



Act I

The winds continued to howl outside and the cold draft that seeped through under the door caused her to shiver as she tried to keep warm despite the meager blankets covering her. The persistent coughing made her chest ache, the increased wheezing worrying her. Sometimes, she wondered, if it was better when she was left alone in the darkened room, left to the machinations of her dreams and hallucinations, or when her kidnapper reappeared to provide her with food and the occasional beating. When the door swung open, the figure briskly moved toward her, grabbing her arm until she staggered to a standing position.

"Move!"

"Where are you taking me?" Natalia croaked out.

"What does it matter? You won't be around long enough to enjoy it," the voice replied, as she harshly pushed her captor in front of her.

Reaching the top of the lighthouse, Marina shoved her through the hatch causing her balance to be off and she caught her wrist on the steel rail.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Natalia asked as she cradled her wrist against her chest.

"Paybacks are a bitch. Or maybe that's just me," Marina responded, thrusting the other woman forward. "You destroyed my family, so now it's time for you and Olivia to pay." Looking down, she could see the police and fire rescue vehicles approaching. "They're too late," Marina yelled over the winds as she pushed Natalia over the side of the building.

"Nooooooo!" Natalia woke with a scream, jolted awake from a free-fall. She was hyperventilating and sweat covered her body. She didn't know if it was better or worse now that she knew Marina had been the one to kidnap and torture her; at least when the nightmares came now she could identify the perpetrator, but it never made them easier to deal with. She thought she'd been doing better in that the nightmares weren't as frequent, and most of them didn't result in her waking from them. As far as she knew, she'd been able to keep them to herself without worrying Olivia about them.

"Natalia?" Olivia inquired and sighed as she put a gentle hand on her partner's arm. "Cariño, another nightmare?"

"Yeah," Natalia replied. She hated waking Olivia up, especially when there was nothing her partner could really do to help, but now that she was, Natalia laid her hand on Olivia's and pulled it around her. Looking over at the clock, she saw that it was still early morning, so there was still lots of time for sleep, if only she could settle long enough without sliding back into the nightmare. She had to do something, talk to someone, to get these nightmares to stop. Sighing, she lay her head back on the pillow and snuggled back against her partner, taking comfort in the familiar loving presence. Some days she felt like she didn't deserve to be loved, and it scared her. But this time, she wasn't running away. She wanted to face it, fight against it. She just didn't know how to fight against the demons that plagued her sleep.

When the morning finally dawned, Natalia had still not slept much, but she had coped enough in her life with less sleep when Rafe was sick; she could get by...with plenty of caffeine. Sliding herself out of the bed without disturbing Olivia, she headed to the bathroom to get ready for the day. When she emerged a short time later, she quickly got dressed and went downstairs to start breakfast; first order of business was to get the coffee pot started. Firing up the laptop that had been left on the kitchen table, she opened up the calendar for herself and Olivia. She got the bowls, plates and cutlery ready then went up to dress Francesca, and then wake up Emma and Olivia.

As she headed into the master bedroom, she smiled noting that Olivia was in much the same position in the bed as her daughter had been - sprawled across the center on her belly, arms splayed outward from her body. However, unlike her morning kiss to Emma on the forehead to get her awake and moving, her wake up call for Olivia, once she was able to get her to roll over, was a solid kiss to the older woman's mouth.

"Mmmmm. Good morning?" Olivia asked, sedation still adding a coarseness to her speech.

"That it is." Natalia smiled and kissed her again. With everything else in her universe still feeling unstable, the comfort and familiarity of being with Olivia gave her some semblance of order.

Taking a deep breath, Olivia smiled. "You started the coffee. I think I love you."

"You think?" Natalia laughed. Somethings never changed. Olivia's need of the dark brew first thing in the morning was one of them. "I might have to go turn it off until you know for sure."

Reaching an arm out, Olivia swatted Natalia on the rear end as she passed her on the way to the bathroom. With a mock glare, she responded, "Don't you dare."

"See you downstairs," Natalia called out as she headed back to the kitchen, by way of checking on Emma again to make sure she was up.

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"What's on the agenda for today?" Olivia asked as she was fully dressed and carrying Francesca on her hip. She placed their youngest in her booster seat and pushed the chair closer to the table before heading to the counter to get her coffee. Looking behind her, she noticed a still drowsy but fully dressed Emma entering the room.

"You have an appointment with Leyla at 10 o'clock about the day care. She'd like to expand it if possible because they're getting a lot of local regulars, in addition to accommodating Beacon guest requirements. At noon there are a few potential vendors coming in to compete for the wine supplier tender we put in the paper last week. I've got a meeting with General Staff this morning at 11. With spring arriving and the upcoming summer season, I want to get employee vacation times sorted, address sick time, and some health and safety stuff that has come up in my absence."

Olivia smiled, impressed with how much her partner was delving back into work, but at the same time she worried about Natalia pushing herself too hard. She tread carefully in asking, "Has Ava sent you the up-to-date paperwork on the Health and Safety Committee? I know she met with them a couple weeks ago."

Natalia took a deep breath as she focused on putting Francesca's cereal in front of her, and getting Emma's breakfast ready. She knew Olivia meant well with her easing back into work, but she was more than capable of taking back all of her responsibilities at the hotel. It

was still occasionally a sticking point, though. "Yes. She sent me an email with the issues they addressed."

"Mom, can I go play with Clarissa after school today? Mrs. Marler said it would be fine."

"I'll check with Blake, but that should be fine," Olivia mentioned, but realized the other woman probably needed the normality of two preteen girls compared to the craziness of having her husband come back from the supposed dead.

They finished their breakfast and got Emma sorted on the bus to school before getting themselves to the Beacon to start their day.

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"Nooo!" Beth woke with a scream, her heart racing as she fought her way back from a nightmare of Bradley Raines raping her. She thought she had put all that behind her more than twenty years ago, but their recent case involving a young woman who'd been raped by her husband had brought the memories back in startling clarity. Beth lay back in the bed and cuddled into Phillip, who just wrapped his arms around her. Once she settled comfortably, she remembered doing much the same thing after the rape when she and Phillip had fled Springfield and headed to New York City.

Her husband had always had a huge protective instinct when it came to his family and those he loved. While his actions weren't exactly good, or even legal at times, his intent to protect was strong. She placed a kiss on his chest. She could understand Kathryn wanting to protect her daughter no matter the costs, from her husband, and she could only hope that those costs would not involve a prison term.

Sensing his wife's slowed breathing and settling, he knew that the nightmares had resurfaced. He also knew she sometimes found it hard to talk to him about it. Placing a kiss against her temple, he whispered, "Why don't you call your mother when you wake up in the morning?"

Beth nodded and curled in to him tighter to try and get a couple more hours of sleep as it would probably be another very long day ahead of her.

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Lillian sat in her kitchen, drinking a cup of tea. She picked up the *Springfield Journal* to

browse through the morning news before she had to go into work for a day shift. Her heart sunk as she read in the top news article that the jury for the Kathryn Howard case would be chosen today. It all seemed so wrong. How could this woman seriously be charged with murder when she was defending herself and her daughter?

She could remember vividly the night the young woman came into the emergency department, clothes looking very worn and nearly hanging off her small frame. She looked so young to see and be part of such horrifying acts of violence. Unfortunately, in her job, she had seen victims of domestic violence on more than one occasion. More times than she would ever be comfortable with. It never made it any easier. She sighed. She knew this case was affecting Beth because Bradley had raped her. While she had initially denied it and lashed out at her daughter, she found she could never really forgive herself for letting him hurt Beth.

With a heavy heart, Lillian put the paper down, no longer interested in reading any further. Then she put away her breakfast dishes and headed back upstairs to get ready for the day. She'd call Beth later.

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Mornings at Company were always busy with pre-work folks coming in to get their caffeine and breakfast, or those taking a break from work and retirees. Frank had come in to help since one of the usual staff had taken a sick day to care for a family member. The regular breakfast crowd had just settled their bills and were taking off for the day, when Blake Marler arrived with Ross in tow.

"Morning, Frankie," Blake called over to her friend. She headed for a booth and tossed her coat on the bench.

"Morning Blake, Ross," Frank responded, bringing over a pot of coffee. "You folks want anything more?"

"I need it black and coming frequently," Blake replied as Frank poured the coffee into a mug.

"That kind of day?" he asked as he took in Ross's assessment of him. He'd frequently had to work with the other man when he'd been a detective and Ross the DA. How times had changed.

"You have no idea." Blake left the comment as is. She couldn't believe how turned inside out her life was. She noted Frank's acknowledging her need for privacy and his retreat to the counter, though she could see his furtive glances their way on occasion.

"You actually dated him, Blake?" Ross asked, somewhat amused. "A second time?"

"He's a friend. We thought we might make it work, but it wasn't really going anywhere," Blake responded, her unease growing. As much as having Ross back in her life was beyond her wildest dreams, the reality was much different. They were both different from where they had been. He had been the love of her life, and father of her children. But there were things she could tell he was keeping secret from her.

Looking at his wife over the rim of his glasses, he commented with some derision, "So now you're batting for the other team? Doris Wolfe?" He'd fought in court with the woman on many occasions, and didn't really think much of her. "Do you screw her, too? Or does she take the reigns?"

"Do you have to be so crude?" Blake asked, annoyed. "We became friends as we were both friends of Olivia and Natalia. That gradually developed into something more as we got closer. We fell in love with each other." Blake sighed. Right now, she was missing Doris's quiet comfort and support. "What is it you want, Ross?"

"I want my family back, intact," Ross responded, blithely. "The kids are happy I'm back. Why can't you be?"

