



## Act I

*Blake leaned back on the plush sofa and admired the roar of the fireplace. Clarissa and the boys would be terrorizing poor Leyla by now. How Olivia had ever been able to convince her that adding a Valentine's overnight camp to the service offered by the Beacon's Little Lights daycare was beyond her. However, it was a stroke of genius, as Valentine's was on a Tuesday night this year. She heard the sound of soft footsteps just before she felt warm arms wrap around her shoulders and a glass of red wine magically appear.*

*"Look at you, getting in touch with your butch side." Doris teased gently, dropping a sweet kiss to Blake's exposed neck. Blake had insisted on getting the fireplace set and lit it by herself, going into the basement to bring up a few logs.*

*"Don't start," Blake swatted her lover's hand and turned slightly, smiling as she was rather pleased with herself. "So what is on the agenda this evening, my love?"*

*Doris grinned and helped Blake up to her feet, tangling their fingers together as she led them to the couch.*

*On the coffee table sat several take out containers and a bag from the Quiki Mart. Blake shook her head and sank down onto the plush sofa.*

*"First, we have some Thai food from your favourite restaurant downtown, followed by a double feature." Doris grinned.*

*"What are we seeing?" Blake peered into the paper bag, curious.*

*"Well, I found the last copy of Resident Evil: Resurrection and we can follow that up with Shaun of the Dead." Doris said proudly. "There's nothing like some scary movies to snuggle together with."*

*Blake just stared at her, and slowly raised her eyebrow. Doris blinked back.*

*"Ookay, maybe not." Doris grinned again, pulling the rental DVD's from the bag and handing them over to Blake.*

*"An Affair to Remember' and 'Sleepless in Seattle'," Blake's smile widened as she read the titles. "Oh, my God, I love these movies."*

*"I know," Doris leaned forward and stole a quick kiss from her pleased girlfriend. "There's an extra large box of Kleenex in there too. Just saying."*

*"Who are you kidding, Doris Wolfe? You are just as romantic at heart as I am," Blake said, nodding happily. "These aren't even rentals are they?"*

*"Shh," Doris hushed with a finger to her lips, and stood. "You'll ruin the image." Blake swatted her leg and grinned up at her. "I'll go grab us some plates for the food."*

*Doris disappeared into the kitchen, the sound of cupboards opening and closing and rattling of cutlery filling Blake with a sense of contentment. This was how it should be. The simple things shared together. It was very clearly her second chance at something just wonderful, and Blake was going to grab it with both hands and never let go.*

*The doorbell chimed suddenly, and Blake stood to answer it.*

*"Who the hell is that?" Doris' grumble from the kitchen could be clearly heard, echoing Blake's thoughts exactly. Outside the house the storm swirled, snow falling mixed with freezing rain. Thunder even rolled in the distance.*

*"This had better be good..." grumbled Blake, her hand reaching out to turn the handle on the large oak door. Clutching the neck of her sweater closer, she peered out into the night, "Can I help you?"*

*The dark shadow of a man stood there, trench coat wrapped tight, a fedora perched on top of his head. Behind him a flash of lightening streaked across the sky, the rumble rolling along.*

*"Oh, my God," Blake's hand came to her mouth. The silhouette of the man was so familiar, but wasn't possible. Her mind must be playing tricks on her. It couldn't possibly be, could it? The man stepped closer, into the light falling from the porch light, slowly pulling the fedora from his head, water and snow falling with a dull splat onto the floor. His hair was thinner and more grey, but his eyes still sparkled.*

*Blake shook her head, not fully believing what she was seeing. She gripped her glass of wine tightly, the stem snapping in her fingers. The glass fell, the red liquid bleeding into the slush at the man's feet. She felt dizzy all of a sudden, the world spinning and then growing dark, as she fell forward. The man caught her and held her close, breathing the warmth and scent of her in.*

*"Well, that went better than I expected." The man murmured softly into Blake's hair.*

*"Blake, who is it?" Doris stepped out of the kitchen, abruptly stopping as she took in the scene unfolding before her, her heart sinking as she realized just who was at the door. "Oh, my God..."*

*Ross Marler was alive.*

*And now, on to Episode Four, 'Déjà Vous All Over Again...'*



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Darkness.

It was a relief really, the void numb and all consuming. No emotions needing to be dealt with, just peace and quiet, with time for thoughts to swirl and settle, like waves lapping at a shoreline. Sounds began to filter through next and the tranquility started to shift and to change. The darkness was becoming heavy, clinging, like being stuck in mud, arms and legs too heavy to move.

And then the emotions started up again. A feeling of great joy and sorrow, and a pesky feeling that there was something that needed to be done. A throbbing pain began behind her eyes, hovering, threatening to take over. Thoughts began to take shape, memories churning and rising to the surface like flotsam and jetsam in turbulent waters.

In an instant Blake Marler remembered everything, and then wished she didn't.

Surely this couldn't be happening, could it?

Shock and disbelief pulsed through Blake's veins as her mind struggled out of the warm dark depths to the surface, trying desperately to catch up, to take it all in. Her heart thundered in her ears, just like it had so many years ago, when it had been shattered by the news, never to be the same again. Now though, it had been pieced back together, rebuilt and stronger than ever, only to be tested again at the limits of belief. It was too much to grasp, too much to comprehend.

It was all just... too much.

Blake's eyes fluttered open, as she finally pulled free of the smothering darkness clawing at her, trying to draw her back into the void. She was in her living room, on her couch and she was safe, but her mind was in the past. She could remember the day it all had happened perfectly, like it had just been yesterday. It was burned into her mind and soul like a brand, a healed over scar that was never to be forgotten. How could she forget?

After all, it was only the day Blake's perfect world had been changed forever.

She had been waiting for Ross in their suite at the Beacon, excitedly going through her closet looking for the perfect outfit. The slinky teal number she finally picked out was low cut and showed off all her best assets. It hugged her curves, caressing Blake's skin like a

lover, but she knew it would look even better off of her heated flesh and in a pool at the foot of their king sized bed.

She couldn't wait to see her husband again. She was so eager for him to arrive so she had called him, leaving a voice message on his phone, promising the mother of all welcome homes. He was coming home for the weekend, his flight arriving at 6:15 pm from Washington D.C. A spritz of his favorite perfume at her ears and cleavage for good measure, before slipping in the long dangly diamond earrings Ross had bought her for their second wedding anniversary.

There was a knock at the door and she rushed to open it, thinking Ross had somehow found a flight home early, only to be disappointed and annoyed to find Jeffrey O'Neill standing there. The rest was pretty much a blur after that.

Jeffrey had broken the news to her as gently as he could. A witness saw the plane crash, burst into flames, the plane and all on board burned to ashes. There was nothing left to identify, let alone bury.

No...

Blake couldn't take it in, she didn't want to believe it, wouldn't believe it.

No, no, no...

Desperately she grasped at straws. Jeffrey was lying, up to some trick, it couldn't be true. It wasn't true, Ross' plane was landing at that very moment, she was so sure. Her heart raced in her chest, refusing to believe it. Ross would be walking through that door any second.

Another knock at the door and Blake was sure this would be Ross. She whipped the door open and instead of her husband it was her mother, Holly's eyes big and sad.

No, no, no, no...NNN0000000!!!

Blake knew from the depths of sorrow in her mother's eyes that it was impossibly, horribly, true.

Ross was dead.

Blake sighed now, her eyes closing briefly before opening to face her new tNatalia. She was laying on the couch, a throw blanket tucked around her with Doris leaning over her, wiping at her forehead with a cool cloth. Their gaze met and locked, Doris' eyes big and sad.

Blake knew then, in the depths of the sorrow in her lover's eyes, that it was true.

Ross was very much alive.

"Blake?" Doris murmured softly, tenderly trailing the back of her fingers across a flushed cheek. "There's my girl, back in the land of the living. Are you okay?"

Blake nodded, bringing her hand up to catch her girlfriend's, holding onto it like a lifeline. She sat up, a little dizzy but nothing she couldn't handle.

"Whoa, go slow, you had a bit of a shock," Doris said gently, smiling as Blake stubbornly swung her feet around and moved to sit beside her, hanging tightly onto her hand.

"Is he...is Ross still...here?" Blake struggled for the right words, fear and hope mingled in the depths of her eyes. Doris nodded and looked up, over her shoulder. Blake could sense movement behind her, as she turned her head. And there he stood.

Ross Marler.

His hair was greyer and a little thinner too. He had put on some weight, but not in a bad way. Most importantly, Ross still had those kind eyes that she knew so well and as Blake turned a little, he flashed that smile of his that had always wrapped around her heart.

"Hi, Blake," Ross took a tentative step closer to the couch, wanting nothing more than to take her into his arms. It had been so damn long. "I'm sorry if I-"

"No, just stop," Blake held up her hand, not anywhere near ready to deal with any of this. She glanced over at Doris for strength, squeezing her hand again for good measure and then stood. Before she even knew it, she threw herself into Ross' arms, holding him tight. She soaked up the strength in his embrace, the warmth of his body pressed against hers, inhaling the plain and simple scent of him. Blake closed her eyes and just let her body remember what it was like to have him in her arms again. Slowly she pulled away from him, her eyes glittering with unshed tears and something else.

Anger.

Blake registered the vibration along her arm first, the smack of her palm striking his cheek ringing loud in her ears as she watched Ross' head snap to the side from the force of her slap. Her hand stung, but damn, it had felt good.

"How DARE you!" Blake growled, pushing away from the stunned man. "How dare you come back now, after all this time? Where the hell have you been all these years?" Blake began to pace, her hands in the air as she vented. She stopped and stared hard at him. "Your friends and family, your children, all of us, we thought you were dead. I visited your grave, for years. YEARS, Ross. And you saunter in here like nothing has happened." Blake's eyes glittered, cold as ice. He was willing to sacrifice their love for what? She needed desperately to know. "You leave the world behind and we all paid the price. You gave us all up for what? You gave *ME* up, for what? Tell me."

"Blake, please, let me explain. What I can of it, anyway," Ross swallowed hard and looked down, his cheeks flushed and not just from the slap. He glanced over at Doris and then back to Blake, and prayed that they believed him. "I was kidnapped by someone I trusted, a private investigator I had hired--"

"Nikki Landers?" Blake asked hopefully. After all this time she needed to know if there had been another woman in her husband's life. He looked down and nodded. "The woman you were having an affair with."

"What? I was NOT!" Ross looked up sharply at that. He had not been sleeping with the pretty brunette but his eyes widened as he realized how some of his meetings could have been misconstrued. "Dear God, Blake. All these years and you thought..."

"It nearly ripped me apart," Blake's vision blurred with unshed tears. "Loving you, and hating you, all at the same time. Not knowing what I should be feeling, and never knowing for sure." Ross took a step towards her, but she stepped back, not ready to let him in just yet. She felt a strong presence suddenly behind her, knowing instinctively that it was Doris. The warmth coming from her was almost palpable, and Blake leaned back into it, needing the silent strength and support.

Ross' eyes narrowed, taking in the closeness of the two women. Doris' eyes locked with his as she stared back at him defiantly as if daring him to say something, to realize something. He blinked as his mind chewed on the facts before him. There was more going on here than met the eye, he was sure.

"Why don't we sit down," Doris said quietly, pleased when Blake nodded tiredly and made her way back to the couch. This whole ordeal was exhausting for all of them, but it was obviously getting to the petite redhead, and Doris would be damned if her lover would be upset again. She would kick Ross out on his ass before she'd let Blake get hurt any more this evening.

