I now pronounce you wife and wife." He stepped back with a smile. "You may now kiss your bride."

"Finally," Olivia breathed out with relief. She pulled Natalia to her by their joined hands and leaned in to kiss her. She intended the kiss to be chaste, but she lingered a little too long. Eventually, Natalia opened her mouth slightly and gently tugged on Olivia's bottom lip, making her moan. Knowing they had to stop, Olivia pulled away reluctantly, but they stayed connected as they held hands and rested their foreheads together. "I love you so much, Natalia."

"And I love you," Natalia whispered and gave Olivia a quick kiss before standing up straight.

Josh untied the cord, loosening their hands, before bringing the ends back together and handing it to Olivia. "Congratulations."

She lifted her free hand to brush his cheek. "Thank you."

Turning to the crowd, Josh announced, "May I present Mrs. and Mrs. Olivia and Natalia Spencer-Rivera."

Friends and family rose to their feet clapping as Olivia and Natalia wrapped their arms around each other, smiling at everyone.

Olivia looked down at her wife. "Ready, Mrs. Spencer-Rivera?"

Natalia couldn't help it. She giggled happily and pulled Olivia into another kiss. "I'm ready to go anywhere with you, querida."

Act III

The front lawn in front of the farmhouse had been laid out with long tables, covered in white tablecloths and anchored by flower bowls. The light warm breeze ruffled the edges of the cloths but did not disrupt them. A tent had been set up by the Beacon catering staff to serve the guests, and the last of the decorations were being applied by the crew just as the first cars began to arrive following the ceremony.

Arriving first, Olivia and Natalia rushed into the house to ostensibly check to make sure everything was going according to plan, but Natalia's plans were temporarily postponed as Olivia drew her into the living room and kissed her. The passionate kiss, however, was interrupted as one of the catering crew entered the room, blushing at the two women's actions. In his attempt to back out quietly, he nearly tripped over the coffee table, causing the glasses on the tray in his hand to fall to the floor and break.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry," the young man blustered, seeing the death glare coming from his boss. "I'll just go get something to clean this up." Hastily, the young man retreated to the kitchen.

"Olivia, that was bad," Natalia looked up at her wife, noting the glare.

"What?" Olivia mock pouted. "He's in our house. We just got married. We should be allowed to make out wherever we want in here."

"Really? Did you have to scare him?" Natalia started to pull away from Olivia to head into the kitchen, but she leaned in to place a quick kiss on her wife's lips. "Be good. We can't traumatize all the catering staff before they feed the guests."

"You're no fun," Olivia said, sticking out her tongue.

"You do that again, and I'll show you what kind of fun I can be." Natalia grinned wickedly, then added a quick, "later," as she disappeared into the kitchen to talk to the young man.

In the gathering crowd on the lawn, groups of Springfield's citizens gathered in discussions as the wet bar tent started serving the guests. At the forefront of the lawn, Doris noted a

familiar car pull up. Dressed in a smart black pant suit and red dress shirt and blazer, Detective Anna Li approached Doris and Blake's group.

"Hey, Anna. It's time?" Doris asked, noting the detective's determined expression.

"Time?" Blake asked, feeling slightly off that she was missing something about a conversation.

"I'm going to try to find my father. See if I can bring him back here to face justice for the murder of Edmund Winslow, among others. I got a few leads from Jeffrey and Mallett to go after with their Interpol connections."

"Good luck with that. I'm not sorry the bastard is dead; for real this time," Blake said with disgust.

"Thanks, Blake." Anna sighed. "Doris, can I speak with you alone for a few minutes? I need to sort some paperwork."

"Sure. Let's go into the house." Doris turned to Blake and let her know she'd be back shortly before following the detective up the lawn to the house.

Noting the nervous apprehension in her daughter's face, Holly placed a hand on Blake's arm. "So, what's that look about?"

Burying her face into Holly's shoulder, Blake turned to wrap her arms around her mother in a hug. "It's a long story."

"I've got time," Holly said comfortingly.

Blake pulled back and then led her mother over to some chairs, separate from others. "She's an ex-girlfriend of Doris's. When everything was going to hell in a handbasket when Ross returned and I didn't know which way was up, I pushed Doris away, and I think she may have been interested in getting back with Anna." She let out a long sigh. "God knows I wouldn't have blamed her. I can't say that I was the most understanding person at the time."

Holly placed her hand over her daughter's. "Doris is with you. And from what I can tell seeing you two together, that is where she wants to be. Don't overanalyze things. Take it for what it is, and appreciate it every day. But don't suffocate it."

Blake smiled up at Holly, looking at her through wet eyes. "How did you get so wise?"

"I've had my share of relationships -- some good, some bad, like most people." Holly shrugged. "I've just learned to be happy with what I have with life and love, and not to give a damn about what others think about me. People are going to think what they're going to think. That's their problem."

"Thanks, Mom."

Directing Anna into Olivia's home office, Doris initially waited for the other woman to start talking. Despite the initial self-assuredness that Anna had displayed out in the lawn full of guests, Doris noted some doubt plaguing the other woman in the privacy of the office.

"Anna?" Doris asked. "What's wrong?"

"Am I doing the right thing, Doris?" Anna sighed. She leaned forward, resting her hands on the back of the leather chair.

Unused to seeing uncertainty in her friend, Doris asked, "So, what's brought this on then?"

"I don't know. I mean, I do know that bringing him to justice for Edmund and for a whole lot of his other crimes is long over-due. I've been fighting against him and his ideals for most of my life. We've got enough evidence to get him for Edmund's murder. I just wish he could be punished for the rest." Anna lowered her head. "Maybe I'm just too close to the situation to be impartial; he is my father."

"A father who's committed pretty damned despicable crimes, Anna. Yes, he is your father, and on some level you do love him. I get that." Doris stepped closer to her friend and lifted her hand under Anna's chin to raise the other woman to face her. "What does your gut tell you?"

"I want justice. For all of his victims, but especially for Olivia. We can't prosecute him for his part in the aftermath of her rape but there will be some sense of justice."

Doris nodded and after a moment asked, "What can I do?"

Taking a set of legal documents out of the inside of her blazer pocket, Anna handed them over to Doris. "First, this is an updated copy of my Last Will & Testament. Just in case something happens to me, I want this on record." Anna noted Doris's worry. "Doris, I don't know where this investigation will take me. I have a few locations where he might be according to Interpol. But if he moves, he's not going to be flying commercial. Private jets have some official flight paths they need to file, but passenger lists can be faked. Since he's probably using faked passports, this might be more futile, but I need to try."

"Okay," Doris said solemnly. "I'll notarize and file it in my office safe," sighing heavily as she placed the legal document in her purse. "What else?"

"I have my files with regards to my father secured on my computer, but I also have full backups on discs." Pulling a couple cases of DVD discs from her front blazer pocket, she handed them to Doris. "I'm giving them to you to put with the will. Just in case. I don't trust that my father won't try to have someone try to find them. He's already broken into my apartment twice. I can't take the chance that he won't try to destroy evidence." Anna stopped a moment. "Olivia also has a copy." At Doris's glance, Anna smirked. "One can never be too careful when my father's involved."

"Very true." Doris sighed. Sensing the conversation was coming to an end, she asked, "When do you take off?"

"In about two hours. Flight to New York, then London, then Jakarta. I have a contact there that has some more information for me. I'll keep in touch."

"I shouldn't keep you then," Doris said with a wan smile. "Be careful, Anna."

"I will do my best." Standing up to her full height, which was still shorter than Doris, Anna leaned in and kissed the other woman. "I never really stopped loving you." She placed a hand on Doris's cheek. "Take care."

Anna walked out the office door, leaving a stunned Doris in her wake.

"Did you see Natalia's face when she realized it was Rafe?" Emma laughed, tugging her light blue blouse down and tucking it into her khakis. "It was priceless."

Olivia glanced over from where she was applying fresh makeup in the mirror in Emma's room as she tried to hurry the girl along. Francesca had already been changed and disappeared with Leyla back outside, leaving just her and her mom to finish up. It would certainly be a more comfortable way to spend the afternoon.

"Yes, it definitely was, Jellybean." Olivia's cell phone chimed and she paused in the reapplying of eye shadow and glanced into the mirror at Emma. "Is that Natalia?"

"Yeah," Emma grabbed the BlackBerry from her bed spread. "It says 'Talking to Rafe and no it's not later yet.'" Emma frowned, handing the cell phone over to her mom. "Whatever that means." Olivia just smirked, and double-checked that her lipstick was no longer smeared.

"Never you mind," Olivia straightened and stood next to Emma, mother and daughter looked into the mirror together. Similar eyes and slope to the nose, long gangly arms and a figure just starting to bloom, Olivia couldn't deny that her daughter was looking more and more like her every day. Her gaze landed on Emma's old bear, still standing guard on her bookshelf. She turned to Emma and tucked a blonde strand back behind an ear, marveling not for the first time at how quickly her baby was growing up. "We look amazing as usual! Time to get back to the party, don't you think?"

Emma nodded and then paused, glancing up at her mother, her face suddenly serious.

"Before we go, Mom, I just wanted to say thanks," Emma smiled shyly all of a sudden at Olivia's confused face, and shrugged her shoulder. "For a long time it seemed like we were just the two of us against the world. And now, well, you found us a home and someone who loves us both and we have this big family around us. I couldn't have wished for anything better." She wrapped her arms around Olivia's waist and held on tight. "I'm so happy for you and Ma."

"Oh, sweetie," Olivia dropped a soft kiss to her daughter's head and sniffed. "I love you so much. I'm happy for all of us. We really are one big family now." Emma squeezed her tighter and then leaned back to grin up at her. Outside her bedroom window, they could hear the band start to play, the music drifting up on the warm breeze.

"Come on, the party is starting! You're slowing me down!" Emma teased and pulled away, opening the door for her mother. Olivia shook her head and headed out of the bedroom.