"Don't lay that responsibility on me." Blake started. "You disappeared for a few years, making me believe that you were dead. Did you really think that I would just welcome you back with open arms just because you're not? You didn't think that life would go on or that I'd rather go through life mourning you forever, without someone to share my life with?" Blake moved to stand up. "Because if you did think that, then you never really knew me." Blake grabbed her purse and coat and turned to leave when she felt a hand on her arm. She turned back and leveled a glare at Ross. "I have to go to work."

Blake was ready to storm out of Company when Doris arrived, travel coffee mug in hand. Nearly bumping into the other woman, Blake stopped suddenly and sighed, clearly needing a comforting hug, but not feeling right about asking for one from the other woman since she had told her she needed space to figure out what she wanted.

Disregarding her own feelings as she saw how upset the other woman was, Doris put her mug on the counter and wrapped her arms around Blake, taking whatever comfort she could, and providing that for the redhead. In her peripheral vision, she spotted Ross looking over at them, and she took the opportunity to hold Blake just a little bit longer, pressing a kiss against her temple as she pulled back.

"Are you okay?" Doris asked gently, as she brushed Blake's cheek with her thumb.

"Not really." Blake paused. Then looking into Doris's eyes, she smiled. "Can we talk later? I've got to get to work."

"Sure. Give me a call or a text when you want to meet. I have to be in court most of today because of jury selection. If I'm not available, just leave me a message."

Pulling Doris back into a hug, Blake whispered, "Thank you," before she headed out the door.

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The brisk morning air was pleasant as the new Springfield police chief, Michael Thorne took a run around the small lake, stretching out his muscles as he did so. The area was pretty, he noticed, picking up his pace. Certainly a nice place he could raise his daughter out of the crime-ridden area of Chicago he was coming from. As he finished his second round about the lake, he headed back up the road toward Company.

Coming to a stop in front of the restaurant, he took a few good, deep breaths and stretches to lower his heart rate. And, to his amusement, he noticed a few good glances at his physique from passing customers. The day was unseasonably warmer than usual, and he'd taken advantage of that by going with a fit pair of running shorts and a tank top with a light sleeveless hooded sweatshirt over it. With a final stretch, he turned towards the restaurant door and opened it. The small family-run restaurant was well run and clean, and that impressed the chief as he headed to the counter, where he spotted the mayor.

"Good morning, Madame Mayor," Mike smiled and reached out a hand.

"Coming in to charm the natives?" Doris returned the smile as she spotted a few heads turn in his direction as he entered.

"Is it working?" Mike asked, tongue in cheek, as he laughed.

"Perhaps," Doris responded with a smirk at noticing Dinah Marler's prolonged glance. "There are certainly a number of women and probably a couple of men who'd be interested."

Mike Thorne outright laughed at the Mayor's comment. He was certainly secure enough in his own identity to not be put off by the suggestion of men being interested in him. He was certainly aware of attracting the women, but for the time being his focus was on his job and taking care of his daughter. Any hint of a romance were nowhere on his radar. From the looks of things, there were quite a few management issues he was going to have to address first at work, so he needed to head off soon. "I just came in to get a bottle of water...or two."

"You don't keep one with you when you run?" Doris asked amusedly.

Putting his arms out from his side, he quipped with a grin, "Where would I put it?"

Responding to his charm, Doris laughed. "Okay, there is that. Anyway, I just came in for coffee and then I'm back to the office briefly and then to the courts. See you later, Chief Thorne." Holding up her refilled travel mug, she got off her chair and headed out the door.

The kitchen door opened and Buzz Cooper came out with a couple of orders in his hands. He smiled as he saw the new police chief. He thought he might feel a bit of resentment since Frank had been put on administrative leave, but he realized that Frank's concentration hadn't been on his job for some time, and his son needed a break from the police department. And he had to admit the new police chief was a nice guy who was coming to a new town to do a job. He had a family to care of just like many people here did, and deserved a chance to prove himself like anyone else.

Depositing the orders with the customers in the corner booth, he turned back to the Chief as he returned to the bar. "How are you, Chief Thorne? Can I get you anything?"

"Just call me Michael, or Mike. I don't stand on ceremony if I'm not on duty. Can I get a couple bottles of water?"

"Sure thing." Buzz turned to grab the bottles from the fridge unit under the bar. "On the house," he added as he noticed Michael pull out a couple bills from his sweatshirt. He noticed the chief's hesitation. "Really. Good will."



"Thank you," Michael held out a hand. "Anyway, I've got to get going. See you later, Mr. Cooper." He took the three single bills he was going to use to pay for the water and put them into the tip bowl and smiled.

"Buzz," the older man responded, grasping the Chief's hand. "Have a good day."

After the chief left, an irritated Frank returned to the bar from the back of the restaurant. "Did you have to be so nice to him, Pop?"

"What, Frank?" Buzz asked, askance at Frank's apparent attitude.

"He's taken my job at the police department and you're being all chummy with him."

Buzz just shook his head. Some days Frank was like his old self, charming and pleasant to be around. Other days, the slightest thing set him off. "Frank, just let it go. He has a job to do, just like most people in this town."

"I just don't get why you have to be so nice to him." Frank was sulking at the bar, taking a drink of coffee.

"In case you've forgotten, this is a restaurant and we're in the hospitality business. You'd do well to remember that it pays to be nice to the customers. It keeps them coming back."

"Fine. But did you have to give him freebies?"

"Frank, if you're going to be like this, just go take a walk. Come back when you're a little more pleasant to be around." Buzz looked around the restaurant at the few customers that remained that were already served. He could manage for a little while.

"Fine. Later, Pop." Frank grabbed his jacket and left through the rear door.

Buzz let out a sigh and slumped down on one of the stools. He looked up as he saw a figure standing on the other side of the bar.

"You need a hand?" Dinah asked, taking pity on the older man, seeing how much of a jerk Frank had been.

"You?" Buzz asked surprised. "Not that I'm complaining, but hasn't it been a while since you did any waitressing? Besides, don't you have to work for WSPR?"

"Buzz, really?" Dinah looked amused rather than insulted. "Mom's got that all looked after for today."

"All right. But just until Frank gets back and Lynn can come in," Buzz said as he headed back into the kitchen to prepare for the lunchtime rush. The soups and chili had been cooking for much of the morning.

Dinah's voice stopped him. "Buzz. You really need to hire some more staff. Do you want me to keep an ear out for potentials, unofficially?"

"Sure. Something needs to happen." Truthfully, business had been hurting again, despite many of his regulars still coming in, and he had been reluctant to hire any more staff, with Frank taking on more responsibilities at the restaurant. But even that had been sporadic. With Lynn and Blake taking on a few extra shifts, it had helped, but he needed more back ups. Grateful that Dinah was temporarily filling in until Frank returned, he smiled. "Meals on the house today for you."

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The Beacon day care center, Little Lights, was at full capacity today with many of the usual children, and five children from parents staying at the hotel. It had reached the point where Leyla had had to turn a couple of customers away and direct them to another business, which she was loathe to do because sometimes it was hard to get them back. However, it did lend credence to the expansion plan she had developed for the center. She'd also investigated other space in the hotel on the lower levels, unused boardrooms that could be converted to meet her needs. She'd taught herself some basic design techniques to draw up blueprints as part of her business plan and Jonathan had given her some idea of labor and construction costs. She had even prepared a projected income expenses statement. Overall, she thought her plan was solid.

Nervously, Leyla fidgeted with her coffee mug as her meeting with Olivia was in half an hour. As solid as her plan was, Olivia was very protective of her hotel, and very diligent. So, her plan had to be very comprehensive for Olivia to agree to it. It hadn't helped matters that Ava since hearing about the venture, had been attempting to sabotage her confidence. Some days she and Ava had been on good terms, almost like sisters, but other days were just maddening. Realistically though, Ava didn't have any strong objections where Leyla couldn't argue her point. When the other woman had blasted her the previous week for contacting Jonathan about contracting costs, it had been just one more annoyance.

Stuck in her own thoughts, Leyla hadn't realized that Sarah had come up to her and tugged on her sleeve. Distracted as she was, she spilt her coffee on some of her presentation paperwork. Inwardly cursing that she'd have to go print it off again, she turned to the young girl. "Hey, Sarah, what can I do for you?"

"Can you help me with my puzzle?" Sarah asked, holding up her puzzle block with missing pieces.

"Okay. Can you just give me a minute? I have to go print something off, then I'll be right back." When Sarah nodded, Leyla directed the girl back to the table where she had been playing. Turning her attention back to her laptop, she pulled up the file she needed and requested a couple copies, one in the main office and another to Natalia's printer. She'd pick them up on the way to her meeting with Olivia. Moving over to Sarah, she figured she'd help the girl to take her mind off her own nervousness. Two puzzles done, she looked up to find Ava standing in the door way with one of the copies of the paperwork she had printed off.

"Needing these?" Ava handed them over to Leyla, watching as the other woman raised her eyebrows at the red marks and notations in the margins. "I made a few adjustments."

Leyla counted to ten so she wouldn't say something she'd regret. "Gee, thanks. Oh, by the way, Katie just went out for half an hour up to the office supply store. While I'm meeting with Olivia, you're in charge of Little Lights. Try not to screw it up and lose someone." Leyla smiled at Ava before heading towards the elevator banks.

While she waited for Olivia to see her, she took a glance at the notations Ava made and quirked her head. She hated to admit it, but Ava had made a couple valid suggestions that would save some funding. When Olivia opened the door, Leyla took a deep breath and entered the older woman's office.