Ross nodded in agreement and followed behind the women, watching carefully as Doris' hand came to rest into the curve of Blake's spine. It was a knowing touch, comforting and yet more, loving and familiar.

Too familiar.

The women sank down onto the plush couch together, Blake reaching to take her friend's hand, holding on for dear life. Doris leaned close, whispering something that made Blake smile and shake her head, a tender look exchanged between them. It was more than just tender, it was almost...intimate.

And then it hit him.

Doris Wolfe was Blake's lover.

Ross ground his teeth as the truth of what he was seeing seemed to tilt his world to the left all of a sudden. He fidgeted slightly, not sure how to deal with this latest wrinkle, hope deflating in his chest as this new revelation sunk in. It seemed like he'd been doing nothing but adjusting his life since he woke up in that damned hospital bed. And now here he was on Valentine's Day intruding on what would have been a romantic evening for them.

"Tell me what happened," Blake finally spoke, her eyes weary but curious. It was the least he could do, she deserved to know the truth, and whether or not they still had a future together. Ross sighed and nodded.

"I had hired Nicole Landers to look for Phillip. I was certain that he was alive and that there was a cover up going on. Apparently I got too close for comfort and while she had discovered photographic evidence of Phillip being alive, she was more cunning than I gave her credit for." Ross leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his short hair. "She double crossed me and made a deal with the devil, Alan Spaulding. Alan decided that it was time for me to disappear, to protect Phillip, so he paid Nikki to make it happen."



"But the plane crashed, there were witnesses, and Rick said that he had someone tamper with it." Blake leaned forward, trying to understand.

"The pilot had caught the tampering on his pre-flight inspection, repairing it before we even took off. Nikki said Alan had the rest of it all under control. A Spaulding Enterprises military contract to build drone planes for the government came in pretty handy," Ross laughed mirthlessly. "A test drone plane flew out and crashed on the original flight path, burning to ashes and making the authorities believe that my plane had been incinerated beyond all hope of finding anyone alive. No other planes were reported missing; Nikki had the pilot register another flight path, taking us north, up into Canada to a small airport in the country. With the drone plane taking the fall, no one even thought to look for us. It was a brilliant plan really."

"How do you know all this?" Doris asked, shocked at the complexity of the plan. She almost wished Alan was still alive to be punished for this whole thing. Ross smiled sadly and shook his head, clearly lost in old memories, at the audacity of his kidnapper.

"Nikki filled me in on the whole plan as we flew towards the border. I sat there, held at gunpoint, duct taped to my seat, helpless to stop her. I never did understand why the bad guy always feels the need to tell their victims the whole dastardly plan before getting rid of them," Ross shook his head, as Doris and Blake snorted in agreement. He looked down at his hands as the next memory was a little harder to take. "The last thing I remember clearly was the syringe of drugs being injected into my arm and her laugh." Ross stood then, the woman's insane laughter still ringing in his nightmares to this day. He paced back and forth, his body needing the movement.

"Dear God," Blake sighed, glancing over at an equally horrified Doris. "All this time Rick thought he'd caused your death, when in fact it was Alan Spaulding and that crazy woman behind it all." She watched as Ross once again stopped pacing and sank down into the chair beside the couch. "When did you wake up again?" She watched as Ross sighed and leaned back into the comfortable armchair, thrilled that he was once again in her home, soaking up his presence. Something she never thought she'd experience again.

"It was about eight months ago, I woke up in a private convalescent hospital outside of Toronto, but I couldn't remember anything and I was a physical mess. No one knew who I was; my file records were false provided by Nikki, my so called daughter and I had amnesia. The local police did as much as they could, with no success, and finally the RCMP were

called in to figure out my true identity." Ross sighed and rubbed at his temple with his hand, a headache threatening.

"For all intents and purposes though, I was a dead man and my file didn't come up right away, especially since I was an American citizen. By the time six months had passed and my memory was starting to come back on its own, the Mountie investigators had uncovered that one of the doctors on staff had been keeping me in a drug induced coma for years, paid in very large sums of cash to do it too. When arrested, the doctor said that Nikki had told him that she was my daughter and authorized it all, paid him in cash to keep it quiet. Family issues she had said, and he needed the money so he had done as he was told. And then one day, Nikki didn't show up like usual."

"That must have been after Alan had died," Blake said, exchanging looks with Doris, both coming up with the same thought.

"With no more money coming from Alan to foot the bill for the treatment, Nikki would have nothing to pay the doctor with," Doris said putting two-and-two together.

"Exactly," Ross continued. "The doctor didn't know what else to do, so he stopped the drug treatment and tried to cover his tracks and I eventually woke up on my own. I couldn't remember a thing at first, and then over time, certain events were triggered. I dreamt of you, almost every night, not knowing who you were," Ross smiled softly at his wife, pleased when she seemed to appreciate his words. "And then when I did figure who I was and who you were to me, I couldn't figure out how to tell you."

"The hang up calls," Blake said suddenly figuring it out. "That was you?"

"Guilty as charged," Ross nodded and sighed. "I couldn't leave Canada right away and I kept trying to find the words to tell you over the phone, but eventually I decided that it was something that I needed to tell you, and the rest of my family, in person."

"Oh, God," Blake covered her eyes, all the things that needed to be done yet almost overwhelming her. "The children. We have to tell the kids you're alive." She went to stand, to find a phone, only to get a little dizzy again, falling back down to the couch.

"Whoa, Blake. Take it easy," Doris murmured, slipping her arm around her lover. "You're still a little shaky and you haven't eaten anything yet." Their forgotten Thai food still sat in the kitchen where Doris had been getting it ready before the knock on the door.

Blake froze as she realized how this might look to Ross. Glancing into his eyes, she saw the knowledge there, he had figured it out. He had always known her so well, why would that change now?

"Listen, it's late and I know it's a lot to take in. A shock to your system and your life," Ross said softly, shifting forward to take Blake's hands in his own, his thumb rubbing slow circles against the backs of them. "I just wanted to say that I still love you, and want to rebuild my life with you," He glanced over at Doris, seeing the terror lurking there, feeling it a little himself before turning his attention back to Blake.

"However, I can understand if you've moved on. I hope you could give me a second chance to have the life and love we once shared again, but I know that might take some time," Ross smiled gently, hoping for the best despite the protective arm Doris had wrapped around his wife's tiny frame. "So in the meantime, I'd like to gather Dinah and the kids and together we can explain what's happened. I've lost so much time; I need to get my life jump started again. So I think I should go now and let you regroup."

Ross stood up and headed towards the door. Doris followed him, with Blake tagging along behind her. Ross shrugged on his overcoat and grabbed his damp fedora from the closet. Digging into his coat pocket, he flicked a business card towards Blake.

"Here's where I'm staying," Ross smiled as his wife took the card and carefully slid it into her back pocket. He turned the door handle, swinging it open he turned back to look into her troubled eyes. "Don't worry, I'll be back."

With one last gaze, Ross nodded and disappeared out into the cold night.

Doris quietly shut the door behind him, not sure of Blake's state of mind. She locked everything up tight and then turned off the hall light, before following her lover into the kitchen. They hadn't even made it to the doorway before Blake was in her arms.

"Oh, God, what am I going to do?" Blake sobbed into the soft material of her lover's shirt. She felt warm arms slowly shift and envelope her.

"Hey, we'll figure it out," Doris whispered softly, pulling Blake closer, needing to feel her tucked against her safe and sound. "I promise." They stayed like that for a long moment, just soaking each other in, trying to calm their racing minds. Leaning back, Doris tucked a tuft of hair behind Blake's ear and smiled. "Would you like me to leave too? I'd understand..."

Blake reached out and placed a long finger against Doris' lips, stopping her words with the simple touch. It was the last thing she needed, to lose Doris right now too. Blake shook her head, tears threatening to fall.

"Please don't go," Blake sniffed. "Just hold me and wait for me to figure out what the hell is going on."

She sighed, relieved as she was tugged closer and held tighter still.

"I'm not going anywhere," Doris said, her frown hidden from the woman crying softly in her arms. "I promise."

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## **Act II**

The sun had risen hours before, long rays stretching out, across Springfield and its surrounds, out into the countryside, before finally kissing the small farmhouse on the outskirts of town. Bright sunshine spilled into the quiet master bedroom as time passed, inching across the pile of blankets and quilts, and warming a single foot poking out from one side.

All was calm and peaceful.

Somewhere a cell phone chimed, as a text message arrived for what seemed like the millionth time that morning, its tasteful tones normally not obtrusive or annoying.

The mound of blankets on the bed moved and shifted but no other signs of life appeared. Silence once again descended in the farmhouse master bedroom.

The sounds of birds drifted in from outside, happily chirping and tweeting as they greeted the morning with almost disgusting joy, luxuriating in the start of a new day. From the hallway outside the bedroom, the tippy tap of Shadow's nails on the wide plank floors paced back and forth, as the dog patiently waited for breakfast.

A cell phone on the other side of the bed chimed, yet another text message arriving.

A low moan rumbled, like the voice of the long dead returning. A lone hand emerged, reaching out from under the pile of blankets, stretching up and across to grasp blindly along

the nightstand to find the phone. Grabbing it, the offending item was hurled across the room where it landed with a satisfying thud on the floor. The hand disappeared back under the covers, where it was warm and cozy.

A shocked yelp was muffled by the quilts as said cold hand found a place to warm itself, followed by a sleepy giggle and a contented sigh.

Silence descended once more.

From across the room, the disembodied chime of a text message arriving defiantly rang out. Pushing the heavy quilt away from her body, Olivia Spencer's dishevelled head appeared as she sat up, squinting and blinking into the brightness of the room.

"Urgg..." Olivia grumbled, yanking a pillow from behind her and with unerring accuracy, launched it across the room, easily covering the cell phone and muffling any further noise coming from that direction. Olivia smiled which quickly turned into a huge yawn as she rubbed sleepily at her eyes, not sure she'd be able to get back to sleep. She glanced down at the silky flesh of her adorably tousled bed mate, memories from the night before flashing before her eyes and throbbing through her body.

Sleep was overrated anyway.

Grabbing the edge of the quilt, Olivia smiled mischievously as a plan of attack began to form and she dove back under the blankets. It was a little early for breakfast, but she was sure there was something around here she could find to nibble on.

Another squawk of surprise was muffled by the blankets, followed by naughty giggles and finally low, throaty moans.

So much for peace and quiet, but all was right with the world, in this little corner of it anyway.

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Emma hitched her backpack higher up on her shoulder and made her way from the Beacon shuttle bus towards the front door of her school. As much fun as the overnight camp had been, Emma had thought she was getting a bit old for it all and was glad to get back to her normal routine at school.

Dashing towards her home room, Emma skidded to a stop just outside the staff room as she noticed the door was ajar and could clearly make out a very familiar voice. Smiling excitedly, she moved closer to the door, hoping to ask Anna Li about their next martial arts lesson, but she soon realized that Miss Jennings and the good detective were having a very serious discussion.

"I'm sorry, Callie. With my father's potential return, I can't..." Anna said reaching out tentatively to put her hand on the teacher's shoulder, as if somehow the gesture would ease the tension.

"No Anna, I get it," Callie jerked her shoulder away from the tender touch, standing abruptly as she surreptitiously wiped at her eyes. "I've got to get to my class." Turning she headed for the doorway, needing to just get away to collect herself, somehow.

"Wait. Don't you see, it's not safe for you to be with me," Anna ran a hand through her long dark hair in frustration. "If something ever happened to you because of me..."