Entering back into the living room of the farmhouse, Anna turned as Olivia and Emma came down the stairs, noticing that the girl had changed into more comfortable clothes for the rest of the festivities.

"Anna! You came! I didn't see you at the wedding," Emma rattled off as she approached the detective at something resembling mach speed. Crushing into the woman, she wrapped her arms around her.

"I got there late, but in time to see your mommies say, 'I do,'" Anna grinned down at the girl then up at Olivia. "Congratulations, Olivia. You must be over the moon."

"Just glad it came and that we all survived." Olivia grinned and held up crossed fingers, the meaning clear that the day wasn't over yet.

Anna nodded then pulled back from Emma's hug. "Hey, Emma, I need to tell you something, okay?"

"Is something wrong?" Emma asked, worried.

Guiding the girl over to the couch, Anna sat her down then she sat beside the girl. "In a way, yes. You know that my father did bad things to people, right?" Anna started and waited for Emma to acknowledge her. "Well, I need to go to find him. But I don't know where he is right now?"

"Can't other police find him?" Emma questioned. She was tired of people leaving her and Anna had been helping her deal with a bunch of stuff she couldn't tell her moms. "Maybe. They'll be helping me. But I know some things about my father that they don't that might help me find him. It's kind of hard to explain."

"Like intuition?" Emma asked, her head quirked to the side.

"Yes, a bit like that."

Anna smiled.

Emma sighed and pulled her bottom lip in with her upper teeth. Looking up at the detective, she asked, "How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know right now." Anna saw the girl's shoulders deflate and her eyes sadden and she thought of something. "I have an idea though," she said to try to brighten Emma's spirits. "What if every place I visit to find out information, I send you a postcard? You can put them on that map you have in your bedroom."

"Really? Can I send you letters?" Emma asked hopefully. If that was possible, she could still tell the detective things that bothered her.

"Not physical letters, but I'll send your mom an email with contact information. You can send me emails. Okay?"

Emma nodded. She was still unhappy that the detective was leaving, but at least there was still going to be some contact. "Do you have to go now?"

"I do." Anna gave the girl a big hug and whispered into her ear. "You take care of your moms for me. Make sure they're safe and happy." Standing, Anna turned to Olivia.

"You sure about this?" Olivia asked as she took Anna's hand.

"As sure as I'll ever be," Anna replied. "Look, I've given Doris all the pertinent documents to keep safe, and I've left a copy on your desk in the office here. And as I said to Emma, I'll give you a contact email and phone number to use when I get to London."

"Be careful, Anna." Olivia drew Anna into a hug. "Have a safe trip."

"Thanks. Okay, I've got to go. Talk to you gals soon. Give Natalia a hug for me, will you?" Anna said as she turned towards the front door.

"Will do." Olivia moved closer to her daughter and gave the girl a hug, knowing how Emma had developed a bond with the detective and how much the girl was going to miss the other woman. As the door clicked shut behind Anna, she dropped a soft kiss to Emma's head.

"I guess we have a bigger family than we realized, huh Bean?" Olivia felt the girl nod under her chin and together they quietly made their way outside.

Ava stepped out of the shade of the tent where the bar was set up with her white wine in hand and checked out the proceedings. Even though he had been a pain in the ass about the whole thing, Greg had truly out done himself this time.

The tables were set immaculately, with white gauze wrapped around everything. A small stage had been set up to the side, where a band was setting up and doing a short sound check. An area had been cleared as a dance floor for later. Even after Olivia and Natalia left for their flight, the guests were more than welcome to stay and celebrate into the night.

Ava took a sip of her wine and sighed. She was happy for her mother, finally seeming to find happiness at long last. Had it only taken how many marriages and a string of men for her to figure out what she truly wanted? Ava sighed again, unsure. She could only hope that in time she would figure out what she truly wanted someday too.

Leyla's laughter drifted across the yard on the breeze over the growing chatter of the guests assembling. She smiled in response, the warmth of it washing over her. It made her wish she could make the other girl do that more often. Ava noticed that Leyla's whole face lit up when she laughed, her dark hair flowing around her shoulders with a life of its own. Her dress clung to her in all the right places, its hem stopping above the knee, exposing well muscled legs beneath.

Their eyes met for a moment across the lawn, before Leyla nodded and turned back to continue her conversation with Josh. Ava let out a slow breath and then took a deep swallow of her cool drink. She nearly jumped out of her skin as a voice spoke beside her.

"So beautiful, si?" Carmen said, her dark brown eyes seeming to soften as she glanced up at the willowy young woman.

"Oh, Mrs. Rivera, I-I didn't see you standing there," Ava tore her gaze away from Leyla's fine form and met the knowing eyes of the older woman. She swallowed hard and smiled. "Uh, yes, everything looks absolutely stunning."

"Yes, the decorations are pretty, but I don't think that is what we are talking about here, is it?" Carmen tilted her head and fixed the other woman with a hard stare, an awkward silence stretched out between them. She noticed Ava's eyebrows shoot up, almost off her forehead before taking another quick gulp of her white wine. Carmen's hand slid across her forearm giving the taller woman a reassuring squeeze. "I think perhaps the apple doesn't fall so far from the tree, no?"

"Uh...well..." Ava's mouth gaped open slightly as she did a very passable imitation of a fish out of water. She was so not ready to talk about this, especially with Leyla's mother!

"It is still soon, I see," Carmen's eyes twinkled with mirth, as she gently patted the young woman's arm. "Your secret is safe with me."

"Uh...I..." Ava blinked and shifted, not wanting to deny that she was having these feelings and yet Carmen was not who she ever expected to have this conversation with. She averted her gaze and bit her lower lip.

Carmen just chuckled softly at the girl's discomfort. Ah, youth was wasted on the young.

"My Leyla, she is young and impetuous, still rough around the edges and stubborn like her father, And blessed with his temper too," Carmen leaned a little closer. "But beneath the bluster is a good soul, with a deep passion for life. It is a gift to see behind the mask, something that they share with only a chosen few, but when they open up and show you what is inside..." The old woman shook her head, words not able to truly express it, but the emotion shone from her eyes. A deep abiding love reflected there, a love that had lasted a lifetime.

It was the same look Olivia had when she spoke about Natalia.

Ava's gaze lifted and she turned in time to see Leyla laughing and talking with some friends from work now. Their eyes met and locked and she felt like she could see forever.

"It is worth it my dear, when you are ready. Trust me." Carmen squeezed her arm and smiled as Ava looked back at her again, mouth still opening and closing in surprise. She winked at Ava and then wandered out to find her eldest daughter. Matchmaking was always fun at a wedding, even if this had been a little different than what she was used to.

Ava blinked after the old woman, and turned to find the younger Rivera daughter headed her way, a fresh glass of white wine in her hand.

"Hey, was that my mom you were talking to?" Leyla asked, carefully handing over the wineglass, her voice low and intimate. "She didn't say something freaky to you did she? You looked a little shell shocked there for a bit."

Ava stared at Leyla for a moment. She really did have the most gorgeous brown eyes.

"Uh...she actually gave me some really good advice," Ava said, finally finding her voice. Deep inside something seemed to shift into place. Maybe she was finally figuring out what she wanted after all.

"Ookay..." Leyla frowned and cocked her head. Ava's hand slid down along her arm, fingertips tickling across her wrist until finally their fingers tangled together. Ava leaned in closer, their eyes locking and holding. "Remind me to tell you about it some day," Ava grinned and tugged her hand, pulling her along beside her. "Right now though, we need to find Emma and work on our family toast."

"...and I have physiotherapy now three times a week," Rafe said, taking a pull from a bottle of beer and glancing out over the familiar fields. It was funny, before shipping out the farmhouse had never really felt like home. Now though, there was nowhere else he would rather be.

Natalia stared at her son, still not quite believing that he was here, battered and torn, but alive and at her wedding. She reached out and swatted him hard on the shoulder.

"Ow, hey Ma!" Rafe ducked and rubbed his shoulder. "What was that for?"

"Don't ever do that to me again," Natalia frowned at her son, her heart aching for all he had been through without her there to help him. Tears welled and threatened to fall and she choked out her words. "Promise me, Rafe. Never again..."

"I'm sorry, Ma," Rafe swallowed hard and pulled her into his strong arms. "I didn't want you to worry about me, and then as I started to improve, I don't know..." Rafe shrugged, his own tears welling. "I just couldn't...it's hard to explain."

"I told you to call her, mijo," Carmen's warm voice cut through the heavy tension hanging in the air as she came up and interrupted the intense conversation. "But you are stubborn." Her fingers cupped his face and she shook her head. "It seems to be a Rivera curse."

"Tell me about it," Natalia smiled, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm so glad you were able to come, that both of you could make it to the wedding. I can't tell you how much it means to me."

"That Olivia, she's a keeper," Carmen said, wiping a tear from her own eye. "I tried to get Hector and Leo to come, but you know what they are like. I thought that Hector might change his mind at the last minute, but..." Carmen shrugged, the old irritation at her husband rising deep inside. The old goat had stubbornly refused to even acknowledge she was leaving, staring at the television set as she quietly left. There were days that she didn't know what she would do with that man.

"And Leo was just being a jerk, like usual" Rafe grumbled under his breath, as he slowly sank back down into his wheelchair. Enough standing for a bit, between the heavy emotions and the strain of staying upright, he was worn down. He shrank as both his mother and grandmother turned to glare at him with identical looks of irritation. It was kind of eerie and definitely terrifying.

"Rafe!" Natalia admonished with a frown. True though his words may be, she would not let him disrespect his elders that way.

"Mijo!" Carmen said at the same time, frowning at her grandson's tone. At the same time she was oddly pleased with Natalia's defence of Leo. She turned to Natalia She could reassure Natalia though not to give up on him.

"Raphael Augustine Rivera, you are in such trouble, mister!" A familiar voice came from the small group of guests mingling nearby. Natalia and Carmen crossed their arms and exchanged knowing looks as Rafe turned to see who had called his name.