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Smiling, Leyla returned to Little Lights, pleased with how well her presentation went with Olivia. The older woman had been receptive to the ideas she proposed.

"Did you bring up my suggestions?" Ava asked curiously.

"Yes, I did. And I credited them to you." Leyla headed over to her coffee maker in the corner of her office area. Gesturing to the unit, she asked Ava if she wanted some coffee but then put the carafe back, wincing at the burned smell of the coffee. "On second thought, you

might want to hold off on the coffee. You made some valid points regarding the funding sources."

"I picked up a lot of things working with Mom the past few years."

"Really?" Leyla said, with an amused deadpan response. "That might be interesting."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ava asked, not sure how to take the comment.

"It's nothing," Leyla said. "All I meant was that you had some good ideas with regarding the business plan. Just curious to know what else you picked up from your mother."

"Her sarcastic wit and her ability to detect bullshit a mile away," Ava quipped.

"Not bad. Must come in handy in this line of work."

"You have no idea the kinds of crap some of the guests try to pull to save a few dollars. They sometimes forget we have imprints of their credit cards; we get them in the end." Ava smiled.

"You're a devious woman, Ava Peralta."

"Why thank you." Ava picked up her purse and turned to leave. "Call me later and we'll go for coffee. I've got a few more ideas for you."

"Thanks," Leyla responded a little surprised. She was never quite sure how to take Ava sometimes; one moment she was friendly with her and at other times antagonistic. But if she was willing to put in some ideas for the day care center that would help, Leyla wasn't going to toss that resource away. Shaking her head in bemusement as Ava headed out of the center, Leyla went back to the paperwork in front of her on the desk, and her charges in the care of one of her employees.

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Getting in her car, Ava had planned to make a run over to Towers to meet with a potential vendor when she flicked on the local news on the radio.

"In other news, District Attorney Jeffrey O'Neill is confident when the jury is selected today that he will be able to proceed in obtaining a conviction in the wrongful death of Michael

Howard, stating the physical evidence is strong enough to have charged his wife, Kathryn, of second degree murder."

Ava flicked the switch on the stereo, looking for anything other than a local radio station. The less she had to hear of her father's involvement in that case, the better. Given his own history, she figured he'd want to stay well away from cases that involved rape, lest that history become public knowledge, but she wouldn't wish that on her mother. It was hard enough on Olivia when she had had to divulge that information to a select few a couple of years ago when Edmund had been threatening the family. Even Reva kept quiet on that information.

Distracted and frustrated, she hadn't realized she had been speeding until a police cruiser pulled came up alongside her to get her to pull over. Great, just what I needed right now. Sighing, Ava pulled along the curb and retrieved her license and registration; no need to make this longer than it had to be.

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On her way over to Towers to meet with Margie, Anna sighed, wondering what kind of evening this was going to be. The profiles on Greg's Rainbow Connections dating service were fairly detailed, and the woman seemed pretty intelligent, teaching economics and business administration at the local community college. Another teacher. She regretted dumping Callie, a woman she had grown to really like, but she didn't want to be responsible for the other woman being hurt by Hung Li. She loved Callie's quiet humor, her laugh and her gentle nature. Shaking her head, Anna realized that going into a relatively blind date with another woman while thinking of her most recent girlfriend was probably not the best idea.

Pulling into the parking lot, she got out and smoothed down her deep blue shirt, making sure everything was tucked in where it should be. With a here-goes-nothing attitude, Anna entered the restaurant and spotted her date sitting at the bar.

Extending her hand, she introduced herself, "Hi, Margie, I'm Anna Li."

The other woman smiled at her and took her hand. "Why don't we go get our seats and we can talk for a bit."

"Sounds good," Anna said and caught the glance of a waiter, who guided them to a table.

"Can I get you ladies something to drink first?" the young man asked them.

"I'd like a glass of the Australian Shiraz, please?" Anna asked, thinking if she was going to have alcohol, it better be a good red wine. The least it would do would take care of the nerves and slight unease she seemed to be having.

"I'll have another gin and tonic," Margie responded to the waiter with a smile.

"The chef's special tonight is the mushroom stuffed veal loin, which comes with steamed vegetables and butternut squash, and the soup is a minestrone. I'll be right back with your drinks, ladies, and to take your food orders."

"Mmm. That sounds good," Anna said, suddenly realizing she hadn't eaten much that day, aside from a regular ingestion of coffee and a sandwich from the vending machine at the office. The appetizing aromas of food made her stomach grumble loudly and she looked down then back at her date with an enigmatic grin.

They chatted about various goings on about Springfield, movies and television shows and preferred music as their drinks had been served and they ordered their meals and Anna was actually pleasantly surprised that she was having a good time. They'd been conversing about Margie's work at the community college when the other woman asked about her job.

"I'm a detective with the Springfield Police Department," Anna replied, though that information had been in her profile.

"That sounds interesting, especially in this town," Margie responded, with a wry grin. For a relatively medium sized town, Springfield did seem to have its share of criminal activity.

"Definitely. Keeps us busy at any rate." Anna took a sip of her wine and shook her head. She'd only been in Springfield a couple of years, but it seemed much longer. When she looked back at her date she paused, unsure of the near leering smile on the other woman's face as she looked her over.

Leaning forward, Margie questioned with an amused grin, "So, have you had to handcuff anyone lately, in a less than professional manner?"

Anna almost dropped her glass of wine on the table as the shock registered inwardly, though her professional mask kept it from showing on her face. Making sure that she hadn't

spilled the wine, Anna rested the glass back on the table. A long ingrained sense of manners kept her calm as she replied, "Excuse me?"

"Don't pretend you haven't thought handcuffing a woman hasn't turned you on, just a little," Margie continued, not realizing that she'd pushed her limits too far. "Or a lot."

Taking a deep breath, and placing her napkin back up on the table, Anna stood up and politely smiled at the other woman. "This date is over. Have a good night." She turned and headed in the direction of their waiter and caught his attention. A few short words later wherein she paid for her meal to take with her, and she stood at the bar waiting for the take-away container. She sighed, wondering what the hell had happened. The date had actually been going fairly well, and then from out of nowhere the inappropriate comments on handcuffs; it seemed like such a B-movie cliché.

Taking her phone out of her jacket pocket, she turned it back on and noticed a few messages. A few were about work but they could be answered later. And one from Doris: *How's the date?* Anna smirked. When the waiter returned with her food order, she asked him for a bottle of the Shiraz she'd ordered earlier and a second order of the special. She didn't mind waiting for the extra meal to share with a friend. Smiling, Anna looked back to her phone and quickly typed in: *Tell you in a few minutes. Bringing wine & food. Home or office?*

It didn't take long for Doris's response: *20 minutes. My place. Dish, and not just the food.*

Anna laughed. She'd been happy that she and Doris had managed to stay friends, especially as they shared some friends and occasionally had to work together. Though it had been rather awkward at first, they'd managed to forge a good friendship out of the deal. Looking back at the table she'd come from, she noticed the other woman had left the restaurant. Inwardly she realized she was probably not the dating service type of client; she much preferred to meet women face to face through friends or networking of the old fashioned way.

*Done. See you soon.*

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More than ready to let off some steam, Doris had been glad when Anna had texted with the offer of food and wine. She loved Blake but with Ross back, she'd said she'd give the woman some space to figure out what she wanted. It hurt like a son of a bitch; she'd been down this

road before and had been heartbroken. It had been fine...*well, no, it hadn't*...this morning when she'd seen Blake and Ross at Company, but when she'd seen that Blake was upset, her first instinct had been to give her a comforting hug, Ross be damned.

Following that had been the jury selection for the Kathryn Howard trial. She and Mel had had to deal with Jeffrey's grandstanding with regard to more than half of their approvals. Damn bastard was trying to drag this out at least until tomorrow afternoon. They'd successfully won most of the challenges, but there were still a few more jurors to choose.

Doris was at the door when the bell rang, welcoming Anna in. Giving the other woman a kiss to her cheek, she directed Anna into the kitchen.

"Are you okay?" Anna asked, seeing the worn out look on her friend's face.

"It's just been a shit kind of day." Heading over to the cup board, Doris pulled down a couple wine glasses and some plates. "Grab some knives and forks. I'll heat this up and take it into the living room."

"Got it." Retrieving the items in question and a corkscrew, Anna turned and opened the bottle of wine while they waited for the food to heat. "Anything you can talk about?"

"I saw Blake and Ross this morning at Company," Doris said, sighing as she put the food in the microwave to heat up.

"Ouch. Sorry."

"No, it wasn't as bad as that. He must have said something to piss her off, as she was about ready to tear out of there and ran right into me. God, I just didn't want to let go once I hugged her. What am I doing, Anna?" Doris picked up her wine glass and took a long swallow of the red wine, not bothering to let the beverage breathe as she normally would.

"Trying to protect your heart; I get that. But it hurts when you love someone that much." Anna placed a hand on Doris's arm. "You'll just have to trust whatever happens, you have friends around you to help you. You aren't alone."

"Thanks." Doris smiled though she still had a hard time believing it at that moment.

"Besides," Anna added. "It certainly has to be better than my night. Blind date set up through Greg's dating service."



"Oh, no." Doris tried not to smirk. "You signed up for that?"

"I figured, what the hell. I'm not looking for anything long term at this point, especially with my father in the wind. Edmund is dead, but I don't trust my father not to screw up my life and that of my friends, so..."

"So that was the reason for the break up with Callie?" Doris inquired, curious as she hadn't seen them around together lately.

"Yeah. Damn, it hurt doing that to her. I really liked Callie."