"Anna, don't you see?" Callie stopped, her head bowed as she struggled for the right words. Glancing back, her eyes filled with unshed tears. "You will never find happiness if you let the 'what ifs' scare you away. I thought you were stronger than that, I thought that we could be stronger than that together. I guess I didn't really know you very well at all, did I?" Callie ducked her head and quickly left before Anna could say anymore.

Anna's head fell forward in defeat and she felt the sting of tears biting at the back of her eyes. Her honor and an innate sense of impending danger wouldn't let those around her come to harm. This was her path to walk alone, and she couldn't allow herself the luxury of letting her guard down for even a minute. Even at the expense of her heart and dreams. So another relationship bites the dust and there is no one to blame but herself this time.

And her father.

Anna raised her head with renewed determination, anger churning fresh in her belly, mixing with the sadness and disappointment already living there. Her father would not take anything else from her, if she had anything to say about it. Tucking her hands into her pockets she headed out of the teacher's staff room, practically running right into Emma on the other side of the door.

"Was Miss Jennings crying?" Emma glanced down the hallway where the woman had disappeared, worried that her former teacher seemed very upset. She looked up into the

dark eyes of her instructor and recognized a look she'd seen before, a haunted sadness that stayed in her mother's eyes after Natalia had left them that one summer. A cold shiver ran down Emma's spine and she knew something bad was going on.

"Yeah, she probably was," Ann nodded, digging into her jacket to find her sunglasses. She glanced down at Emma's wide eyes and smiled sadly, reaching out to squeeze the girl's shoulder. "Sometimes kid, love sucks."

Sliding her sunglasses on, Anna calmly walked away down the hall and into the morning sunshine.

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Leyla wandered into the Beacon Bistro looking every bit a shell-shocked zombie. Plunking herself down at a small table with a huge sigh, she barely registered when another body dropped into the seat opposite her, sliding a steaming cup of coffee towards her.

"Oh, my God, I think I love you," Leyla said, reaching for the much needed mug and taking a drink.

"Riiiiight, don't let Greg hear you say that or he'll be planning our wedding before you know it," Ava teased, as Leyla snorted and continued to gulp down another swallow of the dark brew. "I was going to make up *'I Survived Valentine's Overnight Camp'* t-shirts, but I wasn't sure if you'd actually make it through the night." Leyla levelled a glare at her for that, but Ava merely blinked innocently back before both of them finally broke down and chuckled.

"I almost didn't." Leyla shook her head and sighed. It had been so much more work than she had expected. She'd nearly had a heart attack when she couldn't find Colin O'Neill, visions of Reva Shane tormenting her from here to eternity if anything had happened to the boy. Luckily, Colin had merely been dawdling in the bathroom and all was right with the world again. Still, it was bad enough trying to stay in Olivia's good books, without adding Reva to the juggling act.

"What? Did you have an escapee?" Ava asked, curious as she took a sip of her own coffee.

"Something like that," Leyla smiled and thought about confiding further in Ava, but wasn't sure. After all Colin was her half-brother too. She quickly changed the subject. "Great news

about Edmund Winslow, I'm sure everyone is going to sleep just a little more soundly around Springfield."

"I'm just glad it's over. I know my Dad must have been over the moon when he found out," Ava said quietly, a part of her wondering if sacrificing his happiness had been worth it in the end. With Edmund gone maybe Jeffrey could finally settle down and get his life on the right track again. She was pulled from her thoughts as her BlackBerry chimed, reminding her of her next appointment.

"Ah, no rest for the wicked I see," Leyla smirked as Ava sighed and stood.

"That clearly explains why you're so exhausted then," Ava grinned and sassed back, before heading out to her meeting. Leyla smiled and shook her head, grabbing a paper from the table beside her and starting to read up on the day's news.

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Olivia shuffled into the kitchen, pausing to admire the view. The woman who had so soundly took her last night in bed and then ravished her again this morning, despite her sneak attack attempts, was now happily humming to herself as she made breakfast.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to be a good girl and grab the newspaper?" Natalia asked, turning to meet her gaze, before dark eyes raked down the curves of Olivia's body possessively.

"Oh, I'll be a good girl and get the paper, my dear," Olivia said sweetly as she moved closer and dropped a quick kiss to Natalia's full lips. "But as you well know, when I'm bad, I'm better." Olivia waggled her eyebrows and pulled away to get the paper from the porch. She squeaked as Natalia swatted her butt and chuckled softly. If she wasn't careful, Natalia would find out just how bad she could be in the kitchen.

Olivia opened the screen door and quickly found the paper sitting in a clear plastic bag to protect it from the snow and slush still lingering on the porch. Tugging the wrapper off, she shivered in the brisk wind and quickly made her way back into the house. The warm sounds of scrambled eggs cooking and coffee perking greeted her as she tossed the wrapper into the garbage and opened the *Springfield Journal* to read the headlines before hunting for her coffee mug.



"Oh my God, Natalia!" Olivia gasped, relief and an odd sense of sadness rushed over her. Natalia put down her wooden spoon to look at her quizzically. Olivia glanced up, their eyes meeting. "It's Edmund Winslow. He's been killed."

"What?" Natalia put a hand to her mouth and leaned heavily against the counter, shocked. "I can't believe it. Is he really gone?" She pulled the *Springfield Journal* nearer, scanning the article underneath the bold headline that screamed 'Monster Found Murdered!'

"That must have been what all those damn texts were about this morning," Olivia handed the paper over to her partner and went to grab their phones from the counter where they had put them when they had come down from upstairs. Giving Natalia her phone, she began to scroll through her own inbox, frowning as the same name kept appearing. "There are a lot here from Doris."

"And I've got some from Blake," Natalia said, chewing on her bottom lip. She had a moment of concern, wondering if perhaps there was a lover's spat going on between the women. Stuffing down her irrational thoughts, she began opening some of the messages. "They all say the same thing, 'Call me as soon as you get this message'." Natalia glanced up and met Olivia's troubled gaze. "Do you think there's a problem with Blake and Doris?"

"It's probably just the news about Edmund," Olivia sighed, unsure too. As one they both began to dial their respective friends.

"Hi, it's me," Olivia said, getting through first. She frowned as Doris began babbling at her, clearly upset. "Whoa, whoa, slow down."

"Blake, calm down." Natalia murmured, having meanwhile gotten through to Blake, who was weeping inconsolably, making it equally hard to hear her. She turned to look at Olivia, who was struggling herself with Doris.

Something was definitely wrong.

"Start at the beginning," they both said at the same time, smiling at each other.

"Okay, you can skip the part about the line up at the Thai food place," Olivia said, growing more impatient with her friend by the second.

"Shaun of the Dead, that Doris always a kidder," Natalia smiled softly.

"So this has nothing to do with Edmund's death then?" Olivia asked, surprised. "No, I just thought...sorry, you're right. This is your story, go ahead."

"Yeah, I remember those weird hang up calls you've been getting," Natalia nodded, wondering what that had to do with all this.

"For God's sake, would you put me out of my misery, Doris and cut to the chase here," Olivia rolled her eyes and sighed, her patience snapping.

Natalia's mouth dropped open and she glanced over towards her partner, as Olivia's shocked eyes widened and met hers. Together, their next words fell from their lips.

"Ross is alive?"

They were going to need more coffee for this conversation, a lot more.

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Anna walked into the small coffee shop on the outskirts of town that afternoon and scanned the small room looking for her old friends. Jeffrey O'Neill was already there, sitting in his expensive suite looking every inch the powerful man he was trying so hard to be. Laughing beside him was Jonathan Randall, his comfortable plaid work shirt with rolled up sleeves and well worn jeans making him seem much more comfortable. Jeffrey waved at her as Anna made her way to their table.

"There she is, we were beginning to think you weren't going to make it," Jeffrey grinned as Anna dropped down into her chair. A coffee was already there waiting for her and she took a much needed sip of the dark brew.

"Sorry, I had some business to take care of first thing this morning," Anna sighed, not wanting to dwell on her love life again. She was already depressed enough.

"Involving the Winslow case?" Jonathan asked, taking a bite of his bagel.

"Kind of related, but not part of the case," Anna shook her head. "Anyway, I asked you both here to discuss our next steps." Jonathan glanced over at Jeffrey, who put his mug of coffee down and leaned forward. "I know my father was behind Edmund's murder, I just can't prove it yet. Eleni and her team will need time to go through the forensics, but I know my father's style and this has all the ear markings."

"That would make sense," Jeffrey leaned back, scratching at his bearded jaw in thought.

"Winslow was going off the deep end, Hung was protecting him while watching the whole operation they had spent years building starting to unravel, who knew what happened to piss off your father and then there was the perfect opportunity to remove Edmund and take over the enterprise."

"He dropped the body at my doorstep as a message. Like a dog marking his territory," Anna's eyes darkened with suppressed anger. "Taunting me to do something about it."

Jeffrey sighed. Winslow might be dead but this was far from over. The snake in the grass had just shed its skin; it was still just as dangerous. He looked at Anna and knew this had become personal between her and her father. Just like his battle with Winslow had become personal and had cost him everything in the end.

"So what's next?" Jonathan asked, shifting in his chair.

"I must stand up to my father and clean up this mess that he has brought to our family." Anna straightened her shoulders, a deadly determination settling on her narrow frame. There was only one thing to do, and she must be the one to do it and suffer the consequences. "I might need some help."

Anna stared hard at both the men, Jeffrey nodding as Jonathan sighed and ducked his head. She had her answer already.

"Anna, I'm sorry," Jonathan started. "My daughter needs me, and I need to have a normal life. I can't do that if I'm traipsing around the world looking in the shadows for your father."

"I understand," Anna nodded. She did understand and she respected Jonathan for his decision. Family was important and on some level she envied him. She wanted to have a happy normal life too, but it didn't seem to be in her cards. Jeffrey shifted in his seat and drew her attention.

"I'll put a call into some of my old spy buddies and see what I can find out. Maybe they have new information for you," Jeffrey said, pulling out an iPad from his briefcase and tapping in a note to himself. Jonathan smirked and Anna cocked an eyebrow at his new toy. "What? I can't have a few job perks?"

"It makes me wonder where my hard earned tax dollars are going to," Jonathan grinned and stood. "I've got to head back to the work site before Billy has another heart attack or Josh

has one trying to keep him under control." With a small squeeze to Anna's shoulder, he left the diner. Anna watched him go, a part of her wishing she could return to a nice normal life.

Whatever that was.

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She had made it into Company for the early shift but other than that, Blake had been working in a blur, her mind frazzled. Doris had tried to talk her into taking the day off, but she knew that keeping her hands busy would be the best course of action until her mind settled down. Tears welled in her eyes as she wiped at the counter, at how wonderful Doris was being in all this.

Blake had no idea how this would all work out, but deep down she knew someone would end up getting hurt. There would be no getting around it and that weighed heavily on her mind. She glanced up as the little bell over the door dinged and a familiar figure made her way into the small restaurant.

"Blake, are you okay?" Natalia asked coming around to the side of the bar and pulling her into a much needed hug. She nodded and slumped into the embrace like a rag doll, soaking up the comfort.

"Yes," Blake murmured into the strong shoulder, then shook her head. "No...maybe?" The redhead sniffed and pulled away, more confused than ever. "I feel like my head's about to explode actually."

Natalia sighed and hung up her coat, before sliding onto a stool at the counter and waited for her friend to continue. Blake paced back and forth behind the counter, as if not knowing what to do next. Natalia was exhausted just looking at her.