"Ashlee?" Rafe's eyes widened as Ashlee Wolfe emerged, definitely not happy with him. He glanced up at his mother and mouthed 'help' but she only grinned back at him and shook her head.

"Oh, I think you have some more explaining to do, son." Natalia teased, turning his chair towards the upset girl and patting his shoulder. "Good luck with that."

"You are such an asshole," Ashlee grumbled and sat down on a chair next to him and swatted his shoulder.

"Ow! Why do people keep doing that?" Rafe rubbed his shoulder before he was enveloped in a huge hug from the girl.

Natalia chuckled and slipped her arm into Carmen's and together they moved away from the young couple, and slowly headed to where Jonathan was sitting and playing with Francesca and his daughter.

"You know, your Papa and Leo, they will come around. They just need some more time..." Carmen sighed softly. "And I'm sorry I took so long to see what truly matters. I spoke with Father Ramirez at my church, and he was very good at helping me understand. And Rafe has helped as well. He said he had a hard time at first too, but now he speaks so highly of your Olivia." She placed her hand over Natalia's, their eyes meeting and holding, so much left unsaid, the pain pulsing beneath the surface, and yet hope was there too. "I just want you to be happy, mija."

"I am, Mama. I am." Natalia said, wiping a tear from her eye. "I can be patient, Olivia and I are not going anywhere. Leo and Papa know where to find us. And you're here now, and going forward that's what we need to focus on," Natalia said softly. Neither woman could change the past, but the future was a lot brighter than it had been. She smiled, her soul feeling lighter in the afternoon sunshine. "Now come meet some of your new family."

The afternoon seemed to fly by as guests mingled and greeted each other. The sun slowly began its long trip towards the horizon as servers went around with large trays of food and fresh drinks. Olivia stood on a small rise by the side of the house, overlooking the crowd and glanced around, trying to take it all in. All of Springfield seemed to be in their yard and it was as if the farmhouse was the center of their little world for this brief shining moment.

Philip and Beth sat laughing with Rick and Mindy, as if the world had never changed since they had been teenagers growing up together. Lillian and Buzz played with Francesca, the girl standing on Buzz's good dress shoes as he held her wee hands high and tried to teach her how to dance on the small makeshift dance floor. Sister Anne and Brooke Tremain were in some intense discussion if the waving of Brooke's hands were any indication. Beside her was Callie Jennings, Emma's old teacher who was laughing and smiling at whatever Brooke said. Matt Reardon was chatting with Remy, who was holding his squirming son, and Christina. Chief Thorne stood with his arms crossed and a beer in hand, clearly talking shop with Mallett, while poor Dinah looked extremely bored. She perked up and smiled as she noticed Olivia and waved hello. Olivia smiled back.

So many lives intermingled with each other. The threads were all woven together today, a tapestry of their special day. Olivia felt truly blessed.

Suddenly small white twinkle lights blinked to life, hidden within the miles of white gauzy material Greg had draped everywhere. It was if a fairyland had come to life. Servers began to busily light tea lights next to the bowls of red gerbera daisies and babies breath found on the tables.

It was beautiful.

"There you are," Strong arms slid around her waist, clasping together over her stomach. The scent of vanilla and something all Natalia enveloped her, and Olivia smiled.

"Here I am," She leaned back into Natalia's embrace, before slowly turning to find warm dark eyes full of love watching her. She didn't even realize she was dipping her head to steal a kiss until she was scant inches away. "This looks like later to me..."

"Oh, really?" Natalia teased, her eyes flicking down to stare at Olivia's mouth. The very air around them seemed to still in anticipation, as Olivia drew slowly nearer and she waited breathlessly for the touch of Natalia's sweet lips on hers.

Instead though, a round of giggles and a discreet cough came from somewhere behind them, breaking the mood. Olivia growled in annoyance, before bumping her forehead to Natalia's, feeling the warm skin press against her own with an accompanying frustrated sigh. It was just like old times, they just needed Frank Cooper to come bursting in and ask Natalia for a date for it to be complete.

Olivia didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Hey, save it for the honeymoon," Leyla's teasing voice broke through the haze and Olivia's eyes blinked open. The disappointment of being interrupted didn't last long as she glanced over to see the biggest grins on the two young women standing there watching them. She lifted her eyebrow and glared at them, but that only produced more giggles.

"Nice try, Mom. We were wondering where you two had disappeared," Ava said softly, one hand resting in the small of Leyla's back. "Clearly there was no need to worry."

"We just needed to...talk." Olivia glanced back at Natalia, her heart beating faster at the tender look on her wife's face, meant for her alone. The honeymoon couldn't come fast enough as far as she was concerned.

"Right, is that what you're calling it now? Funny, there didn't seem to be a whole lot of talking going on," Leyla sassed back, earning a snort and an appreciative elbow poke from Ava. Olivia smiled and it suddenly hit her how close the two girls had grown over the last few weeks. Spending quality time together had been good for both of them it would seem.

"You are so bad," Ava chuckled and gazed at Leyla indulgently. Olivia cocked her head and frowned slightly, recognizing the look. A hand slid down her arm and Natalia's fingers tangled together with her own, squeezing gently and breaking her from her musings.

"I'm guessing that we are needed for some speeches and toasts," Natalia said, glancing up at Olivia and smiling warmly. A peace settled over Olivia, as she realized that she had been waiting for Natalia to come claim her all along. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Olivia said, pulling her wife closer. Slowly they all started towards the gathered guests. She took a calming breath, feeling the energy crackling between them. She couldn't wait to be alone with her once more.

The band began to play an old familiar tune, and Olivia looked up to meet Natalia's bright eyes staring back at her. On the small dance floor, several couples were slowly swaying on the dance floor and Olivia took a sip of her wine.

"Dance with me?" Natalia's voice was soft and low, intimate and for her ears only.

As Springfield's most popular, and only, lesbian power couple they had been invited to many events this year, once the word had gotten out that they had been officially married in New York. Part of it was curiosity to some degree, and Olivia could understand that. The other part of it came down to plain, old-fashioned friendship. It was heartening that so many of their friends and co-workers were supportive, embracing their relationship and just treating them like normal.

However, as a couple they had never really been blatantly in your face about their relationship either, holding hands about as risqué as it got. Olivia knew that dancing together now would be taking it to the next level of acceptance for a lot of people. But none of that really mattered to her now.

"I thought you'd never ask," Olivia murmured, leaning close, her voice dropping a register and promising naughty things Natalia only prayed she would follow through on. A smile lit up Olivia's face with delight and she nodded, pulling Natalia closer to her with a tug of her hand.

"Speeches and toasts will have to wait, girls. I want to dance with my wife," Natalia said as she turned to a grinning Ava and Leyla and smiled softly. She squeezed Olivia's hand gently again.

Together they made their way through the swaying guests to the small dance floor. Every eye was watching them now, as the guests realized that the happy couple were about to hit the floor. Natalia swallowed hard, but Olivia's hand squeezed hers and the simple act made her lift her chin. *This is your wedding and these are your friends, who the hell cares what anyone thinks?* She had finally got the girl and now wanted nothing more than to feel her swaying in her arms.

Doris turned in time to see the gorgeous duo step onto the small dance floor together, joining the few couples already there. She elbowed Blake who smiled widely at the sight. Across the lawn, Josh and Billy Lewis grinned at each other. Reva Shayne paused mid-sentence while telling her latest story about her son, as they watched Natalia slide her hands up along Olivia's arms to lock around her wife's neck, absently twisting soft strands of her honey blonde hair.

The band played a wonderful cover of Unforgettable, the lush voices of the singers merged together, very similar in sound to Nat King Cole and Natalie Cole's version of the song. Tucked away near the buffet table, a sheepish Father Ray looked up from the hors d'oeuvres tray, and shook his head, a little shocked as Olivia's hands wrapped around Natalia's small waist, and possessively pulled her closer as they started to sway to the song.

"I love this song," Natalia breathed against Olivia's shoulder, glancing up shyly into the intense green eyes staring back at her. While she felt the eyes of the entire room watching them, Olivia only had eyes for her. The rest of the room seemed to fade away, and she got lost in the motion of her lover's body against her.

"I love you," Olivia said tenderly, the velvety layers to her voice saying so much more. "I'm so glad we finally got here. Alone, together."

"There's no where else I'd rather be." Natalia looked down and then back up, ignoring everything around them except the woman in her arms. Too soon the song ended, and they

simply swayed together to the beat of their hearts, waiting for the next one to start. Taking a moment to glance around the dance floor, she noticed that they were the only ones left on the dance floor.

Natalia snuggled closer to Olivia, breathing in her scent, enjoying the moment. She could hear Olivia humming the chorus again softly in her ear. They had come such a long way this year to arrive at this moment.

"I love you too, Mrs. Spencer Rivera." Natalia murmured as another song started, taking pleasure in the surprised chuckle from her wife as they began to sway together again. "And you know what?"

"What?" Olivia dipped her head and nuzzled into the warmth of Natalia's neck.

"It's later now." Natalia grinned, flashing her dimples for added effect.

Olivia's breath seemed to hitch at the words, and Natalia watched entranced as she raised her head to look at her. Soft green eyes took in the features of her face as if memorizing every inch before her gaze flicked down to her lips. Natalia moved impossibly closer, her eyes fluttering shut, both hearts thundering in anticipation.

And then there was the soft tentative touch of Natalia's lips against hers, before Olivia responded in kind, pressing and moving as one; mind, body and soul searing together, at long last.

They didn't even notice the cheer from their friends and family.

It was perfection.

Act IV

The ride to Springfield's small airport was short. Olivia still refused to tell Natalia what their honeymoon destination would be. The older woman simply insisted that Natalia pack a variety of clothes because no two days would be the same.

When they arrived, Phillip's jet and pilot were waiting for them. The limousine driver loaded their bags and handed over instructions to the pilot that Phillip had written up at Olivia's insistence. She didn't want anything to go wrong on this trip, and she had every

intention of giving her wife a honeymoon she'd never forget.