"So, back to this date disaster - start talking," Doris quipped, ready for anything other than thinking about Blake, Ross, or the upcoming trial. She grabbed the heated food and brought it into the living room, laying it on the coffee table.

Anna smiled following her. "That is going to take a fair bit more wine."

"Oh, I have plenty if we run out of this." Doris started digging into her food, not realizing how hungry she had been. "Start talking, Li."

"Well, it started off pretty decently; she was pretty easy to talk to. And then the inevitable questions came up about what we did for work. Get this, she's another teacher. Anyway, once she found out I was a cop, she got this lascivious smirk on her face that creeped me out." Anna gave an involuntary shiver at the memory of the evening. "She actually asked if I enjoyed handcuffing other women."

"Yikes." Doris smiled, then curiously asked, "So, what did you say?"

"Date's over. Then I texted you and here I am."

"Well, kick back and relax. Time spent with friends." Doris picked up the remote for the stereo and put it on shuffle. As the evening grew late, the food dispersed and plates put away, she and Anna had finished the bottle of wine. The conversation was comfortable and not under any pressure or anticipation and Doris realized that she was perhaps more at ease and comfortable with Anna than she should have any right to be.

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## **Act II**

As she pulled up to Brooke's office, Olivia sat in the car thinking about the morning. Their usual routine was relatively quiet as Olivia and Natalia had prepared for the day. Emma got herself ready for school and Natalia got Francesca ready for Little Lights. She'd actually had a decent sleep as Natalia's nightmares hadn't bothered her to the extent that they woke her or disturbed her. When she'd asked Natalia about the nightmares, the younger woman had replied that she'd been so tired that she hadn't dreamt much. Olivia hated to press her on the issue as Natalia had occasionally snapped at her that she could deal with it on her own. She wanted to be able to help her and solve the problem for her, but as Brooke and Sister Anne had suggested, she needed to allow Natalia to deal with it on her own timetable; not to rush it. It went against Olivia's own tendency to bulldoze through problems. Meet them head on was her mantra.

Up until recent years, Olivia wasn't particularly fond of cognitive therapy, occasionally... *Okay, sometimes more than just occasionally if I'm truly honest...* she used alcohol as a way of not dealing with the pain. She was sure at times she could have been borderline alcoholic, and it scared her. Thinking back to when Natalia had disappeared without word a couple years earlier, she couldn't imagine that she would have ever gotten behind the wheel, intoxicated, with Emma in the car. Thankfully, Christina had stopped her from driving like that. They'd tried to go to Dr. Boudreau after Jane had been killed with mixed results. It had helped Olivia and to some degree with Natalia, but hadn't really worked for Emma. Emma didn't find it of any use, so Olivia had been glad that Anna had stepped in to provide an outlet for her anger and confusion.

Taking a deep breath, Olivia exited the car and headed into Brooke's office. The outer office area was lined with shelves of books and magazines, and a wraparound desk wherein Brooke's office manager sat. Olivia acknowledged the older woman's nod and she took a seat waiting for her appointment. It wasn't long before Brooke's office door opened and Olivia looked up to see Kathryn Howard emerge.

"Hello, Kathryn."

"Hello, Ms. Spencer," the younger woman replied a little shyly.

"Olivia, please," she responded, holding her hand out. "How are you doing?"

"Better, I guess. Nervous. The trial starts this week. Ms. Wolfe says they're supposed to finish the jury selection today."

"That's good. I know your lawyers. They're damn good at what they do," Olivia said with a smile.

Rubbing her hands up and down on her arms to ward off the chill of the room, Kathryn said wearily, "I hope so. I just don't want anything bad to happen to Dani because of me."

"I know. If anything happened to my girls, I would fight like hell to protect them as best as I can." Olivia smiled at her to try to provide some reassurance. "Dani's in the third grade now?" When she noted the young woman's nod, Olivia continued, "Is she involved in anything after school?"

"No, she usually just comes right home on the bus after school. I can't afford to put her into any activities right now, especially since I'm not working at the moment." Kathryn sighed, shrugging. "People don't exactly want to hire someone who is facing a criminal trial for manslaughter."

Olivia sighed. Kathryn had been lucky enough that Mel and Doris had fought hard for their client to be released with an ankle monitor so that she could look after her daughter. "Are you okay for housing?" Olivia asked. If necessary, she was prepared to pay Buzz to put her up in the boarding house. It would give Buzz some extra income and would save Kathryn and her daughter some money. She felt connected to this young woman in a way that she rarely did. Kathryn seemed quite bright but probably hadn't been given much opportunity to thrive. There but for the grace of God, that may well have been her as a young woman had she not fought for everything she could. It could have been Natalia. It was giving her some ideas, which she'd run through with Brooke in a few minutes.

Brooke came out of her office and placed her hand gently on the young woman's arm. "Kathryn, you can make another appointment with me once you know what timetable you have with the trial. I have Wednesday afternoons open and Friday mornings. Otherwise I'm in my office or covering for Dr. Boudreau at Cedars. Just let me know, okay?"

"Thank you, Doctor," Kathryn spoke quietly.

"Kathryn, are you free for lunch?" Olivia asked, not wanting to be presumptuous. Just because Kathryn wasn't working didn't mean that hadn't had planned.

"Not like I have much I can do right now," she said defeatedly and shrugged. "I have to meet with my lawyers this afternoon, but that's it."

"Okay. Would you mind if I treated you to lunch at Company?" Olivia asked her.

"I can pay for my own," Kathryn responded defensively.

"I know you can. That's not the point. This is someone offering without expectations."

After several moments, Kathryn nodded. "Okay."

Olivia nodded and pulled out a pen and paper from her purse. After writing for a second, she handed Kathryn the slip of paper. "This is my cell number. I'll be here an hour, but after that I'll be at The Beacon. Call me."

"Thank you, Ms. Spencer...Olivia." Kathryn picked up her purse and left the office.

Looking up at Brooke, Olivia grinned wryly. "Guess it's my turn now." Waiting for Brooke to step aside, she entered ahead of the psychologist and took her usual seat.

"That was nice of you," Brooke started with her head tilted toward the outer office.

"You know, any one of us could be in her shoes at any given time, given the circumstances. God help Phillip if he had hurt Emma when he took her all those years ago, I could have and may well have killed him to protect her. It was only Natalia stopping me a couple years ago that I didn't go after him with a gun when he first returned to Springfield. I was so terrified he'd hurt her again or take her away from us." Olivia sighed deeply and ran a somewhat shaky hand through her hair.

"That's true. Life is full of opportunities but sometimes you've got to be the one to open the door or kick it down in order to take advantage of it."

Olivia smirked. "That sounds an awful lot like something Sister Anne told me a couple of years ago, *'When God closes one door, he sometimes shuts it on your foot, to get your attention.'*"

Brooke laughed. "That sounds about right. Smart woman."

"She is. She continues to surprise me. She's definitely not what I expected for a nun." Olivia pursed her lips a moment. "I think Natalia is going to be seeing her some more for counseling sessions. We went to church for Easter Sunday Mass. She was nervous, but I think it gave her more comfort than she was expecting it to at this point."

"You know, Natalia will figure out what direction and help she needs, whether that's me, Sister Anne, or someone else. We can help support her and that's what's important - that she feel comfortable in her search for peace of mind." Brooke opened up a notebook to jot something down before looking back at Olivia. "How are you doing, Olivia?"

"Good days, bad days. More or less the same. Emma's been acting out more, being a little more snappy. Frankly, she's turning more into a mini-me than I'm comfortable with," Olivia said on a sigh. "I guess it's part of being a preteen, wanting to grow up faster, pushing the limits. I remember doing the same thing with my own mother. And it's sort of fine with me; I just remind her of the limitations and consequences. But it hurts me when she fights with Natalia, especially when I know it's not out of malice or spite."

"Olivia, your whole family has been through the damn ringer for the past couple of years. Being a preteen can be chaotic at the best of times. She's not a little girl anymore but not quite grown up yet either. Throw in the threats your family has faced and it's not surprising. But how she deals with it is what's important." Remembering that the young girl had been seeing Detective Li for t'ai chi as a life focus and the process working for Emma, she continued, "Is Emma still going to see Anna for t'ai chi?"

"Yes, she's going this afternoon." Olivia was reminded of her schedule, and realizing that she needed to ask Natalia if she could pick Emma up after her session with Anna. Looking over at Brooke, she got thinking again about her idea of helping Kathryn. Sighing, she asked, "I know you can't give me any information with regards to what you've said to Kathryn Howard, but I was wondering if you thought my helping her would do her any good." "What exactly are you thinking about?" Brooke asked a little apprehensively, as the young woman was in a delicate predicament.

"I get the feeling from what she said this morning, that she's probably close to being evicted, especially since she doesn't have any income. That puts her and Dani in an even worse situation with the risk of Child Protective Services taking Dani out of the home; it's got to terrify her." Olivia sighed. "You've gotten to know me since we started these sessions and I'd like to fix things if I can. I have the means in which to help, no strings attached."

"Why do you want to?" Brooke asked, trying to see the reasons behind the Olivia's gesture.

"Sort of what we'd discussed earlier - that it could have been any one of us. Like her, I know who raped me. I was a lot younger than she is now when it happened. I know what it's like raising a daughter as a single mother; trying to do everything in my power to protect my family." Olivia put her head down for a moment, to gather her thoughts. "I was just thinking that I could find out from Buzz Cooper if the boarding house has a room or two that Kathryn and her daughter could stay in. I'll pick up the tab for the time being until she can get her feet back on the ground. She could use the money that she would spend on rent and use it for Dani if she won't use it on herself."