"I didn't sleep a wink all night. I tossed and turned and I think I kept Doris awake too. God, poor Doris," Blake poured Natalia a cup of coffee and topped up her own. "She's been a rock for me in all this. The last thing I want to do is hurt her. God, I'm so confused."

"Calm down, it's going to work itself out, I promise," Natalia said, reaching out to cover Blake's hand on the countertop and squeezing it in sympathy. Tears welled in Blake's eyes but she nodded her head, wanting, needing to believe it.

"Ross called me this morning, to hear my voice he said," Blake half smiled at that, remembering the tender tone to his words, something she thought she would never hear again. She pinched the bridge of her nose, the headache growing behind her eyes. "He has to go out of town for a few days, medical tests in New York with a specialist, and has asked me to arrange a family gathering next week."

"That's good," Natalia nodded and smiled encouragingly. "It gives you time to adjust and then together you can tell the rest of the family."

"I know," Blake sighed, sipping her coffee. "There is just so much to deal with, legally, medically, and financially. That doesn't even factor in all the emotions I'm feeling, that Ross is feeling and Doris. It's overwhelming."

"I know," Natalia shook her head, feeling helpless as Blake wiped at her eyes. "Just take things one step at a time, focus on the things you can change or control. Before you know it, you'll have figured out your path and be with the one you love, the one you can build your life going forward with."

"The thing is I don't want to lose either of them," Blake whispered, the truth in her heart bubbling to the surface, whether she wanted to face it or not. "God help me, Natalia, I love them both."

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The offices of Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding, Attorneys at Law, was bustling with activity. Photocopiers were copying and assembling documents, phones were ringing, and clients were laughing and talking in the waiting area. Olivia closed the heavy oak door to the renovated Victorian house and waved at the secretary before making her way up the staircase to the second floor offices.

Taking the familiar walk down the hallway, Olivia paused outside the door to Doris' office, peering in to see if she was free. She found her friend sitting there, staring out the window, lost in her thoughts. Doris' desk was covered in binders and documents, with large volumes full of legal cases and the intricacies of the law strewn about, post it notes sticking out everywhere. Someone had been busy this morning.

"Stop lurking out there like some stalker and get in here, Spencer," Doris said, turning sad eyes to stare at her, catching her peeping into the room. Olivia entered and quietly closed the door, shutting out the noises of the real world outside.

"I brought you some of Natalia's chocolate chip cookies. Emma swears Natalia has a secret ingredient in them that never fails to make her feel better," Olivia said, snagging a cookie before sliding over a baggie stuffed with them across the wide desktop and then flopping down into the comfortable chair across from her friend.

"She does," Doris smiled and pulled out a cookie too, quickly taking a bite. "It's called love."

"Yeah, I guess she does have a special ingredient in there then," Olivia smiled back and they sat in silence a moment, chewing.

"I've looked at all the legal angles I could think of. I've checked case law and spoke to the Canadian police. I don't know what else to do?" Doris stood and made her way over to the window, staring back outside, her arms crossed. Finally the redhead turned to look back at Olivia, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"How do I fight a ghost from her past, Olivia?" Doris' voice cracked and she looked away again.

Olivia was up and at her friend's side in an instant, pulling her into a much needed hug. Doris seemed to break down, falling in on herself, her heart shattering as she wept.

"Shh, it's going to be okay, I promise," Olivia murmured, slowly rocking her friend as she fell apart in her arms. "All you can do is be there for her, and if Blake loves you and it was meant to be, she'll still be there when the dust settles."

"And if she isn't?" Doris asked, her voice small and afraid, muffled against Olivia's shoulder.

"Then I have a bottle of whiskey with your name on it sitting in my cupboard and a safe place for you to fall in our home," Olivia smiled, pleased when Doris choked out a laugh. Olivia pulled back and met Doris' eyes, making sure her next words registered with her friend.

"After all, that's what family is for."

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### **Act III**

The rest of the week had passed relatively uneventfully for Springfield, with a snow storm rolling through the countryside over the weekend, forcing most people to stay home,

snuggled together indoors. Everyone had pretty much dug themselves out by Monday morning, and life was returning to normal again.

It was business as usual at the Springfield Police Department. After a busy weekend full of traffic accidents and weather related incidents, the police were able to catch their breath to some degree and turn their attention to bigger crimes again. With the news of Edmund Winslow's murder making a natural migration from the front page headlines to a small paragraph on page five of the Springfield Journal that morning had certainly helped everyone calm down.

Eleni Andros preferred it that way. It was a nice change of pace to have not have microphones shoved in her face or have reporters hounding her for a comment on the results of the autopsy. Heaven forbid she give them anything or worse, if details ended up leaking out to the public, they would never leave her alone. And while the citizens of Springfield were settling back into their everyday lives, this was still very much an open investigation.

Eleni left her office in the basement, wove her way through the sea of uniforms milling in the hallways, rounded the corner and made her way into the bullpen, heading straight for Anna's desk. The woman sat hunched over several files oblivious to the world around her, focused on her caseload. Smirking, Eleni dropped a folder at least two inches thick onto the detective's desk with a dull thud, causing the other woman to jump and grab her chest in surprise.

"Dui!" Anna swore, glaring up at her unrepentant and chuckling friend.

"I have no idea what you just said but your tone pretty much said it all," Eleni smirked before sliding into the chair across from the detective's desk. She noticed that Anna looked tired around the eyes, a tendril of concern for her settling in her gut.

"Hm, I guess I'll have to take you out to a decent Chinese restaurant so you can brush up on your Cantonese," Anna grinned as she reached out for the huge file. "Is this the autopsy report?"

"It's just the preliminary findings, actually. This is definitely a homicide; the cause of death was ligature strangulation, which was pretty obvious. The furrow on Winslow's neck matched the cord found on the body; the angle indicates a left handed killer."

"My father is left handed..." Anna murmured, pulling the file closer and starting to flip through the pages of the report.

"Neck was broken as well, so the murderer was pretty strong. And we're still running down the brand of metal string, but certainly those used for cellos are in the top running. We found some fibers and DNA under his fingernails and on his clothes that we are still running down," Eleni stifled a yawn. "And toxicology should be ready hopefully by next week. There's still that back up at the lab."

"Late night, Tiger?" Anna paused in her reading and looked up, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I was at Frank's and we-" Eleni smiled softly at the mention of the man's name. Anna frowned, a little grossed out and not needing to think about them together that way.

"Ah, my virgin ears! Stop it!!" Anna teased, covering her ears and shaking her head. "Oh, great, now I'm getting a mental picture..."

"Shut up," Eleni laughed and tossed a handy pen across the desk at her friend. "Natalia let him have Francesca again for the weekend. I was worried about him, he seems so lost now that he's not working here, but he lights right up when she's there. It does him such good to have that little girl in his world."

"And to have you in his life again, too," Anna said gently, noticing the slight flush on Eleni's cheeks. Ah, love was indeed blind. While she didn't know what Eleni saw in the big dope, she was happy for her friend. There was a stir in the office and they both looked up as Remy Boudreau dashed into the bullpen.

"The new Chief just pulled in," Remy smiled and slid behind his desk, trying to look busy. "I heard he's a real hard-ass."

"What do you know about it, Boudreau? Homer Simpson would be a hard-ass around here," Anna said, rolling her eyes at him and winking at Eleni. Just then the devil himself came through the precinct, a cardboard box in hand, the pretty duty officer escorting the new Chief to his office, busily blushing and talking his ear off.





"Oh, my," Eleni said, her eyes widening just slightly as she took in the fine specimen of a man making his way through the hallway. "He's definitely got a hard ass and other major muscle groups." She glanced over at Anna and smirked.

"If you like that sort of thing, I guess. And would someone call Sergeant Stapleton off before she scares the new Chief away with all that chatter," Anna said loud enough to catch the passing man's attention. The Sergeant frowned at her words, but a huge smile crossed the Michael Thorne's face as he turned to look into the bull pen.

"Mike Thorne, the last time I saw you, you were bleeding all over that gang in the south side like a stuck pig," Anna said, standing and making her way out from behind her desk.

"Dui nei, Li!" Mike said, sliding his box of stuff to his hip and shaking Anna's hand. "I had heard you were hiding here somewhere."

"You know me, always where the action is," Anna grinned. "Mike, this is Eleni Andros, she supervises the CSI team and that's my favorite rookie, Remy Boudreau."

"Nice to meet you all," Thorne smiled and shook hands. Stapleton coughed discreetly from the door and he cocked his head towards her and headed back that way. "I'll be around later and we can catch up, Anna." With that he was gone, trailing after the Sergeant as they headed deeper into the bowels of the precinct.

Anna went back around her desk and dropped back into her chair, smirking as she noticed Eleni's thoughtful face.

"You have a thing for Chief's, don't you?" Anna teased her friend, smiling wider as Eleni looked shocked at her words.

"Please," Eleni shook her head in denial. "Frank is the one for me."

"Well you don't have to keep Mike. You could just use and abuse him a little before settling back down with Frank." Anna took a sip from her coffee mug, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"I think he has enough women throwing themselves at him." Eleni said glancing back in the direction the man and the cute Sergeant had disappeared. "How about you, Remy?"

"Oh, he's not my type. Besides, Cyrus is the one for me." Remy fluttered his eyelashes and then laughed. Eleni snorted as Anna nearly choked on her swallow of coffee.

"I KNEW it," Anna said, ducking as Remy crumpled up a piece of paper and launched it at her head. Eleni stood to get out of the line of fire, making her way toward the doorway.

"I think things are going to get a whole lot more interesting around here," Eleni said, waving as she headed back out to her own office. "A whole lot more."

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Company had quieted down, and Frank Cooper was finally able to have a moment to relax and pour himself his second cup of coffee for the day. It was a nice routine he was falling into, working the mornings with his Pop, talking with people, keeping busy. It helped being a part of something good Marina had been involved in, that she helped to rebuild and improve. He felt closer to the good woman he wanted to remember his daughter as.

Sighing, Frank took a drink of his coffee, glancing up as Blake sank down onto the stool across from him at the counter. He took her appearance in, noticing the carefully done makeup and hair, and what looked like a new dress. More importantly though, he could tell she was upset, her eyes red and a little puffy, something no amount of makeup would be able to cover.

He grabbed the carafe of coffee and poured her a cup full, sliding it across the counter at his ex-girlfriend. Something was up and he wanted to help, if he could. Blake smiled gratefully at his offering and started adding sugar to the mug.

"Thanks, Frank," Blake said. "I'm going to need this."

"Big meeting today or something?" Frank asked as casually as he could, curiosity getting the better of him. He might not officially be a cop anymore, but it was a part of him that would never go away.

"Something like that. I can't talk about it right now, but there is a news conference later today and that should explain what's going on," Blake sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Sorry, it's a long story and I can't get into it at the moment." Frank frowned, but nodded in understanding as she sighed again and looked at her watch. "I should probably go, Doris has a lawyer she wants me to talk to and then I've got to get the kids from school at lunch. God, it's all such a mess..."

Blake's eyes welled with fresh tears and Frank came out from around the counter and pulled her into a big bear hug.

"Hey, it's going to be okay, whatever it is," Frank murmured as Blake sagged against him. "I promise."

"It's just so hard," Blake nodded though and pulled away. She looked up and gave him a watery smile. "Thanks, Frank."

"Any time," he moved away and gently squeezed her arm for more support. "Anything I can do to help?"