The pilot nodded to the women. "Good evening, ladies. Are you ready?"

Natalia rubbed her hands together. While it was no longer her first flight, it didn't stop her fidgeting. "As ready as I'll ever be. I just wish someone would tell me where we're going." She gave Olivia a pointed look.

Olivia wrapped her arm around the smaller woman and smiled down before kissing her pout away. "A surprise isn't much of a surprise if I tell you what it is."

Sighing in defeat, Natalia rolled her eyes and pulled herself up into the small jet. With the seats along the walls of the plane instead of in rows and small round tables in the middle, Natalia assumed this was one of Phillip's business jets. It gave them plenty of room to stretch out and after the long, tiring day, she was ready to do exactly that.

She turned to Olivia and, in spite of wishing she knew what the older woman had up her sleeve, kissed her wife. "I love you so much. You drive me crazy, but I absolutely love you." Olivia smiled happily and wrapped her arms around Natalia's trim waist. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you married me then."

"Definitely." She kissed Olivia tenderly, allowing a few moments to linger before they had to buckle up. She hummed with pleasure into the kiss then pulled back. The hum turned to a yawn and Olivia laughed, getting drawn into the contagious yawn as well. "How long is the flight?" Natalia asked.

"Hmmm," Olivia pondered if she should say and possibly give away the destination. "Why?" Natalia threw her head back in frustration. She wasn't getting any information out of Olivia. "Fine. Is it long enough for me to take a nap?"

The blonde couldn't help the chuckle that bubbled up at her wife's frustration. "Yes, and you are so going to need the rest, Mrs. Spencer-Rivera." She wagged her eyebrows in fun.

"I like the sound of that." Natalia giggled and playfully gave Olivia small nips and kisses to her lips and face before sliding into one of the leather seats.

"Me, too." Olivia said as she went along with the silly behavior.

The pilot opened the tiny cabin door. "We're all clear, ladies. Buckle up!"

When the plane touched down, Natalia was roused from sleep. Bleary-eyed, she sat up and looked out the window. In the growing darkness, she could see the silhouette of palm trees swaying in the breeze. She looked over at Olivia who had been watching her reaction with a faint smile. Natalia considered all of the possible places they'd talked about honeymooning, and she was guessing by the foliage that this either had to be Florida or California since they'd have to stop for a passport check to get out of the country.

It wasn't until the door of the jet was lowered and Natalia was assisted down the few short steps to the tarmac by the pilot that the warm breeze gave away their true location.

She turned to Olivia, confusion and surprise apparent in her voice, "Florida? We didn't talk about Florida."

Olivia smirked. "Who said the trip's over? We're just getting started."

"Oh." Natalia was thinking it over. Trying to puzzle out where they were headed. "So, if we're in Florida, but we're going further, then we must be heading south."

Olivia laughed at the unexpected innuendo and raised an eyebrow. "You could say that."

Natalia ignored her wife's dirty mind for the moment. There were people around and there was no time for such things right then. "So, we've already been to San Cristobel."

Olivia had walked toward the pilot then turned back to her wife, laughing. "Oh my God, Natalia! Would you stop trying to figure it out and just enjoy the trip?" She pulled out some money and handed it over to the pilot with a handshake. "Dinner for you and your family is on me, Bob."

He nodded his head, taking the unexpected tip. His eyes got big when he saw at least three twenty dollar bills. "Thank you, Mrs. Spencer-Rivera. I hope you ladies have a wonderful honeymoon." He seemed to hesitate then said, "My niece and her wife just got back from their honeymoon. They were together twenty-two years before tying the knot. Congratulations to you both." With an awkward nod to his head and a slight blush, Bob walked past his plane to the terminal to wait for his plane to be refueled.

Olivia and Natalia smiled at each other then turned around. They were swiftly greeted by a young man in a crisp black suit and hat. He tapped the heels of his shiny dress shoes together and bowed slightly. "Mrs. and Mrs. Spencer-Rivera, I assume?"

"Yes," Olivia answered.

"I'm Derek, your chauffeur. I'll get your bags, and I'll have you on your way in a jiffy." Derek didn't wait for approval, quickly assuming his role. He efficiently gathered their suitcases and placed them in the trunk of the waiting limousine behind him. Before Olivia could reach the door to open it for Natalia, Derek raced to beat her.

With a flourish, the door was opened and he assisted both inside. Olivia slid in beside Natalia and took her hand. "He's good."

"Will he get a big tip, too?" Natalia had noticed the thick group of bills that Bob had received.

Olivia shrugged. "It's looking like it. I remember what it was like to struggle. If I can help out those who are working hard, I like to try."

Natalia raised the hand in her own and kissed the back of it lovingly. "I know. That's one of the many reasons I love you."

"And I'm really freakin' hot!"

Natalia rolled her eyes in exaggeration. "So freakin' hot!"

After only a few minutes in the limousine, Olivia turned to Natalia. "Okay, I need you to close your eyes."

"What?" Natalia asked in surprise as she was pulled away from her window watching of people as they jogged along the boardwalk or walked hand-in-hand leisurely.

"Trust me. It's part of the surprise."

The way Olivia smiled made it impossible for Natalia to deny her. She closed her eyes and patiently waited as the car took several quick turns before parking. "Can I look now?"

"Almost. Just wait here. I'll come around."

Natalia heard the door open on Olivia's side, slam shut, and then her own door opened. She felt the soft skin of Olivia's hand take her own and help her out of the back of the limousine. Olivia's arm wrapped around her waist and she was guided a few feet down what seemed like some steps. She could smell the salt of the ocean and feel the light breeze billow her hair out.

"Okay, you can open them." Olivia stepped aside as she waited for Natalia to realize where they were standing.

Slowly, Natalia blinked her eyes open and it took her a moment to put it all together. There sitting in the harbor was what looked like an old-timey ship with white, billowy sails snapping in the wind and high masts. If the time had been a few hundred years earlier, Natalia would have easily confused it for smaller version of a pirate ship. A banner hung from the side of the ship saying simply: Welcome aboard, Mrs. & Mrs. Spencer-Rivera.

"Olivia, what is this?" Natalia asked breathlessly as she glanced to her wife, who was biting her lip expectantly.

Olivia bowed and gestured grandly at the ship. "Your ship, m'lady." Then muttered quickly, "Literally."

"Excuse me? Olivia, please tell me this is just chartered." Natalia couldn't help it. She was in awe. No matter what, Olivia always seemed to outdo herself. When Olivia didn't answer right away and instead looked down shyly, Natalia gasped, "Oh my God! Olivia, you didn't!"

Olivia shrugged. "Everyone does cruises. But, not everyone does them on their own boat."

"I can't believe you did this! You didn't have to." Natalia was still in shock as Olivia took her in her arms, holding her close.

"I wanted to," Olivia whispered.

Once the shock had worn off, Natalia raced up the ramp onto the ship to look around. Below deck, the quarters were larger than they'd seem from the outside. A full kitchen was at one end of the ship along with the captain's cabin. At the other end of the ship was the master cabin.

Olivia followed behind her wife as the brunette stopped in the doorway. The pictures the seller had sent didn't do it justice. Even she was impressed. It looked nothing like a typical ship's quarters, but like a grand suite in a luxury hotel.

"Wow!" Natalia looked around the surprisingly massive space before stepping further into the room.

The room looked like they'd stepped back in time and were living in a castle on a cliff. On the opposite wall stood a massive king size bed with four elaborate posters, which rose from each corner and were draped with rich tapestries of maroon and gold. The tapestry was pulled back to each corner post with gold rope exposing the matching bedding. The bed was so tall, thick, and luxurious that a foot stool sat to the side allowing the occupants easy access.

Natalia walked up to the bed and ran her hand down the twisting mahogany of the bed post, while her other hand hovered over her lips. She was amazed by the beauty of the room, but even more so by the loving detail Olivia had given their honeymoon. She turned to look at her wife. Olivia was standing just inside the doorway, leaning back against the wall, with her hands in the pockets of her dress slacks.

"Do you like it?" Olivia asked hesitantly.

"No," Natalia said, shaking her head. Seeing the sad scowl take over Olivia's face, she smiled and walked over to her, reaching down to tug Olivia's hands from her pockets. Natalia raised Olivia's hands between them and tenderly kissed the back of each. "I love it, and you." She brushed the back of her fingers over Olivia's cheek. "You amaze me...every...day. I'm so blessed."

When the relief of Natalia's words sunk in, Olivia smiled happily and kissed her. "And I'm just getting started." She loosened Natalia's hold on her hands and wrapped the smaller woman up in her arms, kissing her again with more intent.

Natalia breathlessly leaned her head back as the kiss broke and Olivia laved her neck in tortuous detail. The brunette spoke haltingly with what little of her synapses were continuing to fire. "Shouldn't we, ahhh, um...oh God...what about the captain?"

Olivia pulled back and grinned at her wickedly, her voice a husky drawl. "I am the captain."

"Oh? Ohhhhh," Natalia whispered. A mischievous glint lit her eyes as she realized where this was going. "I guess that means we can set sail whenever we want then."

Olivia nodded and walked her wife backward toward the bed. "Uh huh."

"No rush?"

Olivia shook her head as Natalia's hips came to rest against the side of the bed. "Nope. I even allowed a couple of extra days before we're expected back here."

Natalia kissed the taller woman as she reached for the buttons on Olivia's white vest. She spoke between kisses as her fingers worked lower, "Beautiful and smart." Finishing the last button, she pushed the material aside to admire the full round breasts encased in a white lace bra. "God, I'm the luckiest woman ever!"

"Next to me," Olivia amended, shrugging the vest off her shoulders.

Leaning forward, Natalia kissed Olivia's naked shoulder allowing her teeth to slightly graze the tender skin of her collarbone as she worked her way closer to Olivia's neck. A sharp bite followed by a tender lick was enough to propel Olivia into motion. Quickly, her bra and pants were discarded as she set to work on Natalia's white dress. She brushed her hands up Natalia's thighs, her nails leaving a light trail behind causing Natalia to hiss and pull back from her ministrations on Olivia's neck.