Brooke sat for a few moments thinking about the options Olivia presented. "Look, it can't hurt to find out the information. Just keep it quiet for the time being. I'd like to address it with her at the next session and see how comfortable she is with that option. I know you want to help, but like with Natalia, sometimes people need to feel like their lives are in their own hands. Despite being married, Kathryn's primarily raised Dani on her own, especially the past few years. In an abusive situation. That gives her perhaps more of a need to be in control of her life and that of her daughter."

"I get that. I do." Taking a deep breath, Olivia realized that her desire to help would have to be temporarily postponed. But she could find out the information. Looking down at her watch, she realized that she had a little bit of time before her next appointment at The Beacon. She'd make a run to Company before meeting with Kathryn there, and she'd broach the topic with Buzz. "Okay, saving the world is on hold...for now." Before long, Olivia's session with Brooke was done for the day and she booked an appointment for the following week.

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As Natalia rounded the hallways of St. Margaret's Mission, she could hear the loud haunting sound of Adele's "Turning Tables" coming from one of the offices. Figuring it was one of the young women that often came by to help sort the donated clothing, she missed seeing the nun's head as it popped over the top of the desk, soon to be followed by a thump of a box being tossed on to said desk.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where Sister Anne is?" Natalia asked after a rap on the door frame failed to catch the woman's attention.

"Oh, sorry," Sister Anne said as she stood up and quickly moved to the stereo to turn down the volume. "Hey, Natalia. I got caught up in spring cleaning my office and I forgot you were coming by."

"No worries," Natalia responded with a smile as she pointed to a mark on the Sister's face. "Ummm, you've got a black smudge of ink on your cheek."

"Do I? Oh crap. Sharpie. I was labeling boxes when some hair strands fell out of the ponytail. Didn't put the marker down as I pushed the hair back."

"It looks kind of adorable on you," Natalia said before she thought about it, then blushed furiously, and apologized profusely.

Trying not to laugh at the other woman's sudden discomfiture, Sister Anne waved her off that it didn't bother her. "How bad is it? The mark that is?"

"Just a small one on your cheek."

"Ah well. I'll just have to remember to wash it off before the soup kitchen opens." Sister Anne looked around her office. "Um, do you mind giving me a hand as we talk? Trying to pack up this office as I'm moving to another bigger office and this one will be used for additional storage for donated items. I've got to get some office supply containers to put the clothing in by sizes to make them easier to find."

"Sure, not a problem." Natalia took off her sweater and draped it on Sister Anne's coat hook as she prepared to dig into the packing. "Any specific order you want this stuff in?"

"I don't really know. I was just kind of packing the books by category, but beyond that, no, no order," Sister Anne said, lightly biting down on her lip. They continued working together for several minutes with the stereo playing.

"I didn't figure you for an Adele fan," Natalia grinned.

"It's cathartic," Sister Anne replied. Thinking about seeing Natalia at the Easter Mass, she smiled. "I see you joined us for the Mass. Will you be returning regularly again?"

Putting her head down, Natalia sighed. "I don't know, to be honest. It was nice to be there, the familiarity of the ritual. Having my family with me. It reminded me of when I was a girl going to Easter Mass with my parents." Natalia smiled at the recent reconnection with her

mother and realized that she hadn't yet mentioned it to Sister Anne. "My Mom has been back in touch with me again. Since..."

"Since the kidnapping," Sister Anne gave voice to Natalia's horrifying experience. She noticed the other woman nodding, barely managing to keep from crying. Quietly, she reached over and pulled her friend into a hug. As she pulled back, she noticed the tiredness in Natalia's face that the other woman tried to mask. "How are you sleeping?"

"Not well. The nightmares keep coming. I thought they'd start to go away after a while as I started to deal with it." Natalia wiped the tears that slipped down her cheeks.

"Are you? Dealing with it?" Sister Anne asked her directly.

Sighing, Natalia said, "I don't know. I try, I guess. I mostly try to keep my head down and work."

"Do you think that maybe that's avoidance you're working on?" the nun asked. "It's not really working for you though, is it?"

Natalia shook her head. A buzz of her cell phone surprised her and she picked it out of her pocket and found a text from Olivia: "Can you pick Emma up from Anna's? She's got her t'ai chi session after school today." Typing a quick response, she looked back up at Sister Anne and the boxes that had already been filled.

Seeing that Natalia still looked a little troubled, Sister Anne said, "Look, I'm pretty busy today getting this sorted out, but I should be free tomorrow morning if you want to come by. Nothing on the agenda tomorrow, so we'll have plenty of time to talk."

"Thank you, Anne," Natalia responded, holding out her hand. "I'll bring some tea for us to share."

"Sounds like a plan. Take care, Natalia, and say hello to Olivia and the girls for me."

"Don't forget the ink smudge," Natalia quipped playfully, her earlier discomfiture forgotten.

"Go on." Sister Anne said, laughing as she pivoted to turn up the volume dial on the stereo in her office.

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Entering the diner, Olivia was startled to see Dinah serving coffee at Company as she looked around for Buzz.

"Hiya, Ollie, whatchya lookin for?" Dinah responded cheerfully as she came up behind Olivia with a carafe in her hand.

Opening up her coffee mug and sniffing the interior, Olivia wondered if someone had slipped her some interesting drugs by mistake as she looked back up at Dinah. Shaking her head, she decided she wasn't hallucinating. "Dinah Marler, what exactly are you doing working here?"

Heading behind the bar, Dinah picked up a towel and wiped down the counter. "Buzz needed some help. I didn't have anything specific on the agenda for today. Plus, there's the free food and all."

"I didn't think Buzz was that desperate." Olivia handed over her coffee mug for a full cup of the steaming beverage. "Speaking of, is he around?"

"Ha ha. He's in the kitchen, to answer your question," Dinah responded. "Aside from the coffee and the acerbic wit, what else do you need?"

"I'm meeting Kathryn Howard here for lunch, but I wanted to check on a few things with Buzz first."

"Sounds interesting. He should be finished doing the prep work on lunch meals so just go on in," Dinah said to her before turning her attention to the mayor who had just walked in the door.

"What the hell?" Doris commented on seeing Dinah behind the bar.

"Do I have something stuck in my teeth or what? No, you are not hallucinating; I am actually here serving customers," Dinah said, somewhat exasperated.

"Hey, Olivia, check to see if there's anyone been poisoned yet," Doris called out to her friend before the other woman headed into the kitchen.

Olivia's laugh carried back through the doors.

"Now that's a sound I like to hear," Buzz said as he turned away from the large pot on the stove.

"Hey, Buzz," Olivia responded, giving the older man a kiss on the cheek. "I have a question or two for you."

"Go on."

"Do you have a room or two available up in the boarding house?" Olivia inquired.

"Yeah, actually, we don't have anyone there at the moment. Have anyone in mind?"

"Would you be okay with having a woman and her daughter stay there...on my bill?" Olivia asked tentatively.

"Yes, that's not a problem."

"You haven't asked who it is yet," Olivia added. "Kathryn Howard and her eight-year old daughter, Dani. I'm thinking she might be close to an eviction from her apartment, and she will need somewhere to live." Sighing. "It's not definite and I have to talk it over with her lawyers and her counselor before we approach her, and even then it's up to her. But I wanted to get some leg work done here."

"And what nice legs they are," Buzz joked. "But in all seriousness, yes. That's not a problem. If it all works out for her, too, with the trial, she's got employment here if she wants it. It will

be near full time hours, since Blake is mostly occupied with other work and we're down a couple of staff. Thankfully, Dinah is picking up the slack."

"About that? What a shock to the system to come in to see her playing waitress. Any poisonings yet?" Olivia grinned.

"Nope, but tips are up," Buzz smirked. "Pays to have a pretty face at the bar instead of this bearded mug."

Olivia laughed. "Still as handsome as ever."

"You might want to think about wearing your glasses more often."

"Look, I'm treating Kathryn to lunch here today. Don't mention anything just yet, please," Olivia added then laughed as Buzz mimicked drawing a zipper across his mouth. "Thanks for the coffee. I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Later," Buzz turned and picked up the long wooden spoon to stir the chili as Olivia headed back into the main part of the restaurant.

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As she walked back into Company an hour later, Olivia felt lighter with a renewed sense of purpose and mused to herself with a grin. If anyone would have told her a few years ago that she'd be helping people - other than family - for altruistic reasons, she would have laughed. Loving Natalia changed her in the best kind of way.

There were a few projects at the Beacon to keep her busy. She was pleasantly surprised by the detail that Leyla had put into her plan for expanding the day care, and it would certainly provide some additional revenue to offset the expansion costs. The conference planning and group bookings were starting to come in for the summer months and business was looking good.

Coming up to the bar, she ordered a cup of coffee as she waited for Kathryn to arrive. The minutes seemed to stretch on but she took her newly acquired iPad out of her purse to peruse some emails and some news articles she bookmarked to read later, and with a smile checking her Twitterfeed, both personal and business feeds. Initially, she'd been surprised by putting the Beacon on Twitter, but after the first couple times she'd offered room deals via the service, she'd had repeat customers since; so once a week, the hotel's marketing

division began to offer a room special, or specific services at deals and it had started to become a success. She'd gotten so distracted that she hadn't noticed Kathryn's arrival.

"Sorry, I'm late," Kathryn apologized.

Olivia smiled. "Not a problem. Just checking a few things to pass the time." Standing up, Olivia directed them to a booth along one side of the restaurant that had been cleared for them. Putting the device away, she motioned for Kathryn to take the seat opposite her as she sat down. "Why don't you take a look at the menu and decide. Anything you want."