"No, but thank you," Blake pulled a tissue from her purse on the counter, shaking her head. Quietly wiping at her eyes and blowing her nose, she slid back onto her stool as Frank walked back around. An idea formed, and she bit her lip before leaning forward against the counter.

"Actually Frank, is it possible for you to get your hands on your sister Harley's file investigating Ross' death?" Blake wasn't sure if it would help her or not but she really needed to see who knew what about the whole thing, and why the investigation hadn't discovered that her husband had been kidnapped.

"Sure, I think so," Frank said. He knew the official case file was still in the police storage, but Harley always kept a back up. There were several boxes up in the attic at Pop's place that she kept full of files. "Let me see what I can find and I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, Frankie," Blake smiled and reached out to squeeze his hand in gratitude. "I knew I could count on you." With that she drained the coffee from her cup, tugged on her long jacket and headed out with a small wave goodbye.

Frank smiled, wiping down the counter. It was good to feel useful again for a change. Maybe things were looking up after all.

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Dinah Marler pushed open the door to the meeting room at Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding. It was familiar territory after her own case and she trusted the women at the law firm to be fair and honorable. Mallet followed her in, slipping his big hand around hers, tangling their fingers together. Neither of them were overly sure why they were there, other than Blake had said it had something to do with her father.

"Maybe she found a long lost will or something," Mallet murmured, giving Dinah's hand a quick squeeze before heading over to the table with food and refreshments. "Want anything to snack on?"

Dinah shook her head as she sat down at the long meeting table in the center of the room. At least she'd get a chance to see the kids, it seemed like forever since she'd seen them. She straightened in her chair as the door opened and in Clarissa came, almost diving into her arms.

"Dinah!" Clarissa wrapped her arms around her big sister's neck.

"Hey there, Squirt," Dinah grinned back. "I see your mom sprung you from school early." She smiled wider as her half brothers lumbered in and headed towards the refreshments. "Hi guys!" An intelligible mumbled greeting came back.

"Don't mind them," Clarissa said slipping into the chair beside her sister. "They're just grumpy because Mom wouldn't let them bring in their video games." Dinah nodded knowingly, smirking as Blake and then Doris came into the meeting room.

"If everyone could sit down please," Doris said, checking her watch. "Vanessa said she had an appointment and wouldn't be able to join us, so I guess the gang is all here."

Blake nodded, smiling softly as Doris squeezed her shoulder in silent support. Everyone took a seat and gave Blake their full attention. Doris picked up the receiver of the phone from a side table and punched an extension, speaking softly with reception as Blake began.

"Thanks for coming. I suppose we could have met at my house, but this seemed a little more appropriate somehow," Blake paced a little trying to find the right words. She knew she would have felt too vulnerable to have Ross back there so soon, better to keep this more business like for now, more neutral until she got her head, and her heart, together. Ross had agreed instantly when Doris offered her meeting rooms. Blake glanced down and then back up, meeting Dinah's eyes first and locking.

"I received some startling news that you all need to know," Blake's voice wavered a little, and Dinah knew something important was coming. "News about your father."

"Daddy's in heaven," Clarissa said, clearly confused. "You said he watches over us every day."

"I know, baby," Blake's eyes welled up with tears and she smiled. "But I have some good news. There was a mistake..." The door to the room opened a crack; Doris smiled at the person on the other side, nodding to come in.

Ross stepped inside the room, and took in the stunned faces of his family.

"Oh my God," Dinah said, shattering the silence, shock rushing through her veins and she didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

"Daddy?" Clarissa said, standing and slowly taking one step and then another.

"That's right, sweetheart, it's Daddy," Ross' voice broke as he knelt down to be closer to his youngest daughter's height. Clarissa lunged into his arms, and he held her tight, standing up and taking her with him.

Before Dinah could even move, the boys were wrapped around their father in a group hug, laughing together. Blake stood to one side, smiling and crying, Doris holding her close. She looked over at Mallet, who was smiling at her as it began to really sink in.

Her father was alive!

Dinah stood and took one step and then another towards Ross. Their eyes met and he cocked his head to one side, watching her, his eyes full of tears.

"Daddy?" Dinah whispered, tears biting at the back of her eyes too. Ross nodded at her, Clarissa slipping down from his embrace turning to smile up at her. Somehow Dinah found herself wrapped in Ross' arms, both of them laughing and crying.

"That's right, sweetheart," Ross whispered into her long blonde hair. "I'm home."

Dinah nodded and held on tighter. She knew there would be explanations and more tears to come, but for now it was enough. This moment was enough.

Their father was home.

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Tuesday morning arrived bright and early, the usual flurry of meetings and reports happening, business as usual. Natalia leaned back from her computer screen and yawned, stretching a kink out of her neck as her mind whirled at various ways to get her budget figures to work out.

She smiled as she considered an impromptu meeting with Olivia to help her with it, but didn't know if any work would actually get done.

"Someone looks like the cat that ate the canary," Leyla said from her office door.

"Something like that," Natalia smiled up at her sister, all naughty thoughts flying from her mind as she noticed that Francesca was in her sister's arms "Oh my goodness, look who's come to help me in the office." She stood and took her, Francesca giggling as she tickled her tummy.

"I knew you had meetings most of the day but thought you might like a baby break," Leyla smiled, watching as mother and daughter laughed and smiled together. "And I wanted to bring up the package that was delivered after you and Olivia had left for work this morning."

"Oh, who's it from?" Natalia hadn't even noticed the small parcel that Leyla had in her hand. Sliding back into her office chair with Francesca on her lap, Leyla slid the package to her across the desk.

"I've been sworn to secrecy," Leyla smiled and simply watched as Natalia cocked her head, more curious now than ever.

"Oh, look Francesca, it's beautiful," Natalia gasped, popping the box open and discovering a satiny pink and white dress inside with tiny black patent dress shoes. There was also a folded letter with very familiar handwriting on it. Flipping it open she began to read the chatty letter inside. "It's from your Abuela for Easter."

Natalia felt tears welling. It was such a thoughtful gift and so pretty, Francesca would look darling in the outfit. Deep down though, she wasn't even sure if she would be attending Easter mass this year. She sighed, and ran her fingers through Francesca's dark curls.

"Mom wasn't sure about the size so she sent it early," Leyla grinned, pleased at how touched Natalia was. "We can swap it out for a different size if need be, I have her receipt."

Natalia nodded and just hugged Francesca closer, more confused than ever.

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Brooke Tremain slid her sunglasses up into her short messy hair and glanced around Towers. In the corner she saw her friend Doris waving at her, her girlfriend Blake sitting beside her.

"We were beginning to think that you weren't coming," Doris grinned sliding into the booth to make room.

"Traffic was a mess coming out of Chicago this morning," Brooke groaned, before turning her sharp eyes towards the other woman in the booth. "Hi there, you must be Blake."

"Guilty as charged," Blake smiled taking the woman's hand and shaking it. "I have quite a few houses for you to look at today, once we have some lunch." She was quite glad that Doris had encouraged her friend to call about house hunting. It took her mind off of her personal life.

"That sounds great," Brooke smiled as their server arrived. Quickly scanning the menu they all ordered food and chatted lightly about the weather until their drinks arrived.

"You were saying that your second house finally sold," Doris asked, taking a sip of her white wine as Brooke nodded.

"Yes, finally," Brooke sighed and turned to Blake. "My ex took off out of the blue, clearing out our bank account. I've been able to recoup some from the sale of my two homes, but it just been horrible for me the last few months."

Blake reached out and squeezed the other woman's arm. It was oddly comforting to know that even professional therapists had crazy lives too. Mind you, husband's coming back from the dead was a little unusual, even for Springfield.

"So if you ever come across Nicole in your travels, Doris, run far and fast," Brooke took a much needed sip of her drink. Blake froze, reacting to the name of the other woman's girlfriend.

It couldn't be, could it?

"Maybe she was working on a case?" Doris said, turning to Blake to fill her in a little. "Brooke's girlfriend was a private investigator." Doris frowned as she realized what she said, their eyes meeting, the same thought crossing their minds.

"What was your girlfriend's last name?" Blake asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Lansing. Nicole Lansing," Brooke sighed, oblivious to the sigh of relief across the table. "But she often went by different names depending on the job. Usually Nikki went with Landers when she goes undercover."

Blake grew pale, a wave of nausea coming over her. Doris' mouth opened, but nothing came out.

It was the same woman that had kidnapped Ross.

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Across town, Dinah and Ross sat across from each at Company, other just smiling at each other, the pleasure of being together still overwhelming.

"The press conference went well yesterday," Dinah finally spoke again. After spending time with the family, her father had gone public with his return to his life. The police were investigating the whole sordid case and there wasn't much else for anyone to do but wait and to heal.



"Yes, I thought so," Ross cut into his salmon and took a bite. "Now I just need to get my life back on track."

Dinah nodded, knowing it wasn't going to be easy for the man to pick up where he left off. Everything had changed.

"So, you know about Blake and..." Dinah raised her eyebrows, her voice trailing off as she was reluctant to necessarily spill the beans to her father about his wife's love life.

"Doris Wolfe? Yes, I was able to figure that out pretty quickly," Ross sighed, but smiled at Dinah anyway. "I'm sure it will work itself out. I'm not giving up on Blake so easily. What we had together was special, once in a lifetime really."

Dinah took a sip of her drink and nodded, not sure if this was a contest he'd be able to win.

"No I'm more concerned about getting myself back into my life. I've had a long time to brew about everything. I'm thinking politics might be calling my name again, maybe mayor. Or take some time and get back into law," Ross leaned back in his chair, a world of possibilities stretching around him and he definitely wanted to do as much as he could, experience life again to the fullest. Life was too short and he had missed too much already.

"You might want to take a bit of a break and fully recover before you conquer the world again, Dad," Dinah grinned at the man, looking every bit like a kid in a candy store. Ross just laughed with her.

"Okay, good point. There is one thing I do need to take care of," Ross said growing serious again, anger flashing in his normally kind eyes. "Someone needs to be accountable for putting my life into limbo. If not Nikki Lansing herself, then I will see that Phillip Spaulding pays, for his own hand in all of this and for the sins of his father."

Dinah frowned, concerned at what trouble this could bring, but wisely she remained silent.

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"We had met while I was still in the military. Don't ask, don't tell was in place but there was a gung-ho homophobic JAG officer who was conducting witch hunts in our base. Nikki had been hired to follow several of us, take any incriminating photos that she could so that we could be dishonourably discharged," Brooke grimaced, taking a drink of her wine. "She wasn't beyond creating incriminating situations, so she hit on me and the rest was history.

Somewhere along the line, we fell in love. She confessed it all to me but I didn't care, I loved her. I was eventually kicked out of the military and I moved from California, where I was stationed, and I came to Chicago and we never looked back."

"Nicole had said once that she had family in California, she must have meant you," Blake said, trying to put the puzzle together.

"I had no idea about any of this, I assure you," Brooke said, her mind reeling at the devastation that her lover had caused Blake's family. "I knew Nikki was off on cases every now and then, but she never wanted to talk about them very much. She would regularly drive up to Canada to visit her old bachelor uncle, but I never suspected anything like what you've described was going on with your husband. I'm so sorry."

"Please," Blake shook her head. "It's not your fault. You apparently were manipulated by her as much, if not more, than all of us."

"Last summer things started to go bad between us. Nikki was struggling with a case she said, but I had never seen her so stressed out. I was scared for her and then she started disappearing for long periods of time. I figured she was having an affair but had no proof," Brooke swirled her wine in the glass and took another sip, the pain still fresh in her heart.