The break in contact allowed Olivia the chance to pull the dress over Natalia's head and toss it behind them. Natalia's bra was soon added to the pile along with their panties. Olivia ran her hands over taunt nipples and a slightly round stomach, dancing close to the tight curls further down. She could hear Natalia's breathing increase and small gasps escape her lips.

"Get on the bed," Olivia's voice was huskier than usual, desire dripping from each word.

She watched as Natalia used the stool to climb up. As Natalia's hip rose past her, Olivia couldn't resist reaching out and running her fingers over the firm curves. Following her wife, she climbed up next to Natalia, helping her push down the covers, until they lay next to each other on cool, white sheets.

Propping up on an elbow, Olivia took in the sight of her beautiful wife stretched out on the bed completely naked and vulnerable. Soft curves, full breasts and hips, strong thighs. She sighed in contentment and pleasure. This would be their first time to make love after

becoming in every respect a married couple. She wanted to make this special, different, from all the other times they'd made love.

Natalia noticed the faraway look. She rolled over and hooked Olivia's chin with a finger, drawing their eyes together. "What are you thinking?"

Long fingers came up to brush over Natalia's neck and collarbone and Olivia sighed. "I want this to be special."

A sweet and loving smile was Natalia's answer. "Every time you make love to me is special, Olivia. Every time is unique and beautiful. I just want you close to me, touching me. All I need or want is to come apart in the safety of your arms. Don't you know? You have every part of me, every inch, any way you want it. You have all of my trust and all of my faith. That's what makes every second we love each other so amazing."

Olivia's heart fluttered in her chest and a joyous smile erupted on her face. There were so many things she wanted to say, but she didn't want to ruin the moment. Instead, she ran her fingertips over Natalia's full lips before leaning in to kiss her reverently. The slow, tender kisses turned raw and needy quick as Natalia nestled in close, bringing the full length of their bodies together.

They lost themselves in their kisses; arms wrapping around each other to get impossibly closer. There was no need to hurry. No kids to feed. No job to get ready for. All they needed was to touch and feel and kiss. Tomorrow, they could begin their trip. Tonight was all theirs.

Olivia dipped her head, placing kisses along the long column of Natalia's perfectly tan neck. Small sighs of pleasure and encouragement echoed in her ears as she drifted lower taking a dark, tight nipple into her mouth. She could feel Natalia's blunt nails caressing and then tugging the hair at the base of her neck, making her needs well-known. Olivia had no intention of disappointing her, but she did have every intention of getting drunk on Natalia's body as the younger woman's heady aphrodisiac permeated her senses.

With a quick glance up, Olivia caught dark hooded eyes looking back at her. The raw look of desire in Natalia's eyes always had an delightful effect on her and this time was no different as she moaned at the tight clenching low in her belly. Olivia took the fingers tangled in her hair, sliding her lips over the palm before kissing the center and lightly teasing with her tongue. She pushed Natalia's hand, palm down, onto the sheets encouraging her to hold on as she slid her body down between Natalia's thighs.

No requests had to be made or explanations given. Natalia's thighs opened willingly to accept her wife. The delicious ache of expectation and arousal strengthened as Olivia settled between her legs, opening her wide for easier access.

Olivia teasingly brought a finger up to play in the copious juices at Natalia's entrance. She never ceased to be amazed at the wonder of her wife's body and the effect their lovemaking had on her. She brought the wet finger up in wonder before succumbing to the desperate need of tasting her love and she sucked the delicious liquid off her finger.

A sharp, shaky moan made her look up the length of Natalia's body. Again, dark eyes connected with green and Olivia realized that Natalia had been watching her taste her arousal. Maintaining eye contact, Olivia returned her finger to Natalia's center, this time sliding in to the knuckle. Natalia groaned harshly at the sudden penetration then gasped as Olivia removed her finger. She watched Natalia shiver as she licked the entirety of her finger.

"Olivia," Natalia whispered harshly. Her fingers twisted the sheet beneath her. She wanted...no, needed, so much more. "Please."

Desire shot like lightening to Olivia's core at the need in Natalia's voice, and she whimpered at the sudden wetness on her thighs. With effort, she pushed aside her own needs and focused on the woman now writhing beneath her mouth. She sunk into the wetness, savoring the sweet yet salty taste of her wife. She moaned at the assault on her senses and the reaction of her body. Gone was the goal of being patient. All she wanted was to make Natalia come undone just so she could put her back together, one swipe of her tongue at a time.

Gone as well was the deliberate precision. Greedily, Olivia raised Natalia's knees to open her further as she impaled the beauty on her tongue over and over again, the slightly metallic tang of Natalia's opening was surprisingly intoxicating.

"Oh God, Olivia," Natalia groaned as she felt herself penetrated again and again by Olivia's warm tongue. She couldn't help it. She pushed down, opened up more, trying to take more of her inside. "Don't stop." She was so close, and she wanted desperately to come this way. Her body bowed taut as Olivia changed angles to go even deeper. If this went on much longer or got any more intense, Natalia knew she was going to rip the nice sheets beneath her. The little more that Olivia gave her was all she needed as her body jerked

once...twice...and then held for a third time as she had to remind herself to breathe or pass out.

Olivia had felt the spasms start on her tongue just as Natalia urged her to continue. The brunette was so close all she needed was a little more. Olivia gave it to her, tilting her head slightly for a better angle. In a sudden rush, Natalia opened more and her tongue was deeper inside than ever before. A quick flick of her tongue and she felt the muscles contract around her as Natalia's entire back rose from the bed.

As Natalia came down from her orgasm, Olivia took advantage of her disorientation and cleaned her with long swipes of her tongue, being careful to avoid the bundle of sensitive nerves nearby. She discreetly wiped her face on the sheet before sliding up beside Natalia and draping an arm over her waist.

Natalia glanced at Olivia out of the corner of her eye and saw the weak attempt at hiding her Cheshire cat grin. She couldn't help but chuckle herself. "Feeling a bit cocky?" Olivia lifted an eyebrow. "It's not cocky if it's true."

The brunette guffawed at her over-confident wife. "I guess I should feel cocky too. I seem to recall more than once making you lose control."

Olivia made a show of tapping her chin in thought. "Hmmm, maybe you should refresh my memory."

It was Natalia's turn to lift an eyebrow, though it wasn't nearly as effective as Olivia's, and all Olivia gave her in return was a cheeky grin. Natalia rolled over on top of Olivia and gently pinned her wrists above her head. "I accept that challenge."

With little preamble, because she knew how wet Olivia was, she could feel it against her stomach, Natalia sat back on her heels and spread Olivia's thighs. She briefly ran her fingers through the wetness to ensure they were well-coated then slipped in two fingers.

"Oh, fuck, Natalia!" Olivia blurted in surprise as she reached behind her head for something to grab on to and found the top of the wooden headboard, her eyes slamming shut at the intensity. Her body arched and pushed against the invading digits. No one really had the honor of taking and claiming Olivia, except Natalia. The knowledge and awareness that Natalia had not only laid claim to her body but also to her very soul was terrifying and

exciting. She couldn't imagine giving herself this way with anyone else, not anymore. Natalia was it, the only one for her.

"You like this?" Natalia whispered heatedly as her fingers continued to move, driving harder, faster, and deeper with each thrust. Olivia's wetness increased with each stroke, and Natalia found she wanted more. Olivia nodded quickly in silent agreement. Natalia smiled. "Do you want more?"

Olivia opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She swallowed and opened her eyes taking in the dominant and powerful image of her wife, steadily fucking her. "Dear God...yes. Yes."

With her free hand, Natalia spread Olivia's folds wider and sunk a third finger into her. After a few strokes to make sure her fingers were coated, she added her pinky. Rolling her fingers together into a semi-circle, Natalia embedded her fingers to the hilt and leaned over Olivia's arching body. Dipping down, she took a dusky nipple into her mouth, sucking and biting gently, before moving up to nuzzle beneath Olivia's ear.

"Is this better, querida?" She whispered hotly. Olivia nodded frantically but didn't speak. "Am I hurting you?"

Olivia shook her head. "No," she grunted as Natalia thrust into her. There was a little pain. She felt stretched and full and amazing. She loved this feeling, and she loved it even more that it was created by Natalia. "You feel so good. This feels so good."

Natalia murmured in agreement, "Yes, it does." She sighed in contentment, nuzzling further along Olivia's neck. "I love being inside of you, Olivia. I want you to come for me, like this." She rose up on one arm, her hips thrusting into Olivia, and pushed her fingers deeper. "Can you do that?"

Frantically, Olivia nodded. She wanted to come like this. Desperately. She reached down and tugged at Natalia's hips, setting the pace for them. With a few more strokes, her body went rigid as her nails dug into Natalia's ass making her hiss. After a few seconds and more than a few aftershocks, Natalia slumped against Olivia's body, still buried deep inside, the light flutters against her fingers the only movement.

When the flutters stopped, Natalia pulled out and rolled to her side, curling up against Olivia's body. The last thing she remembered was a soft kiss to her forehead and mumbled affirmations of love as both of them fell into contented and exhausted sleep.

The gentle roll of the ocean made it difficult for Natalia to get out of bed. After a full day of sailing and a long night of lovemaking, Natalia didn't have to be told twice. She had rolled over and burrowed back under the covers. Glancing over at her watch on the night table stand though, she realized it was midmorning and she was sure by now that Olivia was hungry as she had risen early to get started on their second day of their journey. A good idea for brunch came to mind for her beautiful captain as she stretched and then climbed out of bed to get dressed.

Up on deck, Natalia walked across the cool planks on bare feet feeling Olivia's eyes on her the whole way. She stepped up to the large wheel where Olivia stood and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"I love that you can sail," Natalia murmured as she nuzzled into the light strands of Olivia's hair as it blew in the breeze, the scent of the salt and sea mixing with Olivia's unique smell. It was decadent and exotic, like the woman herself.