Kathryn hesitated, conflicted. From her experience, most people didn't offer something unless they had expectations of some kind of repayment, usually something that cost her dearly. Looking up at the woman in front of her with a mixture of curiosity and nervousness, she said, "To be fair, Ms. Spencer, I don't really know you. Why are you doing this for me?"

Olivia nodded. "That's a fair question. One which I'll answer once we have our meals," Olivia smiled genuinely. "By the way, Buzz makes an awesome shepherd's pie."

Kathryn looked at her curiously. "Buzz?"

"Buzz Cooper, owner of this fine establishment and chief cook," Olivia smiled. "Lovely man. He makes all the meals from scratch."

When Dinah passed behind them with a tray of food, Kathryn could smell the scents of the food and she smiled. "Well, if it tastes as good as that smells, it would be fabulous."

The woman in question returned to their table to take their orders. "What can I get you ladies?" Dinah asked.

"Could I get a glass of lemonade and some of whatever you just brought to that table over?"

Grinning, Dinah said, "That would be the homemade minestrone soup and toasted garlic bread."

"That sounds great, thank you," Kathryn responded.

"Olivia?" Dinah prompted.

"Can I have the shepherd's pie and some more coffee?" Olivia smiled up at her old friend.

"Sure thing. I'll be right back with your drinks." Dinah headed off to the kitchen with the orders, then returned to the bar to pour the drinks.

Looking over at Ms. Spencer, Kathryn nodded in Dinah's direction. "Uhhmm, isn't she a reporter with WSPR?" The woman looked familiar to Kathryn, inasmuch as she'd occasionally seen her on the local station's news.

Olivia laughed. "That she is. A woman of multiple talents."

"You seem to know a lot of people in this town," Kathryn commented.

"I've lived here for about 14 years, give or take. I own the Beacon Hotel, so I've housed quite a few locals in the hotel over the years," Olivia said with an amused smile, thinking of some of her more memorable guests and long-term 'residents'.

"Do you have family here?" Kathryn asked out of curiosity. If she was going to let this woman pay for her meal, she wanted to know a bit more about her.

Smiling, Olivia nodded. "My partner, Natalia, and our children. Three daughters and a son. Though Rafe is currently in the Army." Olivia noticed Kathryn's surprise at her comment. "Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem," Kathryn quickly responded. "Just not something I expected."

"Which? The fact that my partner is a woman, or that between the two of us we have four children?"

"The former, I guess," Kathryn responded. "I don't know why, though."

"That's okay. It took Natalia and I a while to get used to being together once we figured out what we were feeling for each other. Trust me, half the town was surprised when the two of us got together."

"You weren't always...?" Kathryn enquired curiously.

"No." Olivia smiled. "Natalia is the first woman I've loved." Sighing, Olivia realized that she wouldn't normally go through her personal life with an almost complete stranger, however,

she had the sense from the other woman that she didn't trust easily. Looking up at Kathryn she continued, "You asked me why I offered to take you to lunch. I don't know if Dani mentioned to you after she and I had talked outside the therapist's office a couple weeks ago, but there was something bad that happened to me as a teenager. We spoke about being hurt by people we knew."

"Ms. Spencer?"

"This is something I don't share with many people. In fact there are only a handful of people who know. When I was sixteen years old, I left my house against my mother's adamant wishes and went to a party at a diplomat's residence. The drinks were spiked with alcohol and I was dancing with this older boy. When I was feeling the effects of the alcohol, he led me upstairs to one of the bedrooms. And he raped me, as I could not give any consent in the intoxicated state I was in." Olivia stopped as she heard the soft gasp of her dinner companion. "A few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant. Though I ended up giving Ava up for adoption at the time, that night forever changed my life."

"How...how did you cope?" Kathryn asked quietly after taking a large gulp of air. Her hands shook mildly against the table.

"I did because I had to. My mother died around the same time, so I was responsible for raising my siblings. I couldn't look after a baby, too." Olivia closed her eyes as a wash of memories flooded her thoughts and nearly threatened to overwhelm her. So quiet for several minutes that she barely registered Kathryn's hand upon her arm.

"I'm sorry," Kathryn replied softly, starting to understand a little about why Olivia offered her lunch, even though their circumstances were quite different. She shivered. The other woman's violent act had been a one-time only event, though by no means would that lessen the after effects, but her own violent history had been through much of the duration of her marriage.

"Thanks. But I'm okay now, mostly. That was nearly thirty years ago," Olivia said, somewhat surprised by that admission. "My daughter, Ava, is now twenty-eight."

"You're in touch with her?" Kathryn asked curiously.

"Oh, yes. Long story short, she came to Springfield several years ago. After a misunderstanding, I realized that she was my daughter." *Misunderstanding, my ass. Damn near almost had her killed before I found out Ava was my daughter.* "I look at her now and I

realize that something good came out of something bad, and I can't regret having her. She's a part of me, like Emma. And my extended family of Natalia, Rafe, and Francesca. I'd protect them all with everything I have."

Olivia looked over and noticed the tears forming along Kathryn's eyelids, spilling over onto her cheeks. She noted the brusqueness with which the younger woman tried to brush the tears away and suddenly Olivia had the overwhelming need to give the younger woman a hug. Sliding off her own bench seat, she maneuvered herself over to wrap her arms around Kathryn, allowing the other woman to cry as much as she needed. *Thank you, Natalia*, Olivia whispered in appreciation for her partner's gentle influence on her life.

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When the doorbell of Anna's apartment rang, the detective had just finished talking with Emma about some new techniques to practice, slowly going through the maneuvers and stretches with her.

"I'll get it; it'll be Ma picking me up," Emma said as she quickly headed to the door. She'd been pleased with the progress she'd made with Anna in the past week, as the moves were getting more detailed, and it took her some more effort. She wanted to be able to do some more but the detective had told her there would be lots of time to practice and get used to these moves first. "Hey, Emma," Natalia said, as the girl opened the door. "Everything all set?"

"Yep. Learned some new stuff today," Emma replied happily. "I just need to get my backpack."

"Okay, go on." Natalia smiled at her daughter. There was so much going on with Emma these days, with school, activities, and some new school friends that she and Olivia didn't know all that well. The latter worried her, though she'd talk with Olivia about it later.

"Oh, hey, Natalia," Anna said as she came into the living room of her apartment. "How are you doing?"

"Good as can be expected, I guess." Natalia shrugged.

Noting the tension in the other woman's shoulders and her overall tiredness, Anna worried about her friend; her observation skills came into effect off the job as well. Taking a quick

glance back at her workout room to see if Emma was in hearing distance, she quietly asked Natalia if she was still having nightmares.

"How?" Natalia responded, before realizing that Olivia must have said something. Her face darkened, annoyed with Olivia for sharing that information.

"No, not Olivia," Anna responded quickly, correctly surmising that Natalia might think that. "You underwent a horrible situation, Natalia. That has to have turned your world upside down. It's not surprising that you've been having nightmares."

"How come they won't go away?" Natalia asked plaintively.

"They will, gradually." Hearing Emma returning, Anna held up her hand. As the girl entered the room, Anna smiled at her. "You did well today, Emma. Keep up the good work."

Emma beamed at the praise, though she knew something serious had been talked about by the way the adults hushed as she came into the room. "Thank you, Detective Li.

"You're welcome, Emma. Now, I have to get back to the police station and get some work done, so I will see you next week, okay Em?" Anna smiled as the girl nodded her head vigorously. Looking up at Natalia, she spoke. "Call me later, okay?"

"Thanks, Anna," Natalia responded, even though she still felt a little off. She didn't want to worry Olivia or her family, but her nightmares continued, and sometimes just the simplest things in the daytime, a sight or sound put her right back into the frame of mind that she was in the lighthouse. It worried her that she didn't know how to fix her problems; she just wanted it fixed sooner rather than later.

Sitting in the car, waiting for Emma to buckle her seat belt she waited for the inevitable questions from her bright daughter.

"Ma? Are you okay?"

"I'm just tired, Emma. I didn't sleep well last night." Putting the car into drive, she headed home. Remembering her promise to Emma to tell her the truth as much as she could, she added, "I had bad dreams again."

"About the lighthouse?" Emma asked. She hated seeing her Ma sad.



"Yes, sweetie." Natalia hoped Emma would drop the line of questions so she asked her about the new moves that Anna had mentioned. Sensing the girl wouldn't be deterred for long, she kept up the questions until they arrived at the house. After determining that Emma would go up and do her homework, Natalia settled her purse and shoulder pack down on the kitchen table and sat down with a heavy sigh. She'd call Anna as soon as she started getting supper ready.

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### **Act III**

Supper prepared and in the oven, Natalia went up and checked on Emma and she smiled as she noted her working on her math homework. The furrow in Emma's brow deepened as she sought to work out a problem. On the floor next to her, Shadow lay quietly, her head resting on her paws.

Knocking on the doorframe to get the girl's attention, Natalia asked, "Hey, Em, do you need any help?"

"I think I'm okay, for now."

"Well, if you need any help, I'm downstairs, and your Mom will be home in about 45 minutes."

"Thanks, Ma," Emma responded with a smile.

Natalia pulled the door part way and headed back downstairs, thinking about what Anna said. She wondered if the other woman had dealt much with nightmares and what she did that might help to get rid of them. Grabbing the portable phone from its dock, she returned to the kitchen and sat down, her fingers hovering over the buttons for a moment before she dialled the detective's work number.

"Detective Li. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Anna, this is Natalia. I'm sorry to bother you at work, but do you have a few minutes to talk?"