It had been a tough time and Brooke still didn't know how she had gotten through it all, other than by throwing herself into her work. So much easier to help people solve their problems than to work on her own.

"In September Nikki broke it off, disappearing to Europe somewhere and clearing out our bank account. I've been a mess ever since," Brooke shook her head, not wanting to dwell on it. "I've finally been able to get things together again, selling the houses to get some funds behind me. I thought moving to Springfield would be good for me, I could rebuild my life completely."

"Springfield is the best place for you, a fresh start," Doris said, reaching out to squeeze her friend's arm.

"When Nikki 'Landers' died in the supposed plane crash, Nikki 'Lansing' would be able to continue living her real life no problem," Blake said, still trying to figure out the timeline. "When Alan died, Nikki would have been pretty desperate. Time ran out and so did she."

The three women sat in silence a moment, shocked how one woman could hurt so many people.

"We need to tell the police all this," Brooke finally said as Blake and Doris nodded in agreement. "So much for house hunting today."

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Later that afternoon, Olivia awkwardly pushed the well worn door open to the center, carrying two big bags of donated clothing with her. She wandered down a hallway toward a small office she knew pretty well. Tapping lightly on the door, she smiled as Sister Anne looked up and grinned, waving her in.

"Olivia, how good to see you," Sister Ann stood and took one of the stuffed garbage bags from Olivia's hand.

"We've been doing some early spring cleaning and thought that we'd drop off these old clothes for your next sale." Olivia dropped the other bag on the floor next to where the good sister put her bag. Anne turned and pulled her into a big hug.

"How are you doing, my dear?" Sister Anne pulled away and offered Olivia a seat. "How is Natalia doing? I haven't seen her in weeks. The cookie committee was getting concerned when she missed their monthly meeting for the second time in a row. "

"I'm doing okay, I guess," Olivia sighed and ran a hand through her honey blonde hair. "I've been going to therapy regularly and I think its helping. Natalia though has been avoiding going to church and I'm not sure why exactly, other than she says she's not ready. She's been talking with my shrink but I don't know. I guess it's just going to take some time."

Sister Ann nodded, listening as she pulled some of the donated clothes out and began sorting them into piles. Olivia reached out and started to fold them, happy for something to do with her hands.

"I was wondering if Natalia maybe needed more than just regular counselling," Sister Anne said carefully, trying to gauge Olivia's reaction to her words.

"What do you mean?" Olivia frowned.

"Well, sometimes things happen that make you doubt yourself, doubt who you are and your relationship with God," Anne sighed, realizing that this happened more often than not for many people. "I could see how Natalia could have felt abandoned by God, having been kidnapped and kept in that horrible situation for so long."

Olivia grew still, all of it making more sense. Natalia had lost her way off her path in so many ways. No wonder she was trying to take control of things. She didn't feel like she had her normal support or guidance to help her. Natalia was like a ship without a rudder.

"So what should we do?" Olivia asked, wanting to fix it all for her partner. Sister Anne smiled gently, reaching out to squeeze her arm in sympathy.

"Natalia needs to find her own way, you cannot do it for her, or make it better," Sister Anne went back to her sorting, Olivia shifting beside her to help. "However, I could recommend a good spiritual advisor, someone who is familiar with counselling but who would also be able to help with healing the more spiritual side of her as well."

"I'd like that for her," Olivia said, meeting the kind woman's eyes. "I think Natalia would like that too."

Sister Anne smiled serenely and together they finished folding and sorting in silence.

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Farley's was hopping for a Thursday night. The pool tables were busy with quarters lining the rail, various sports events were flashing across the flat screen televisions around the bar and everyone seemed to be laughing and drinking.

Leyla sat watching the bar spin and dance around her, it was good to get out of the house and forget about life for awhile. Just have some fun. A bottle of beer dropped onto the table in front of her, a large burly man standing in front of her.

"Hey there," The man said, his smile revealing at least two teeth missing, if not more. "I thought a pretty lady like you might like a drink."

"Thanks, but I'm just waiting for my friend to arrive," Leyla said politely, hoping the guy would take the hint. No such luck.

"Is she as cute as you?" He winked and sat down in the empty chair opposite her.

"Um, HE is pretty handsome, yes," Leyla slid the bottle back across the table to the crestfallen man. "Thanks for the offer though."

"I can't leave you alone for a minute," A familiar voice said from behind her. Leyla grinned as the big man looked up and frowned, finally getting the hint.

"Can't blame a guy for tryin'," The man got up and left, taking his drink with him. Jonathan sat down in his place and grinned as Leyla sighed with relief.

"I could have taken him, you know," Leyla said as Jonathan flagged the server and indicated two drinks for them.

"Oh, I know. That huge guy wouldn't have known what hit him," Jonathan said, shaking his head. "You would have gone all south side on his head." They both laughed as their drinks arrived.

"Ava's been driving everyone nuts again at work," Leyla grumbled. "I swear she does it on purpose to make us all miserable."

"I thought you two were getting along a bit better," Jonathan sighed. He was getting fed up with hearing about the two of them bickering and arguing all the time. In fact he wasn't sure that he wanted Sarah around that as much as she had been lately.

"We are and then something happens and we go off again," Leyla took a swig of her beer, glancing up at the game playing on the television. She didn't really want to go into it again with Jonathan, he always took Ava's side and it was starting to really annoy her. Leyla decide to stuff the anger back down, ignore it like usual to keep the peace. "Let's not talk about it."

Jonathan glanced away. This wasn't working, it hadn't been for awhile.

"Leyla, I think maybe we should take a break from seeing each other," Jonathan said quietly, cringing inwardly as her dark eyes bore down on him.

"What?" Leyla ground out.

Jonathan looked down at his hands, fiddling with the label on his beer bottle, trying to find the right words. Leyla didn't give him the opportunity.

"You know what? You're right," Leyla spat before the man could get another word out. She stood, her chair scraping the floor, her temper rising quickly to the surface, masking the hurt eating at her gut. They had family in common, so this couldn't turn ugly, but she just wanted to get out of the loud bar. Right now. "A break might be just what we need to figure out if this is what we both want."

"Leyla-" Jonathan began, feeling bad, seeing the hurt in her eyes.

"No, don't," Leyla said, cutting him off and shaking her head in disbelief. "I'll see you around." She dug into her pocket and found some money, tossing it to the table to cover the cost of her drink. She didn't want anything from him right now, not even the beer. She turned and stalked out of the loud bar, the cold night air hitting her as she stepped outside.

Leyla could make her own way, by herself, just like she always did.

Why did she even think that would change now that she was in Springfield?

\*\*\*\*

Towers was busy, the bar area full of young professional types mingling and flirting over martini's. Phillip Spaulding stepped up to the bar, catching the bartender's eye and ordering a drink.

"Hey, buddy," Rick Bauer came up beside him at the bar, slapping him good naturedly on the back. "It's busy in here tonight. I wasn't sure I could make it on time. I had a broken ankle come in at the end of shift in Emergency, but Lillian shoved me out the door before something else kept me there. What a great suggestion coming here."

Phillip's drink arrived and the bartender brought a second one for Rick. Phillip frowned a little confused.

"My suggestion? You are getting forgetful. Your secretary left a message at my office that you wanted to meet," Phillip took a sip of his whiskey.

"No," Rick cocked an eyebrow and shook his head. "I think you have that backwards."

"Actually, I wanted to see the both of you," A quiet voice said behind them. "I hope you don't mind."

Phillip and Rick froze, both of them recognizing Ross Marler's voice anywhere. Slowly they turned to face the man they thought had been dead all these years. Until the news conference had blown that assumption out of the water and sent the stunning news rippling through Springfield like a shockwave.

"Oh, my God," Rick finally found his voice first. "Ross, I'm so sorry..."

"Save it, Rick. I don't want to hear it," Ross smiled, his eyes cold as ice. "It breaks my heart that either of you could have done that to me. And your father, Alan Spaulding, may he rot in hell as far as I'm concerned."

Phillip glanced down, silent as death. What could he say anyway that would make this better for any of them?

"I swear," Ross all but growled as he leaned closer, anger pouring off of him in waves. "I will do everything in my power to make you both pay for screwing up my life." He glared at both men, his point crystal clear.

Stepping back, Ross tugged at his suit jacket and straightened his tie, before nodding and disappearing from their sight.

Phillip sighed and glanced at a disheartened Rick and then waved at the bartender, ordering another round of drinks. He had a feeling they were going to need it.

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It had been a long week, Friday taking longer to get there than Olivia had realized. It was almost a relief to walk the flight of stairs up to Dr. Tremain's office. Glancing at her watch she knew she was a bit early for her regular appointment, but it she was more than happy to wait. She didn't have to head back to work afterwards, only a quick drink with Doris at Towers planned before heading home for the weekend.

Dr. Tremain's office door was open and there were voices inside, Brooke clearly finishing up with her client. A younger girl sat on the floor, leaning on the wall outside the door, patiently waiting. She glanced up as Olivia drew near, and then she recognized her, it was the little girl from the Howard murder case. Doris hadn't really said but Olivia had figured that Michael Howard had abused both mother and daughter.

The bastard.

"Hi, I'm Olivia. Do you mind if I wait with you?" Olivia smiled at the girl and came to sit beside her, wrapping her arms around her knees as she settled on the floor. They sat quietly for awhile before Olivia spoke again. "What's your name?"

"Dani," The girl said shyly, smiling. "It's short for Danica." Olivia nodded and put out her hand to shake the girl's. Dani giggled but took it, shaking it vigorously.

"That's a great name. Nice to meet you," Olivia leaned her head back against the wall, her legs starting to ache so she stretched them out in front of her. Dani copied her movements, grinning up at her. "I think you know my friend Doris Wolfe, right?"

"Sure," Dani nodded. "She's nice but a little grumpy." Olivia snorted, the girl capturing Doris' personality fairly accurately. "She made my Mom angry once, made her cry and so I had to be strong and tell her..."

"Tell her your secret?" Olivia asked quietly. Danica glanced up at her with sad eyes and nodded. "That was really brave of you. Can I tell you a secret?" Dani nodded so seriously it nearly broke Olivia's heart. "When I was a little bit older than you, I was hurt by someone I liked too. I liked him a lot."

"You were?" Dani asked, a little shocked.

"Yep," Olivia nodded. "It was somebody I thought was nice and who I could trust. He did things to me that I didn't want to do and even though I said no, he still hurt me." Olivia paused, the old pain and anguish washing over her. "Afterwards I felt so angry and sad; I thought I had done something so bad that nobody would ever love me again."

"Really?" Dani's eyes started to tear up and she wiped at them with the sleeves of her shirt, clearly feeling something similar herself. Olivia nodded, tears building up in her own eyes. She swallowed hard and tried to find her words.

"Really," Olivia whispered. "But you know what? I got through it and I met the most amazing friends and people who love me. And I realized that I didn't do anything bad at all, it was the man I trusted who did the bad things." She reached out and tapped Danica on the shoulder with a finger. "You didn't do anything bad either. Your mom loves you and your friends do too, and so does Dr. Tremain. You are so strong and brave and good, more than you even know. You'll get through all this too," Olivia leaned in, her eyes locking with Dani's. "I promise."



"Thank you," Danica sniffed and gave Olivia a big hug.

"You're welcome, sweetie," Olivia whispered back.

From the doorway came a discreet cough and they both looked up to find Brooke and Kathryn Howard smiling down at them.