Olivia hummed in pleasure at the warm voice in her ear. "Perhaps I was a pirate in a previous life."

Natalia giggled. "And I was what? Your first mate?"

Chuckling, Olivia freed one hand and wrapped it around Natalia's shoulders, pulling the brunette into her side as the boat bounced on the waves gently. She glanced down with a saucy grin. "More like my wench." She grinned even more lecherously and wiggled her eyebrows.

Natalia playfully slapped her on the stomach. "You're terrible!" Then she leaned up and kissed the full lips of her wife. "But I love you anyway."

"Good thing," Olivia agreed.

Changing the subject, Natalia pulled away. "I assume you haven't eaten, right?" When Olivia nodded, she continued, "In that case, I'm going down to the kitchen to make us something."

"Coffee?" Olivia inquired.

"That's not food," Natalia corrected.

Olivia smiled. "It is to me."

Rolling her eyes, Natalia bounded down the steps to start on their brunch. Thirty minutes later, she reappeared above deck carrying a tray with frittatas, grilled pineapple, and coffee.

Olivia watched as Natalia placed the tray on the flat part of the wheel housing. "That looks scrumptious!"

Using a fork, Natalia broke off a piece of the frittata and fed it to Olivia. "Let's find out."

A low hum of appreciation was her answer and it made Natalia smile. Over the next few minutes, Natalia continued to feed bites to Olivia, interspersed with her own, as the boat maintained course in an unknown direction.

Looking at the various dials and buttons, Natalia finally located the compass pointed in a southeasterly direction. To the eastm what appeared to be a land mass barely broke the horizon. Natalia tried to picture what she knew of the Caribbean islands, which was obviously where they were if they were heading southeast of Miami, in her mind.

"Is that Cuba?" She pointed with realization to the east.

Olivia shrugged. "Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't."

Natalia was not amused. "Really? You're still not telling me where we're going." When Olivia gave her a cheeky grin, the brunette turned on her heel and marched to their cabin, returning quickly with a rolled up piece of paper. She rolled it out on the deck next to Olivia, who glanced down at her in shock. Natalia had pulled out the map of the area.

"No, no, no! No cheating!" Olivia fussed at the younger woman from her spot at the wheel.

"Olivia Spencer-Rivera," Natalia warned.

"Oh my God! You're worse than a kid before Christmas!"

Natalia pouted. "Just tell me...plleeaassee."

"Augh! Fine!" She growled in fake frustration. Actually, she loved teasing Natalia. "Puerto Rico. We're going to Puerto Rico."

A bright smile broke out across Natalia's face. "Really?"

Olivia shrugged. "It's only fair, right? You got to see San Cristobel. Now I get to see Puerto Rico."

Before she realized what was happening, Natalia jumped up from the deck where she'd sat down to look at the map and took Olivia in a grateful kiss. The pleasant shock of the kiss was broken by the vision of the map fluttering up off the deck. She jerked away suddenly. "Quick! Get the map!"

It took a split second but Natalia came to her senses and spun around. After a short chase, she caught the map and brought it back to Olivia. Handing it over to the older woman, Natalia breathed a sigh of relief. "That was close!"

"Yeah, we don't want to lose that because there are a couple of stops we'll be making before we actually reach the island," Olivia said as she tucked the map safely in a cubicle next to the wheel.

"Oh really," Natalia mused.

With a chuckle, Olivia shook a finger at her wife. "And you're not getting anything else out of me, woman!"

Natalia put her arm around Olivia's waist and looked out over the ocean with her. "We'll see about that."

The sun was dropping low in the sky making the horizon harder to see; however, Olivia pressed on. Their first destination was just under an hour away, and she wanted to make it before the sunset.

Natalia had taken a break from sunbathing, an activity that Olivia found highly distracting because of the nearly nonexistent bathing suit Natalia was wearing, to get a drink from the kitchen. When she reappeared, Natalia walked up to stand next to her.

When disappearing down into the galley, Natalia hadn't noticed the other ships dotting the ocean's surface. But now a noise drew her eyes to the cloud-dappled sky and she watched as a small twin-engine jet passed overhead. Stepping behind Olivia, she kissed a sun-warmed shoulder before doing the same to the back of her neck, thankful that Olivia had pulled her hair up in a ponytail giving her easy access. She rested her chin on her wife's shoulder as she wrapped her arms around her from behind. "It looks like we're close to the island."

Olivia nodded then glanced over her shoulder, her eyes unreadable behind the aviator glasses she wore. "We are, but we're making another stop first. Actually, two stops before we get to the main island. I think you'll like it."

This time, Natalia didn't even try to coax the secret location out of her love. Instead, she decided to let Olivia have her fun and surprise her. Honestly, she was truly enjoying this extended alone time with her wife. Ever since they'd first met, they'd never really been alone - a child or an ex or someone - was always close by, and as much as she loved their family, she didn't have nearly enough moments like this. It was like falling in love all over again.

Natalia kissed the bare space left by Olivia's tank top between her shoulder blades as her hands played underneath the hem of the shirt, teasing the skin beneath her fingers. They seemed to make love constantly and still she couldn't get enough of the other woman. Being as they were coming near some busy ports though, she tucked her desire away and put her hands back over the top of Olivia's clothes.

"You didn't have to stop," Olivia said, her voice thick with renewed desire.

Natalia nodded. "Unless I want you crashing into another boat, yes, I do." She sighed then asked, "How much further to our destination?"

"Probably about thirty minutes," Olivia said looking at the sky and knowing she was going to be cutting it close. She had planned a surprise, but decided that time was of the essence. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Of course," Natalia quickly responded.

"You probably saw in the refrigerator a box marked Culebrita, right?" Natalia nodded and Olivia smiled, surprised that the younger, curious woman saw it and didn't ask about it. "Can you open it and get what's in it out, then bring it up?"

"Sure." Natalia patted Olivia on the hip and left.

After a couple of days, Natalia had become used to the motion of the ship and was now taking the stairs down to the galley with bounding steps. She moved smoothly around the small island counter that served as a food prep area and the dining table as well and opened the large stainless steel doors of the refrigerator. On the far right toward the back was the box that said Culebrita. She had wondered what was in the box, but assumed it was some exotic dish that Olivia had pre-bought for the trip. She placed the heavy box on the counter and found the scissors to slice through the tape holding the top flaps closed. Opening the box easily, she flipped the top back and peered inside.

"Oh my gosh!"

Inside was a large wooden picnic basket. Pulling it out, she opened the lid. An assortment of meats, cheeses, crackers, and fruit was nestled among the packing of napkins, small plates, glasses, and condiments. Angled across the basket was a bottle of expensive champagne. Shaking her head, overwhelmed at the thoughtfulness of her wife, she carefully carried the heavy basket up the steps to the deck.

Up on deck, Olivia had her headset on and was speaking on the radio frequency to other passing ships. She had no idea what any of the nautical words meant, but she assumed it was for navigation purposes with other captains. The island of Puerto Rico swelled from the ocean to Natalia's right, the westward setting sun casting the seaside homes in an ethereal glow. She smiled at seeing her family's home and looked forward to touring the island once she and Olivia had completed their other two stops.

The seas were a little rougher as the ship made its way around the northern side of the island causing Natalia to reach for a nearby rail to remain steady. Once they'd cleared the main island, the waves settled again. Soon, another island appeared in the distance.

"That's where we're going," Olivia stated as she pointed then paused, glancing with a smirk over at the other woman. "Sort of." When Natalia gave her a quizzical look, Olivia chuckled. "The big one is Culebra, but there are a couple of smaller islands, Culebrita and Vieques, on the other side we'll be visiting."

Natalia glanced down at the basket at her feet. "Always planning ahead."

"Always."

In a surprisingly short few minutes, Olivia was slowing the boat down as the water became noticeably shallower. Eventually, she cut the engine and turned to her wife, propping her arm through the handles of the wheel. "So, m'lady, shall we picnic here or blow up the emergency raft and take it to shore?"

Natalia looked at the deserted stretch of beach adorned with a lighthouse, much like the one back in Springfield, probably only a hundred yards away as the setting sun cast it in a soft pink hue, and shook her head in amazement. Offhandedly, she realized it would make a great location for a new hotel, and she wondered if Olivia had even considered it. They'd talked about expanding, but with the kidnapping and other madness in their lives, franchising the hotel got pushed to the back burner. "Is it deserted?"

"In the daytime it's a magnet for tourists who want to snorkel and scuba dive, but according to some locals that run the catamarans, it's virtually deserted at night. Though there can be some stragglers like us hanging around," Olivia answered, then waited anxiously for a response.

Natalia thought about it for only a few seconds. While a moonlight picnic on a deserted beach with the love of her life would be incredibly romantic, her naturally protective instinct didn't want to chance fate after the adventures and tribulations she always seemed to experience around Olivia. "I vote for here."

"As you wish." Olivia leaned over and ghosted a kiss over the soft lips of the younger woman. "I'll drop the anchor."

Sighing at the teasing touch, Natalia smirked, thinking of an added benefit to being on a boat in the middle of the ocean away from prying eyes. "I'll get the blanket and set up the food."

By the time Olivia made her way back from the bow to drop the anchor, Natalia had nearly everything set up. A large navy fleece blanket was spread out over the deck with the basket as its centerpiece. At one end of the blanket were several pillows from the bed, and at the other a couple of lanterns on each corner to hold the blanket down and provide some much needed light so they could see what they were eating.

Olivia walked over and kneeled down on the blanket opposite from Natalia, who was busily removing the last items from the basket. She picked up the champagne from beside the basket and began to open it. Natalia handed her an opener and grabbed the two flute

glasses. With a pop, the bubbly liquid poured out of the bottle and Natalia quickly caught what she could as they both giggled.

"What is it about champagne that makes people laugh when they open it?" Natalia said smiling happily.

Olivia licked off some of the drink that had spilled over the back of her hand. "I think they put something in the bubbles."