*"Sure. Just a second and I'll close my office door. It's not busy at the moment and I'm just waiting on some paperwork to be delivered."* After a moment, the detective returned to her phone. *"What can I help you with?"*

"I don't really know for sure. You said something when we talked earlier that made me think you've dealt with having recurrent nightmares." Natalia sighed, trying to order her thoughts into words.

*"I have,"* Anna said sighing as she wondered how to best approach her next statement. *"Natalia, what you went through was something extraordinary that no one should have to go through. Have you heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?"*

"Yes, Brooke mentioned that once during one of our sessions." Natalia sunk further down in the chair as she remembered what Brooke had told her. The first time she'd ever thought of PTSD was that it happened to police, firefighters, and soldiers as that was most of what she'd seen reported in the news. *How could that apply to me?* Natalia wondered.

*"You've been having persistent nightmares, correct?"* Anna started, starting a line of questioning to confirm Natalia's experiences. While she was not a medical doctor, she'd seen a few incidences of PTSD in colleagues over the years and in civilians enough to be able to spot some of the symptoms. *"Recently, you've been having waking 'nightmares' during the daytime, triggered by sounds and smells? Something that will throw you back to seeing and feeling what it was like being held captivity? Your heart starts racing and breathing rate increases?"*

"Yes," Natalia said, relieved as she took a deep breath, realizing the other woman understood where she was coming from. It was one thing to hear it from the psychologist, but perhaps hearing it from a friend somehow made it more real. But at the same time, didn't make it any easier to deal with.

*"Natalia, are these flashbacks giving you panic attacks? Making you avoid certain places or situations? You often find you get angry about things that wouldn't normally bother you?"* There was quiet for a few moments, so Anna thought perhaps Natalia had been thinking about times when she got anxious or angry without really knowing why she felt that way. She knew her friend needed to see a counsellor as she wasn't trained in this area. It was one thing to be aware of symptoms and the processes of PTSD, but she wasn't trained to treat it from a psychological perspective.

"I guess. I haven't really thought about it too much." Natalia felt distressed.

*"Let me guess, you'd rather it just go away on its own?" Anna surmised.*

"Kinda?" Natalia responded with a half-hearted laugh.

*"Unfortunately, it doesn't quite work that way." Anna sighed. "I'm going to recommend you see a counsellor, whether that be Brooke, Dr. Boudreau, or someone else that's qualified to treat the psychological aspect of it. What I can help you with is finding an outlet for the frustration and anger, much like I have with Emma."*

"I don't know," Natalia said, hesitating. "I've never been much for martial arts and fighting."

*"You do realize that most of what I do with Emma is more training in t'ai chi, a martial art that's primarily used for its physical and mental benefits?" Anna smiled, knowing that Natalia knew this but understanding that the other woman's hesitation was probably in using it for her own health. With a self-deprecating laugh, she added, "Though sometimes, a good round with a punching bag can do wonders for frustration."*

"I don't know," Natalia repeated.

*"Look, no promises, but why don't you come over this evening and I'll show you a few things. You can make up your mind after that."*

Looking out the kitchen window, she noted some of the tree leaves still in the early stages of blooming. "Okay, but I'll have to wait until after supper. Olivia should be home soon with Francesca."

*"That's okay. I should be here for another hour anyway before heading home. Give me a call when you're leaving the house."*

"Okay, thank you, Anna." Natalia took a deep breath, feeling oddly lighter for sharing her worries with the other woman, and realized that she should do the same with Olivia, but she was nervous. Maybe she'd wait until after she met with Anna and see what happens, best see if the training ideas that other woman had in mind would work for her before she told her partner. With a new goal in mind, Natalia stood and set up the kitchen table, preparing it for supper and she smiled at the appearance of Shadow in the doorway. For certain the dog could smell the food cooking.

"Hey girl, do you need to go out for a pee?" Natalia asked the dog as she ruffled Shadow's fur on her head, and she grinned as the dog started wagging her tail stronger. Heading out onto the porch she let the dog run in the yard, stretching her legs out.

\*\*\*\*

Bustling in through Company's doors, Lynn moved to put her purse behind the bar, greeting Dinah and Buzz as she got herself set up for her shift. Profusely apologizing for having to take time off at little notice, she was also setting the coffee pot up for the next brewing. The supper run of customers was starting to pick up and she was soon running off her feet.

At her next break, Dinah sat on one of the stools as Buzz came out of the kitchen. Grinning she turned toward the older man. "Same time tomorrow, Buzz?"

"You're more than welcome, but don't you have another job to do?" Buzz said with a laugh. "Though Frank is supposed to be here in the daytime, so if you need to do something else, that would be the time."

Rolling the bottom edges of her glass along the bar, she smiled. "I like doing this. I get why Blake enjoys it. Stirrs the creative juices and all."

Buzz raised an eyebrow with a smirk. "If you say so."

"No, seriously. With all the comings and goings, and occasional drama that comes in these doors, it's like walking into a real life soap opera sometimes," Dinah grinned.

Buzz laughed. "Look, it's slowing down now. Why don't you head on home? And say hello to that great grandson of mine." Buzz smiled at the mental image of Henry Cooper Lewis, getting bigger every day."

"You sure?" At Buzz's nod, Dinah got down from her stool and was headed for the door when Lillian arrived. Kissing the older woman on the cheek, Dinah then left the restaurant.

"Hey, love," Lillian said, as she rounded the bar and kissed her husband. "Dinah was working here again?"

"Yeah, Frank had an appointment this morning with his therapist, but didn't come in for the rest of the day." Buzz worried for his son. Some days were better than others. He'd thought Frank had started to improve but then he'd go into a funk and didn't emerge from his

apartment all day. At least Frank had cut back on the drinking thanks to Eleni's influence. At least by doing that, Frank had been able to see Francesca more often, but Buzz knew there would still be a ways to go yet for Frank's recovery. "Oh, hey, did you talk to Beth?"

"No. I just finished work and I know that she was supposed to be doing some follow-up work on the case she's on. I'll give her a call in a little while." Truthfully, Lillian found it hard to talk to Beth about the memories that Howard case evoked in both of them. Her regret that she hadn't done more to help her daughter at the time still haunted her.

"Oh, hey, there might be something we can do for Ms. Howard," Buzz said quietly, looking forward to seeing his wife smile. "Not a definite yet, but she might be staying at the boarding house thanks to Olivia."

"Really?" Lillian asked. "How did that come about?"

Shrugging, Buzz said, "Olivia asked."

"You have a soft spot for her. Always have," Lillian said with an amused smile.

"What can I say? She's a unique woman." Buzz laughed. "She and Natalia have been through so much together. To see them happy makes me happy." Glancing at his wife and noting her tiredness, he placed another kiss on her mouth, and asked her what she wanted for supper, quite sure that the last thing on her mind was going home and cooking.

\*\*\*\*

"Will you two stop it!" Blake yelled at her twin sons as they fought over the game controllers. She'd had enough of them arguing with each other and with Clarissa since they got back from school. To top off the crappy day, Ross had promised this morning when he came over from the Beacon that he'd be here to talk to the kids about what his plans were, and as of 7:30 p.m. he hadn't arrived, and no indication if or when he'd show up.

Sighing heavily, she grabbed the portable phone and called his hotel room as he must not have gotten around to getting a cell phone. There was no answer to his room and she shrugged, hoping that he might be on his way. She'd give him another hour before she had to send Clarissa to bed.

Firing up her laptop on the kitchen counter-top, Blake checked her emails and found one from Natalia with regards to book recommendations and a request to meet for coffee, and

another from Ashlee Wolfe about a project for her sophomore year in the journalism program. Looking over the attached file, Blake smiled; Ashlee would go far with her intelligence and her ability to see the good in people. Shaking her head, she hoped the young woman would stay that way.

As she prepared to send a note back to Ashlee, she thought about Doris and she wondered if Doris had let her daughter know that there had been a change in their relationship. She didn't think it was her place to do so, especially in an email. Even so, she'd be hard pressed to explain exactly why – that Ross had shown up alive on her doorstep. Her head was starting to throb with a headache, and the sudden increase in noise from her sons' playing video games felt like someone was driving a pike through her head. Quickly jotting down the note for Ashlee that she'd send along a more detailed response in the morning, she closed the laptop and headed to her bedroom.

Briefly turning around at her door, she called down to her sons, "Boys, turn down the music or it's going off all together. Clarissa, go get ready for bed, please."

In her bathroom, Blake grabbed a bottle of Advil and swallowed a couple gel caps with a glass of water before heading to her bed and curled up. Picking up her cellphone she typed out a quick note to Doris. *'Got an email from Ashlee. Don't know what to say. I miss you. B.'*

\*\*\*\*

"I don't know what to do, Doris," Olivia said, frustrated at not being able to help Natalia and with Emma's increased behavioural changes. She put down her glass of water on her desk. The tension in her neck and shoulders was so wound up with knots that it was giving her a headache. Even though Natalia hadn't said so, she was sure that her partner had continued nightmares, and it seemed to her that the slightest thing would set off Natalia into an agitated or angered state. She hated walking on egg shells until Natalia figured out what exactly she could do to heal. Sometimes she was able to get through to her and they'd have a quiet night in, just relaxing, cuddled up on the couch watching a show or the news on TV, or they'd be playing with the girls, but other times, smaller enclosed spaces or sounds would get the younger woman agitated and panicked.

"Have you tried talking with her about what's going on with you?" Doris asked her gently, taking a sip from her own glass of wine.

Confused about Doris's question, she responded, "What?"

"I mean, I know she's been going through hell since the kidnapping, but have you talked about what you've been feeling about that, and about what you've been feeling about the rape since the Kathryn Howard case?"

