



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. "Heeeeeyyy! 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?"

"Hmmmmmm," 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."