"Time to go, Dani," Kathryn dabbed at her eyes a little with a tissue. Dani quickly scrambled to her feet, Olivia a little more slowly followed suit. Kathryn nodded to Olivia and then Dani waved goodbye, the two of them heading down the hall and disappearing down the stairs.

"Natalia's right, you are a big old softie inside," Brooke grinned, opening her office door wider.

"Tell anyone and I'll have to kill you," Olivia smirked, wiping the tears from her eyes as she wandered inside.

"Your secret is safe with me," Brooke chuckled and closed the door behind them.

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Leyla sat in the small bistro at the Beacon, drowning her sorrows in her mocha cappuccino. Glancing up she saw Ava talking with Greg before smiling and making her way inside.

"Hi there," Ava dropped down into the chair and cocked her head. "You seem down today."

"Yeah," Leyla took her spoon and stirred the dark drink a little, not really interested in drinking it. Not really interested in much of anything actually. "Jonathan and I had a fight and we've decided to take a break."

"Oh," Ava's eyebrows raised in surprise. "I'm sorry. The two of you seemed good together."

Leyla just shrugged a little, and sighed.

"I know a good online dating service," Ava smirked, poking Leyla with her foot under the table. Leyla snorted and shook her head. "Come on; think of how much fun we could have double dating." Leyla chuckled and tossed a napkin at her.

"Get serious, I'm not that desperate," Leyla teased back.

"Hey!" Ava frowned, but soon smiled back.

"It's probably for the best. There wasn't any spark really, you know what I mean? He was sweet, but there was something missing." Leyla sighed, taking a sip of her drink. "And to make things worse, I was hoping Jonathan could help with my plans to expand the daycare."

"What plan?" Ava asked leaning forward. "Mom didn't mention any plan to me."

"Oh, well, I hadn't broached it with her yet," Leyla shifted in her seat. "I was going talk to Lewis Construction and a few other places."

"Whoa, you can't just go hiring people without passing that on to Olivia," Ava said, her voice rising slightly. "There's a chain of command around here, y'know."

"I know that, I was just trying to show initiative," Leyla sat straighter, getting defensive. "And I wasn't hiring anybody."

"Yet," Ava shook her head and standing abruptly. "You can not follow the rules at all, can you?"

"And you're so by the book, you can't see past the end of your nose," Leyla snapped back. They glared at each other a moment longer before Ava finally snapped.

"Fine. I try to be friendly and you get all huffy," Ava shook her head. "I don't know why I even bother."

Ava turned on her heel and stalked out of the bistro. Leyla shook her head and leaned back in her chair.

"Neither do I," Leyla sighed. "Neither do I."

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"Olivia, over here!" Doris stood and waved over several heads to get her attention.

Weaving her way through the crowd gathered at Towers for after work drinks, Olivia smiled and waved at several familiar faces in passing before finally arriving at the table. She smiled as she recognized the handsome man seated across from Doris, who stood and pulled out a chair for her.

"Olivia Spencer, I'd like you to meet our new Police Chief, Mike Thorne." Doris grinned as Olivia nodded and had a seat.

"Nice to meet you, Chief." Olivia said.

"The pleasure is all mine. And call me Mike." Thorne slid back into his chair.

"Okay, Mike it is." Olivia glanced at her watch. "I can't stay long; Natalia is meeting me here after she drops Francesca and Emma with their dads."

"Good thing I already ordered you a martini then," Doris smirked as the server arrived with Olivia's drink.

"Mike was just telling me how his first week has gone so far."

"Have you settled in all right?" Olivia asked.

"It was a little hectic, with the Winslow case still fresh and trying to find my feet. Nothing that I can't handle though," Mike leaned forward, his arm sliding along the back of Olivia's chair.

"I bet," Olivia all but purred, taking a sip of her martini.

They made a striking couple actually as they teased and bantered. Doris wondered if either of them even realized that they were flirting. It seemed to come naturally to both of them, like breathing. And then almost in slow motion, the crowd seemed to almost part. Doris noticed her first, as Natalia stood watching them from across the room. She tapped Olivia with her foot to get her attention, but she was laughing at something and completely ignored the warning as Natalia approached.

Finally Mike glanced up, smiling charmingly at the petite woman glaring down at them. He shifted back in his chair, his arm moving away from the back of Olivia's.

"Natalia!" Doris said awkwardly, as Olivia turned and smiled up at her girlfriend.

"Hey, you're early," Olivia smiled completely oblivious to the annoyed look she was getting. "This is Mike, the new police chief we've heard so much about."

"Hi," Mike stood, offering his hand to her.

"Seriously? I don't think so, Mike," Natalia just stared at it and then glared at Olivia.

"What?" Olivia asked, recognizing the look and not sure what she had done this time. Mike frowned and sat back down, unsure what was going on. Doris glanced away, trying to give them some privacy. Olivia stood, moving closer to her partner, her own anger flaring. "What did I do now?"

Natalia looked up at her partner and shook her head.

"You know what, I'm just going home. If you can tear yourself away from your new friend you'll know where to find me," Natalia's voice was dangerously low. She nodded to the two others at the table and abruptly left.

Olivia ground her teeth and sank back down into her chair, silently counting to ten. This was so not her fault, she was just talking to him.

"Listen, it was nice to meet you but I need to go. Long drive back to Chicago yet tonight, and I need to pick up my daughter from her grandmother's" Mike smiled and stood. "House hunting next week, oh boy!"

Doris and Olivia chuckled and with that Mike headed out of Towers. Doris turned back to face her friend, the only indication she could see that Olivia was upset was the vein ticking in her forehead.

"I wasn't doing anything wrong," Olivia said, taking a gulp of her martini. "He was nice and funny and sweet."

"You are absolutely right," Doris agreed, nodding and sipping at her drink.

"I know I am," Olivia grumbled. "I was just talking to him, not trying to get him into bed with me."

"Right, I mean, look at him," Doris swirled the wine in her glass. "He's gorgeous, funny, and intelligent. I bet he has a big gun and knows how to use it. Why wouldn't you want to bed him?"

"Right...wait, What?" Olivia was getting confused now too, her words getting twisted.

"I mean, think about it, Spencer," Doris leaned forward, shaking her head at her friend. "Natalia probably thinks she is nothing but an emotional wreck, more trouble than she's worth, crying one minute yelling at you the next. You're stuck raising her child with that idiot Frank, and you've been doing nothing but arguing with her since she's come back. And so when she finds you here going all cougar vixen over that stunning powerful man, how do you think she'll compare herself to that?"

"That's not what..." Olivia said, her mind reeling. "Dear God, is that what this looked like?"

Doris just sipped her wine and blinked at Olivia, the answer obvious.

"I am an ass." Olivia groaned and slapped her forehead.

"Yep, pretty much an ass," Doris grinned at her friend. "But you are her piece of ass, and don't you forget it." She grinned wider at Olivia's offended expression, before nudging her towards the door. "You're welcome, now go home."

Olivia stood and shook her head. Old habits still came back to bite her even after all this time. Waving over her shoulder, she disappeared into the crowd.

"Job well done, Wolfe," Doris toasted herself with her wineglass and then took a much deserved sip. "Now if only your own love life was so easy to solve."

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## **Act IV**

Natalia had just arrived home, having driven around a bit to cool down. She stood now on the porch of the farmhouse, staring out across the fields, before hunting for her keys to go inside and get dinner started. On the highway she noticed a familiar white Nissan slow down and then pulled in, parking in its usual spot on the driveway. Olivia emerged from the car and made her way up the walkway. Short black leather jacket, clinging white tank top, well-fitting blue jeans and her natural swagger, it took Natalia's breath away and she forgot for a moment how pissed she was with the woman. Olivia stepped onto the old porch as their eyes met, her green ones troubled, sad. Natalia couldn't help being a little pleased that she seemed to be suffering too.

"You just gonna stand there freezing to death or are you coming in?" Olivia asked and waited for Natalia to move toward the screen door. Unlocking the door, she flicked on the

light and shrugged out of her jacket, dropping her keys and cell phone by the door, cautiously watching as Natalia did the same.

"I don't know about you, but I need a drink," Not waiting for a response, Olivia wandered over to where the good bottle of whiskey was hidden, in the cupboard over the fridge and pulled out a couple of glasses, tossing some ice in for good measure.

It had been a long day and she had been enjoying herself, not even thinking about what it might look like. There was a gorgeous man giving her his undivided attention and she was just teasing and joking with him. Nothing more, simply passing the time until the main event arrived.

Natalia.

All Olivia could think of the entire time was Natalia, even when she was talking with Mike. But the wounded look in Natalia's eyes today haunted her, helpless as she watched them welling with tears before she turned to leave Towers. It cut a strip from her heart knowing that she had been the cause.

Olivia sighed and poured out two glasses and turned to find Natalia silently watching her with those fathomless dark eyes. Reminding herself to breathe, she handed a glass to Natalia, their fingers touching, sliding against each other, before she pulled herself away.

"Olivia, we need to talk," Natalia knew she had to speak her mind, talk about what was bothering her, how jealous it made her to see Olivia flirting with that man. This was too important for her to just let slip through her fingers.

"About this afternoon..." Olivia looked down and swirled her whiskey over the ice in her glass. She wished she could be frozen too, so she wouldn't feel this pain.

"No, let me rephrase that. I need to talk and you need to listen." Natalia took a gulp of whiskey, enjoying the feel of it scorch its way down her throat, the burn warming her gut. Taking Olivia's drink from her hand she placed both glasses carefully on the countertop, before turning and stepping forward quickly.

Olivia didn't expect the move and suddenly found herself backed up against the counter, her body pressed between it and the seductive curves of one angry brunette. She couldn't

ignore the energy sparking between them, nor the rush of desire coursing through her veins.

"Natalia, what are you doing?" Olivia gasped as the lithe brunette moved impossibly closer, slowly tilting her head and tasting her soft lips. Long moments passed, tongues sliding against each other, slick and wet. Pausing for much needed breath, they separated, eyes locked.

"Look at me and tell me that you don't feel the way I do. Tell me that you don't want my hands on your body right now, my lips on your skin, my voice in your ear moaning your name. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me, that you don't love me." Natalia growled, wanting more, needing to hear Olivia say the words, claiming what was hers and hers alone.

Their bodies were pressed so tightly together Natalia could feel toned abs moving against her own with each breath as Olivia panted, thinking hard, trying to focus. She could see the flux of emotions flowing behind the green eyes and then she saw it. Saw the moment the walls fell, watched as Olivia broke open, surrendering and letting Natalia in.

"Please, I love you, so much, querida," Olivia whispered, unable to stop the flood of emotions. She had tried to stay indignant, upset, but Doris' words rang in her ears and she knew Natalia didn't deserve a moment of doubt. "God, Natalia you're all I think about, night and day. I can't make it stop and honestly, I don't want to make it stop. You are everything to me, our family is everything to me. When I almost lost you..."

Tears welled and slowly trickled down Olivia's flushed cheeks, and she looked away, the pain naked in her eyes.

"It fucking scared me, ok? It scared the hell out of me. And now you think that I would throw this all away for meaningless sex with some strange man? We were just talking and laughing, I didn't mean anything and I'm sorry if I hurt you." Olivia's eyes snapped back, locking with Natalia's sad dark eyes.

"Don't you trust me?"

"Oh, baby. Of course I trust you," Natalia swallowed hard and realized how hurt Olivia was too. How damaged they both were. Wiping the tears away with her thumb, her heart melted at her lover's words. She pulled Olivia into a tight embrace, the pain and anger that had

been crushing her soul since she had walked into Towers was washed away with Olivia's tears.