Natalia was mesmerized by Olivia's pink tongue darting out. She took a sip of her champagne, allowing the tang of it to tantalize her taste buds before swallowing it completely. The warmth of the alcohol quickly spread through her body, even into her toes. "You have no idea what you do sometimes, do you?"

A dark eyebrow angled up as Olivia reached for a piece of smoked Gouda. "And if I did, what would you do?" She took a slow sensuous bite then reached out with it toward Natalia, offering the remaining half.

Understanding the challenge, Natalia leaned forward bracing her hands on the deck as she wrapped her lips around not only the food but Olivia's fingers. She noted the sharp intake of breath and pulled back smiling. "Does that answer your question?"

"Keep that up and we'll never finish eating," Olivia said, her voice rough with arousal.

With a coy shrug, Natalia nipped the end off a strawberry, smirked then teasingly licked the curved indentation of the fruit, emphasizing the meaning of her words, "We could just skip straight to desert, querida."

Olivia enjoyed their teasing playful games, and she decided to make it last. After all, they had all night. She looked overhead and back down with a pout. "But we'll miss gazing up at the moon and stars."

Natalia followed the other woman's eyes with her own. When she looked back down and saw the twinkle of mischievousness in Olivia's eyes, she chuckled. "Not if I have you on your back, you won't."

The image of Natalia loving her under the stars seared into her mind's eye and sent a jolt of arousal southward. She watched the brunette for a long moment gauging her seriousness. When Natalia's dark eyes glanced down to her cleavage then took her bottom lip between

her teeth, she knew Natalia was equally aroused at the mental image she'd created for them. With no more hesitation, Olivia crossed her arms and reached down to take the hem of her tank top in her hands. She pulled it over her head, along with her sport bra, then tossed it aside.

"Would this be more pleasing to your palette?" Olivia teased.

"Almost. I think you missed something," Natalia said as her eyes flicked down to Olivia's shorts.

Olivia swallowed. Natalia's lack of inhibition surprised her, and she couldn't help but feel a little like the appetizing prey to Natalia's predator. Standing, she unsnapped the button of her tan shorts and allowed them to fall with a light whoosh to the deck with her panties quickly following suit. "Is this better?"

Natalia looked up at the beautiful woman before her - shapely legs supporting curvaceous hips, a light sheen of moisture topping the curls between those thighs. Instinctively, her mouth watered already anticipating the taste and texture. Standing, she walked around the blanket covered with food until she was standing only an inch from her lover's body. She ran her fingertips up along bare arms, making goosebumps rise along the creamy surface, over shoulders then down between full, round breasts. With the lightest touch, Natalia brushed over dusky nipples that hardened immediately. She couldn't resist pinching each one lightly then tugging a little harder than necessary, just the way she knew Olivia liked it.

Olivia responded with a shaky moan as her eyes fluttered shut. Her knees became weak as she stood there and allowed Natalia to play with her nipples. She felt the flush of arousal between her legs and opened her eyes locking onto their darker counterparts. "Take your clothes off."

The brunette smiled wickedly. It was a look that Olivia thought at one time was impossible for the woman to create. She was eternally grateful to be wrong too.

Stepping back slightly, Natalia slipped the sheer wrap off her shoulders and deftly ridded herself of her bathing suit.

Olivia moved forward and in one fluid movement pulled the younger woman into a passionate kiss. For long moments, they stood there wrapped in each other's arms kissing

under the darkening sky with the only light casting shadows over their naked forms coming from the moon above and the lanterns nearby.

Breaking the kiss, Olivia moved back to her previous position on the blanket and pushed the food aside, careful to not knock over the champagne. She leaned back against the pillows and hooked a finger in Natalia's direction. "Come here."

Natalia went to her knees at Olivia's feet. She raised one of Olivia's legs until her calf was eye level. Moving tortuously slow, she kissed her way up the inside of Olivia's leg, pausing to relish attention on the sensitive spot behind her knee.

Olivia fought the urge to squirm as her wife edged higher. Her hands were already gripping the blanket, and she felt like her body was going to fly apart with the sensations. The brush of Natalia's long hair against her legs drove her nearly as crazy as her mouth. Hands that had been inching up her thighs moved lightly over her stomach and further up to her breasts, again softly grazing the hard nipples then tugging. Unable to stand it anymore, Olivia's body arched into the touch as Natalia's hot mouth settled over her.

The low moan was music to Natalia's ears as she settled between Olivia's thighs, the wet heat welcoming her. Over and over again, she lightly flicked and teased, taking her wife just to the edge before pulling back and slowing down. She wasn't nearly done with Olivia yet. Instead, she put her shoulders under Olivia's thighs, opening her to Natalia's questing mouth and giving her complete access to the rich wet heat. Pressing forward, she entered Olivia as deep as possible with her tongue. A new rush of wetness followed a sharp gasp from above and Natalia felt Olivia's hand grip the top of her head.

Glancing up, Natalia was treated to the wonder of Olivia in the throes of passion - her free hand holding the pillow behind her head in a death grip and her white teeth digging what looked to be painfully into her bottom lip. Tired but determined, Natalia moved up to take the bundle of nerves into her mouth, sucking steadily as her fingers replaced where her tongue had been. Olivia's other hand reached for purchase on the other side of the pillow, her hips beginning to roll frantically as she neared the edge. Curling her fingers, Natalia sent Olivia over with a scream of sheer ecstasy.

Olivia's orgasm was so powerful that her whole body continued to shake long after the aftershocks passed. She knew she was saying something but it had to be gibberish. It didn't even make sense to her own ears.

Natalia slid up next to Olivia. She brushed some hair out of Olivia's eyes. "Are you okay, querida?"

"Huh?"

The brunette chuckled at her disoriented wife. "You're muttering."

Olivia breathed out with a huff and tossed a playful glare at the younger woman. "I think you broke me."

Giggling, Natalia nuzzled along the other woman's jaw to her ear. "I certainly hope not because I am turned on so much right now, and only you can take care of it."

"Well, never let it be said that I'd ever deny my beautiful wife anything," Olivia said and rolled over, bracing herself over Natalia, more than happy to take care of all of her needs.

The next morning, the two women slept in late since they were in no rush to get to their next destination. In fact, they took their time making breakfast and planning their day. Natalia wanted to walk on the beach and visit the lighthouse before leaving.

What had been deserted last night teemed with life in the daytime. The beach was dotted with couples and families playing and picnicking. Others dove off the side of boats to snorkel and a few cast fishing lines. It was so busy that Natalia even wondered if it was safe to get in the water to swim to the beach with all the boats and catamarans in the water. Olivia though was undeterred. She zipped up a change of clothes, towels, and shoes in a waterproof bag and sealed it before tilting her head to the side.

"Ready?"

Life with Olivia was nothing if not an adventure. She nodded and they dove in. A few short minutes later, they emerged from the surf and began walking to dry off. Some of the other tourists seemed to be following a path into the dense vegetation so they did so as well. It was a well worn path to the lighthouse. When they reached the base of the lighthouse, they covered up in some dry clothes and put on their shoes. A sign nearby told of the history of the lighthouse and even though it was now deserted, that it was still open as a tourist spot.

Remembering the last time they'd been this close to a lighthouse, Olivia glanced at her wife with reservation. "Are you okay?"

Natalia breathed out long and slow before nodding. "Yeah...I think so." Another moment passed and she turned to look at Olivia. "I want to go up."

"Really?" Olivia asked uncertainly.

The brunette nodded again, her jaw clenching in determination. Remembering the myriad of conversations she'd had with Sister Anne, Natalia made her final decision. "Yes. Besides, it's probably a great view. Why should I deny myself that because of what Marina did? If I do, the fear wins, right?"

Olivia took her hand, so proud of the younger woman's courage. "Right." She leaned in and gave Natalia a quick kiss. "I love you."

"Love you, too." Natalia smiled. "Come on, let's go see this view."

At the top, Olivia and Natalia found a spot that was free of people and looked out over the sparkling blue ocean. From their vantage point, they could see Puerto Rico gleaming in the sunlight. It really was an incredible view, and neither could resist wrapping up in each other's arms and simply taking it all in.

"I think this would be a great spot for another Beacon. Don't you?" Natalia said suddenly.

Olivia looked down at her incredulously. "We're on our honeymoon and you're thinking about work?"

Natalia tilted her head to the side. "And you didn't?"

The older woman opened her mouth to respond but seeing the look on Natalia's face, basically telling her not to bother denying it, she snapped it shut.

"That's what I thought," Natalia murmured.

"It would be a great spot," Olivia finally agreed and Natalia smiled.

Another hotel down here would give them the excuse to visit often and bring the kids. Maybe make it a regular vacation for their family. "I miss the kids," Natalia admitted quietly, still tucked under Olivia's chin, not caring that other people milled around them.

Olivia smiled secretly and agreed, "Me, too. Does that mean you're ready to cut the trip short?"

The younger woman pulled back in shock. "No way! I have no idea what you have up your sleeve, but I plan on seeing all of it."

Leaning down, Olivia whispered in her ear, "You saw way more than what was up my sleeve last night."

Natalia slapped her on the stomach in mock shock. "Olivia!"

Olivia couldn't help but laugh, and she pulled her wife in closer, kissing the top of her head. "Are you ready to go?"

Natalia agreed to leave as long as they walked on the beach a little more. As they walked along the shore, Natalia reveled in the feel of the warm sand between her toes, reminding her of the day she and Olivia had first been out as a couple at the joint Cooper-Lewis wedding, and the sense of happiness and freedom that came at being open about her love for Olivia. Next to the birth of her children and her own wedding to the woman at her side, it was the happiest day of her life.

Olivia felt Natalia's hand tighten in hers as they walked. She glanced over to see her wife staring out into the distance. "What's going through that beautiful head of yours?"

"Babies," Natalia answered quietly.

"Excuse me?" Olivia snorted.