"Nothing worth having ever comes easy, I get that. As long as we have each other, we can work through everything else together. I promise," Olivia stroked her hand through the thick dark hair, staring hard into serious eyes. "You never have to worry about whose bed I'm going to be in at night. It's yours, now and forever."

Natalia closed her eyes and nodded, soaking in Olivia's words, believing every one of them. "I'm sorry I was jealous. With everything going on, I just was afraid you didn't ... I don't know. Want me or maybe had enough of all the drama. I'm sorry, forgive me?" Natalia smiled as Olivia silently nodded before pulling her close once again, clinging to each other for a time, needing the physical connection with each other. Nuzzling softly in the honey-blond hair, Natalia suddenly could smell cologne on Olivia and she growled softly. "What?" Olivia registered how still Natalia had become in her arms.

"Your clothes, they smell like him," Embarrassed by the jealousy that still burned through her veins like some chemical residue she couldn't wash off, Natalia paused and tried to move away. Olivia pulled her back, their eyes meeting, challenging.

"Then take them off me," Olivia rasped, watching a hunger grow in Natalia's dark eyes. And then before she knew it, Natalia's mouth was against her own, taking what belonged to her alone. Long fingers teased down her body, finding the hem of her white tank top before pulling it up over her head in one fell swoop, leaving her in just her silky bra.





"I want you, now, Olivia," Natalia panted, staring down at Olivia's half naked body, running her fingertips along twitching abs. She desperately wanted to pop open the jeans and keep exploring but she wanted to be very clear that this was what Olivia truly wanted or if they still needed to talk.

"Good," Olivia husked, putting her hand over Natalia's and moving it to cover her scantily clad breast with both their hands. "Now take what's yours."

Natalia's heart soared with the whispered plea, and took what was being freely given. She thrilled at the needy moan falling from Olivia's lips as she started to move along the woman's tempting body. She knew it wouldn't be the last one she'd hear from Olivia Spencer tonight and was cocky enough to think a scream or two could even be coaxed out.

Natalia sent a silent prayer of thanks skyward and then lost herself in Olivia.

"Natalia," Olivia's voice, low and hot against her neck, brought Natalia back to the here and now, stopping her in her tracks. She leaned back to find her lover watching her intently, licking her lips. Olivia smirked and moved to a clear spot on the counter, and hopped up, getting comfortable. "That's better. Now come here."

Natalia walked over to the woman patiently waiting for her. Stopping before the long legs, she put her hands on Olivia's knees and gently nudged them wider apart. Moving between her legs, Natalia tasted Olivia's moist lips and slowly pulled her closer, their bodies pressing tight together once more. Olivia's needy whimper hit her hard, her lower muscles clenching with desire. She sank deeper into Olivia's mouth, tongues tangling with each other. Long fingers ran through her dark hair, gently tugging Natalia's head back so Olivia could kiss a trail to her tender earlobe. She felt Olivia take it lightly between her teeth, gently sucking, nibbling then letting go.

"Something is going to boil over in here, really soon," Natalia panted hotly, her body flooding with desire, desperately needing more contact.

"Good," Olivia smirked and roughly tugged her lover's shirt from her pants, sliding warm hands along the toned belly she found underneath. Moving up her body, Natalia twitched and arched closer. Olivia cupped full breasts and circled stiff nipples through the thin bra fabric with her thumbs. "I like things hot and spicy."

Olivia was distracted by Natalia's playful chuckle for a moment. She felt as her lover's strong hands grab her leather belt and flick it open, twisting the button of her jeans and lower the zip. Leaning back slightly, she watched Natalia's finger trail seductively along the waistband of her panties, enjoying the shiver of anticipation it caused tickling across her sensitive the skin below.

Natalia paused, catching Olivia's eyes, suddenly serious.

"Don't mess up my kitchen."

Olivia lifted an eyebrow and just smirked. Natalia's eyes narrowed and raked possessively down her body. God, she wanted her.

"I've been thinking," Natalia paused, distracted as her hands moved up her partner's torso, unhooking Olivia's bra and tossing it over her shoulder.

"Always a dangerous thing," Olivia murmured along the brunette's neck, following the strong cord down to the hollow of her collarbone, licking. Natalia laughed and twisted a stiff nipple in response, much to Olivia's delight.

"I do enjoy playing in the kitchen, I think we may need to do this more often," Natalia squeezed her hand slowly down inside Olivia's underwear, the jeans adding extra pressure. "Don't you?"

"God, yes," Olivia sighed, rolling her hips, silently begging for more. The angle was a bit awkward, but Natalia was managing it quite nicely, her fingers teasing her aching clit before slipping along Olivia's wet center and filling her completely. Olivia bit her lower lip and threw her head back, moaning her approval.

"I thought you might like that plan," Natalia mumbled against full lush breasts, sucking at her erect nipples as she started rocking against Olivia, pressing deeper with each passing moment.

"I like how you think..." Olivia gasped before losing all ability to form words. Arching her back, she pushed herself wantonly against Natalia's thrusting fingers. Her body responded to her intimate touch, greedily clutching, building deep inside her, harder, faster. Natalia looked up and watched as she drove her lover to the brink. Olivia moaned loudly, before bucking hard once and again, and then coming hard.

"Shh...I've got you now," Removing her hand gently, Natalia held Olivia as she slid limp off the counter and into her arms. Leaning against Natalia, Olivia snuffled in the soft dark hair as she caught her breath.

"Bedroom?" She had felt more than heard Natalia's soft suggestion. Nodding lazily, Olivia smiled as Natalia's hand went to her fly, zipping her back up.

Bending quickly, Natalia grabbed their discarded clothes from the floor and tangled her fingers with her lover. Olivia pulled their joined hands up and kissed the back of Natalia's, following her as they headed upstairs.

"God, I love a woman who knows her way around a kitchen."

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The wind blew cold and blustery in the old Springfield cemetery, the naked tree branches jutted skyward, like boney hands clawing at the clouds. Ross stood staring down at his headstone, black as death itself. Behind him he heard footsteps approaching, the snow crunching and squeaking beneath the person's feet.

"The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Ross smiled at his bad joke and turned to see Jeffrey O'Neill's smiling face.

"That happens around here," Jeffrey smirked, his own faked death had happened not all that long ago. Ross nodded and the old friends began to walk along the snowy pathway.

"I have something you might be very interested in," Ross said, capturing Jeffrey's attention. "Phillip has everyone fooled, but I can feel it in my bones that he is still a danger to Springfield."

"Phillip?" Jeffrey shook his head in disbelief. "The madman you once knew has returned as a saint. He's even won over Olivia, which is not an easy feat, let me tell you." He ran a hand through his hair and glanced back at Ross, concerned that the man was a little obsessed with getting revenge. Not that he could blame him.

"I will find out what is going on beneath our noses and expose him for who he really is,"

Ross said quietly, anger flashing in his eyes. "I will see him behind bars before it's too late for all of us."

"What did you have in mind?" Jeffrey blinked, not sure he had ever seen Ross Marler so cold and dark before. Things really do change, and not always for the better.

"You'll be the first to know when all my information has come in," Ross smiled mirthlessly and continued walking down the frozen pathway.

The wind picked up again, and this time no one even noticed.

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Blake sat in her kitchen, watching the clock on the wall slowly tick down as she waited for Doris to arrive. It had been inevitable really, since Ross had appeared on her doorstep. As much as she loved being with Doris, and the woman had been like a rock, standing by her side as she and their family adjusted to Ross' return, she needed to make some tough decisions.

And this was going to be the hardest.

The doorbell rang, and Blake flashed back to the night her world had changed. She retraced her steps and opened the front door, smiling up at her lover, as Doris came in and dropped a tender kiss to her lips.

"Hi sweetheart," Doris said shrugging her coat off and quickly hanging it up in the closet.

Blake watched her with a breaking heart. Doris felt so at home here, like she was part of the family. And in truth she was. She nodded and led the way back into the kitchen, and poured them each a hot cup of tea.

"You're quiet tonight," Doris said, taking the hot cup and warming her hands.

"Lots going on in my head, I guess," Blake said sadly, taking a quick sip of her tea.

"So you wanted to talk. Is there news?" Doris asked, a tendril of fear coiling in her belly. Blake was quiet, too quiet and warning bells were ringing like church bells in her mind.

"Doris, you know I love you," Blake looked down at her hands, feeling the weight of her wedding ring back on her finger. She'd only just put it on for the first time in years that morning. Now it felt heavy.

"I feel a 'but' coming on," Doris said softly, glancing down and noticing the wedding ring for the first time herself, as Blake twisted it around and around. The tendril of fear was turning into nausea and her heart was suddenly in her throat. "Say what you need to say, Blake."

"I love you more than I can say, but I need some time now to be alone and think," Blake blurted it out all at once, tears threatening to overwhelm her, but she needed to finish her thought. "I'm your lover, but I am Ross' wife. I need time to see if there is anything left between us, for the kid's sake, for everyone's sake. This isn't a goodbye, it's just a wait and see. I don't know what else to do."

Doris nodded, her heart shattering. Just once she'd like someone to pick her, who wanted to be with her, to love her forever, instead of the other guy. Doris thought this time would be different, she should have known better. Straight girls always break your heart.

Every. Single. Time.

"I need to go." She stood and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Tears were threatening but Doris refused to cry in front of Blake, refused to fall apart in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Doris," Blake's voice broke, tears falling freely down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

"I know you are," Doris looked down at her beautiful girlfriend's face, and leaned forward, stealing one last kiss. Slowly pulling away, she smiled gently, devastated inside. "Goodbye, Blake."

Blake wept, listening as Doris' footsteps echoed in the foyer as she gathered her belongings and then the quiet click of the door closed behind her.

It had been the hardest thing she had ever done, not to run after her.

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Sunday morning arrived bright and early, the sun shining brightly and a warm breeze blowing across the parking lot of the small Catholic church. It wasn't so hard to believe that

spring was just around the corner on a morning like this. The parking lot was full as the white Nissan pulled in and circled a moment, before finding a space near the street.

Olivia glanced at her lover, a slight frown clouding Natalia's face. They had spent a good hour the night before discussing this, that maybe they could attend the service as a family, if that was helpful. Natalia had quietly snuggled close, seeming to be at peace about the whole thing. Now however she seemed to be having her doubts again. In the backseat Emma had already unbuckled her belt and had popped the door open, ready to go, while Francesca burred happily in her booster seat patiently waiting.

"Come on, beautiful, before lightning strikes us," Olivia grinned, pleased to see a matching one appear on Natalia's face, dimples at full force. Olivia busied herself with getting Francesca out of the back, as Emma grabbed Natalia's hand and pulled her towards the stairs.

"I'm not sure..." Natalia hesitated as they all reached the top of the stairs, pausing at the large oak doors. Olivia moved closer looking into the troubled eyes of her lover.

"Trust me then. You can do this." Olivia smiled softly, shifting Francesca to her other hip before reaching out to take Natalia's hand, squeezing it gently. Emma came around on the other side and smiled up at Natalia, taking her other hand. "Have faith in you and me, in the strength of our family. We can do this."

"Come on, Ma," Emma reached out with her other hand and turned the handle, pushing the oak door open, the sound of the organ playing inside growing louder. She glanced up at Natalia and smiled. "Together we can do anything."

Out of the mouths of babes.

Natalia's eyes welled with unshed tears. Taking a great shuddering breath, she nodded and followed her family inside.

Ready or not, it was time to come home.

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