Natalia pressed her lips together, wondering if she should bring the subject up, but feeling that a honeymoon was as good a time as any to talk about it; she dove in head first. "I know we kind of talked about it a little, but nothing ever came of it. But...I want to...," she stopped and turned to look at Olivia. "I want to have another child with you, Olivia. I want to have one together, that we both plan for and shop for clothes for and pick out names for. Just the two of us." She emphasized the last point, knowing how important the lack of it had been

with Francesca. There was no fixing what had been done, but she could do better going forward. She determined to do it right this time.

A witty response was on the tip of Olivia's tongue, but the earnestness in Natalia's voice and eyes made her reach up and cup her wife's face instead. She placed a soft kiss on her forehead then down further to the tip of her nose and finally her lips. It was sweet, tender, and full of the overwhelming love she felt for Natalia. "I would love nothing more than for you to have my baby."

A huge grin erupted on Natalia's face. "Really?"

Olivia kissed her again. This time lingering and teasing conveying something more to come. "Really."

The next morning Olivia pulled the boat into a much busier harbor, but far too remote still to be the main island. She watched Natalia brace herself on the railing as the boat bumped the rubber guards. Several bags sat by her feet filled with necessities they'd need for their two night stay.

An old man on the dock muttered "Welcome to Vieques," quickly in Spanish as he jumped on deck, with more nimbleness than his age implied possible, to get the ropes to secure the boat to the dock. After climbing back onto the dock, he spun around and gestured wildly to Natalia.

She glanced back to Olivia uncertain, but the older woman smiled. "Go ahead. I just need to close up everything here."

Even though he spoke quickly, Natalia understood most of what he was saying. She reached down and picked up a bag, handing them to him one by one, before taking his gnarled and calloused hand to be pulled up to the dock.

"Muchísimas gracias," Natalia said with sincere appreciation. She reached into her pocket and found a twenty dollar bill. "Por favor."

The old man's deep seated brown eyes twinkled. "Bueno, como no? Es usted muy bonita, señorita." [[Translation](#)]

Charmed, Natalia couldn't help the blush that rushed to her cheeks. "Gracias."

"No running away with Prince Charming here," Olivia teased from behind her. Natalia looked at her in surprise. She didn't even hear the other woman come up.

Natalia laughed lightly. "As tempting as that may be, I'm afraid you're stuck with me, querida."

Olivia jokingly snapped her fingers. "Darn!" She looked at the old man still standing nearby and asked for directions to their hotel. After some more mutterings and grand gestures of his arms, Olivia picked up two of the bags and began walking. She looked back at Natalia, tipping her head. "Come on, slow poke."

After a short but strenuous walk up a hill away from the harbor, the ground flattened out and the two women walked a few more blocks past restaurants, hotels, and stores with cheap memorabilia common to tourist traps until they reached their destination.

"Here we are," Olivia said, smiling at her wife. She enjoyed the look of wide-eyed surprise that slowly overtook the younger woman's tired features.

A low whistle escaped Natalia's lips as she took in the elaborate marble façade and massive chandeliers that hung from the overhang of the circle drive where limousines waited for their guests and expensive sports cars parked awaiting valet service.

"Wait until you see inside," Olivia teased as they made their way up the sidewalk to the front door.

The interior looked nothing like the outside. The ceiling gave the place a rustic feel with wooden beams but the white and cream walls dispelled the dark weight of the ceiling to give it an openness appropriate to a seaside resort. Low, wide couches and glass tables adorned the common areas, dotted by colorful pillows and accent pieces. Lights with multi-colored shades hanging from the ceiling at different lengths gave the space a sense of carefree abandon. While the decor was decidedly contemporary, it felt surprisingly warm and homey.

Natalia followed Olivia to the front desk as the older woman introduced herself to the manager on duty. From what she could overhear, Natalia could tell they were talking about the hotel. And Olivia chided her yesterday about talking about work! It served them well

though because the manager picked up a phone and called the restaurant giving strict instructions for a honeymoon special to be delivered immediately to their suite.

Even though it wasn't necessary, a bellman took their bags and guided the women to the elevators. Inside, he slid a card through a reader and pressed the button for the top floor.

Natalia looked askance at the other woman.

"What?" Olivia declared with wide eyes.

Natalia just shook her head and tucked her arm through the other woman's, leaning in close as the elevator climbed higher. She wasn't sure what she expected when the elevator dinged and the doors opened, but for the elevator to open up on the actual suite itself was not it. Before her were massive French doors that opened onto a large balcony overlooking the ocean and large plates of floor to ceiling glass dotted the wall, allowing sunlight to stream into the space. In the distance, she could clearly see Puerto Rico.

A hand went to her mouth, overwhelmed again by what Olivia had done. "Oh my God...Olivia. This is...I don't even have words."

Olivia quietly tipped the bellman handsomely and walked over to where her wife was standing in front of the windows. She wrapped her arms around the younger woman's trim waist and pulled her close. "I'm glad you like it."

Natalia rested her head back on Olivia's shoulder and held onto the hands around her. "I'd be crazy if I didn't."

"Well, you were crazy enough to marry me," Olivia joked. She could feel Natalia shake her head before the woman turned in her arms.

"Don't put yourself down like that. You, Olivia Spencer-Rivera, are the most amazing woman I've ever met, and I'm lucky to have your love and to spend my life with you." Natalia punctuated the claim with a kiss, one that promised many more to come.

Natalia tipped her head to deepen the kiss when a bell made her pull back. She looked up at Olivia who was looking a little flushed and frazzled.

"That must be our honeymoon special." Olivia cleared her throat and broke away to open the elevator doors.

A large cart filled with champagne, several wines, fruits, cheeses, and other goodies was rolled into the room. In the middle of the cart was an envelope. Natalia picked it up and looked at Olivia, who told her to go ahead and open it. Inside were two cards for unlimited, complimentary spa use signed by the owner of the hotel.

"Very nice!" Natalia smiled, handing the cards over to Olivia to look at. "I guess it makes sense considering our affinity for spas."

Olivia chuckled as she read. "I bet Mr. Parrilla changes his tune when he learns that I may set up shop on another island."

Natalia couldn't help but smile. As much as she loved the homey, mothering side of Olivia and the way she was with their kids, she had missed the take-no-prisoners business tycoon that she'd fallen in love with over three years ago.

She pulled the cards from Olivia's grasp and dropped them on the cart. "How many nights do we have here?"

Olivia looked at her warily. "Two. Why?"

"Well, since this is the honeymoon suite, we better get to honeymooning. Don't you think?" The look in Natalia's eyes as she spoke made clear her intentions of how she wanted to spend their first night on the island.

Natalia sighed as she leaned into Olivia's strong back, feeling muscles move beneath her as the other woman steered the boat through the choppy waters as they headed north and east of Puerto Rico to the old city of San Juan.

"This has been so amazing," Natalia murmured over the wind and waves before kissing a sun-warmed shoulder. "It's almost a shame to go home, but I do miss the kids."

Olivia smirked fighting hard not to say anything. "I'm sure they're fine." Feeling her phone buzz in her pocket, Olivia distracted her wife. "Would you mind bringing a fresh cup of coffee? Someone kept me up the last two days." She made a show of yawning and Natalia slapped her arm before reaching for Olivia's empty mug and heading to the kitchen.

With the brunette out of eyesight, Olivia pulled her phone from her pocket, read the text message, and smiled. She radioed in to the dock and got the slip number for her boat, then sent the information in a reply. She smiled broadly to herself, knowing she'd have a hell of a time outdoing this trip in the future. To see the look on Natalia's face though would be so worth it.

Pulling into the marina at San Juan was more harried than Olivia anticipated. There were boats and ships of all sizes from speed boats to cruise ships, skiers, fishermen, and even planes that landed on the water. She had boated and sailed many times in her life and her father had even been a fisherman, but the massive coming and going of the San Juan port was overwhelming. Never in her life had Olivia been so glad to see their boat slip come into view.

Seeing a familiar sight on the dock, Olivia called down to Natalia from where she'd sent the younger woman earlier when the stress of coming into port had made her frazzled. "We're here, Natalia!"

She slowed the boat down easing it into position. She waved toward the dock but also put a finger to her lips in a shushing gesture.

Natalia emerged from the galley with a relieved sigh. "I'm glad that's over! Are you sure we can't just fly home?" She looked past the huge smile on Olivia's face and gasped. "Oh my God!" Running to the side of the boat, Natalia scrambled to the dock and enveloped Emma, Leyla, Francesca, and Ava in a huge hug.

"Hey, what about me?" From behind the group, Rafe stood proudly on his braces.

Natalia broke away from the rest of her family to go to her son, pulling him into a fierce hug. "My baby."

"Surprise!" Olivia called behind her.

Natalia turned and looked at her wife in wonder. "You...I can't believe you did this. All of this. Everything about this trip has been amazing, but this..." She took Olivia's face in her hands, simply staring at her in awe. "I love you so, so much."

Olivia took Natalia in her arms and lifting her slightly, spun her around. Putting her back on the ground, she warmed at Natalia's childlike giggle. "And I love you."

Their kiss was met with groans from their family and both of them laughed, breaking the tender moment.

Olivia leaned back and pulled something out of her back pocket. Looking closer, Natalia could see it was a map with writing on it. She held it up and smiled. "Would you like to see home? Your mom was very forthcoming with information on where she and your father grew up, where they met, where they went to church. Stuff like that. If you're interested."

Natalia opened her mouth, but she was speechless at the lengths Olivia went to in order to make her happy. She said a prayer of thanks, one of thousands she'd prayed since first meeting Olivia and only one of the thousands more to come. She linked her arm through her wife's and reached for Emma with the other. "Wherever you go, I'll follow."

To all the OVS fans,

Everyone on Team OVS extends our warmest appreciation for giving us three amazing years with you! While it hasn't always been easy or we haven't always been timely, the enthusiasm of the readers to continuously come back and ask for more kept all of us going. We couldn't have done it without you! Your love and passion for Otalia's love story made it all possible.

Thank you!

Calliope's Muse & Geekgrrllurking

Executive Producers