Sighing heavily, Olivia looked over at her friend. "No. I don't want to put that on her just yet. She's got enough going on."

"Don't you think she might think you're trying to shut her out about your stuff?" Doris questioned.

Taking a sidelong glance over at Doris, Olivia quipped, "Since when did you become my shrink?" She smirked to take the sting out of the comment.

"Look, I'm relatively new at the long term commitment thing, but it's bloody frustrating when you feel like you're shut out from the person you love." Doris ran a hand through her hair before looking anywhere but at Olivia.

"God, I'm sorry, Doris," Olivia reached over and put a hand on Doris's arm. "How are you doing?"

"Frankly? Like shit. I didn't realize it would hurt so much." Doris brought her hand up to her face, resting against her chin. A stray tear slipped over an eyelid and streaked down her cheek. "It's like I'm in limbo, not knowing if she's going to stay with Ross or come back to me."

"Shhh," Olivia said gently, wrapping her friend into a hug. They stayed like that for a few moments before returning to their spots.

"It's not like I can really do anything for her right now. When I saw her yesterday at Company, she was near tears after a conversation with Ross and I just pulled her into my arms. I didn't care if he saw us together or not." Doris sighed and rolled her shoulders. "The boys have been driving her nuts as well, acting out and not wanting to do anything until their father shows up. They've been ditching school, too, apparently."

"Tell me about it. Natalia and I got a call from the principal's office the other day to say that Emma had skipped classes. When we asked her about it, she said the teachers didn't look for her that hard, that she was in the library working on a project and that she'd had her earphones in so she didn't hear the pages on the intercom."

"And?" Doris asked.

"And what?" Olivia replied. "I don't know if it was actually the truth, but Emma knows that she can come to either of us if there is anything she needs." Shaking her head, Olivia continued, "I think somewhere in the cosmic universe my mother is having a grand old laugh at my expense. Something about payback being a bitch."

"Sometimes, what they just need is space at that age, with limitations, of course. I know I wasn't the greatest mother to Ashlee when she was growing up at that age." Doris paused, regret tingeing her voice as she spoke. "We've mended fences over the past couple years, but I know that I hurt her unintentionally more times than I should have."

"I don't think either of us will win 'Mother of the Year' awards anytime soon, but we do the best we can." Scratching a spot on the back of her neck, she looked thoughtfully over at her friend. "Speaking of parenting and looking after kids, how is the case for Kathryn Howard?"

"We've got a solid case, but Jeffrey was a real pain in the ass with the jury selection. The judge has given us a court date next week, so we'll be ready to go then. Why do you ask?"

"I've got an idea on helping her, but it will depend on if you can argue for continued ankle monitoring and her willingness. I had lunch with her today and we had a good talk. Something she had said when I met her at Brooke's office made me think she was close to being evicted from her apartment. That might put her situation in jeopardy, correct?" Olivia asked.

"It certainly won't help matters. What do you have in mind?" Doris asked, curiously.

Olivia took a deep breath and delved in. "I had a chat with Buzz earlier. Checked with him to see if she and her daughter could stay in the boarding house. He said it would be no problem."

"Sounds plausible, but won't she have the same problem with affordability?" Doris asked her.

"I'll be covering it. At least for the time being until she can get work, which Buzz is willing to offer her." Olivia sighed. "Of course, the latter will have to wait until you and your team win the case. But if she needs housing during the trial, it will be available. I've mentioned it to Brooke, since she's also Kathryn's counsellor to see if she thought it was an idea to present to the girl, but I wanted to get your thoughts on the matter."



Doris tilted her head slightly as she thought about her friend's proposal. "Why? I mean, why Kathryn?"

"I just thought that sometimes there's very little that separates us from being in the same situation that she finds herself in; a bad relationship, raising a child in a near impossible place, being scared of what comes next when all you can think of is putting food in front of you and a place over your head, you know?"

Doris nodded, understanding what Olivia was saying, when she felt her cell phone buzz. Picking it out of her pocket, she glanced at the message from Blake. *'Got an email from Ashlee. Don't know what to say. I miss you. B'*. Closing her eyes, Doris rested her head on her forearm. She hadn't even mentioned her temporary break from Blake to her daughter, hoping that Ross's reappearance wouldn't mean the end of their relationship. She hardly felt Olivia's hand resting on her shoulders in silent support. After a few minutes, Doris downed the rest of her wine and decided it was time to get home. If nothing else, she'd pop something in the microwave and watch a corny movie until she fell asleep.

"You okay?" Olivia asked, concerned about her friend's sudden change in demeanour.

"Blake."

"Ah, Doris," Olivia said softly.

"No, I'll be all right. I've got to head home, and you need to get home to your family." Doris stood up and straightened out her blazer and skirt. "Thanks, Olivia."

"Any time." Olivia followed suit, then sent a text message to Natalia that she'd be home soon, realizing she would be later than she'd expected to be. Standing up, she picked up her briefcase and locked up her office, then headed to the day care center to pick up Francesca to go home.

On her way, Olivia was pulled over by the police, apparently unaware she'd been speeding. With a sigh, she pulled over to the side of the road and waited for the officer to come and take her information. She hadn't expected that the officer in question would be the new police chief.

Putting on her best smile as she rolled down the window, she attempted charm first. "Well, well, how did I manage to rate the new police chief attending to traffic violations?"

Michael Thorne smirked. He'd actually been on his way home himself when he'd spotted the white Nissan going a fair bit faster than it should have been. Deciding to take a personal approach, he figured he'd stop the vehicle finding the hotel owner and her daughter.

"Just your luck, I guess, Ms. Spencer."

"You remembered me, I'm flattered," Olivia said, her smile widening.

"No need to be." Michael shook his head, chagrined. "Two Spencers speeding in one day, my luck."

"Pardon?" Olivia looked confused.

"Ava's your daughter, correct?"

"Yes," Olivia responded warily.

"Got her this morning." Michael smirked. Looking in the back to see Francesca strapped into her car seat, he returned his gaze to Olivia. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"Home." Olivia now dropped the charm; she was tired and she was sure that Natalia was worried, despite the earlier text message.

"As with Ava, I'm giving you a warning. Next time, it will be a ticket," Michael said more seriously. "Get home."

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At the farmhouse, Olivia wasn't in the door long before she noticed the kitchen was darkened and there was a covered casserole dish on the counter. Dropping her purse and briefcase on the table, she went in search of her partner, carrying a fussing Francesca on her hip. "Let's go see where Mama is, Sweet Pea."

Finding Natalia sitting on their bed, flipping through a magazine, she smiled seeing her looking relaxed. Francesca squirmed in her arms, wanting to go to Natalia, so Olivia let the tired little girl down on the bed. "Sorry for being delayed."

"Supper's downstairs," Natalia said shortly as she moved to pick Francesca up in her arms and hold her. "Has she eaten yet?"

"Yes, Leyla gave her her supper about an hour ago," Olivia said as she stripped out of her work clothes and pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt. Looking over at Natalia, she wondered if she hadn't pushed her limits.

"Good," Natalia said as she left the room with their youngest daughter and moved to get the young girl ready for bed.

"Natalia? What's wrong?" Olivia was growing concerned by the short worded answers.

Looking back at her partner who stood against Francesca's room's door frame, Natalia responded, "A call would have been nice. What kept you at the office this late? There were no scheduled meetings."

"Doris came over to discuss a few things. About Blake and the case she's working on, though that wasn't very specific."

"I see," Natalia said as she put the wriggling girl into her pajamas.

Olivia sighed deeply as she broached the topic of Kathryn Howard's living arrangement with Natalia. "I want to run something by you, since it will be coming out of my finances. Kathryn Howard will likely be moving over to Buzz's boarding house for at least the duration of the trial, perhaps beyond that."

"And how is that going to come out of your finances?" Natalia started and looked over at her partner before it dawned on her. "You're going to cover the costs of her staying at the boarding house? Does she know this?" Natalia asked, getting annoyed.

"Natalia, look," Olivia began.

"No, don't '*Natalia, look*' me this time. What if she doesn't want to take that charity? Did you even think of that?"

"I don't think she will have much of a choice, Natalia. She doesn't have a job, she's going on trial for manslaughter, and she's on the verge of being evicted from her apartment." Olivia was getting frustrated; couldn't Natalia see that she was just trying to be helpful?

"Why you, though? Couldn't Doris, Mel, and Beth organize something for her? Wouldn't that be more appropriate?" Natalia fired back.

Shaking her head in confusion, Olivia queried, "Appropriate? Natalia, why are you so bothered by my offer of assistance to the young woman?" She ran a hand through her hair and took a deep breath.

"It's like you see her as some sort of charity case," Natalia responded. "Maybe she doesn't want or need your charity. Some people can get by without it."

"Woah, hold up. Where's this all coming from?" Olivia walked over to her partner, trying to keep her voice down so they didn't disturb Francesca. "Are you referring to Kathryn, or are you talking about yourself?"

That caught Natalia's attention and she pulled her partner out of the room and down to their own bedroom, away from the girls' hearing. Making sure to close the door before she turned on Olivia, "This isn't about me!" Natalia said forcefully.

"No? Because you're certainly acting like it was you I was talking about and not Kathryn Howard."

Natalia took a deep breath to try to focus her thoughts and not say something she might regret. "Where do you get off assuming that just because you offered a near complete stranger housing that it's about me and my issues."

"Natalia, calm down," Olivia said and cringed once the words were out of her mouth, knowing Natalia hated feeling like she was being patronized. "Do you want to know why I made the offer to Brooke and then to Doris as a way to help?"

Pacing the room, Natalia thought about Olivia's words. She did want to know. What's more was that she wanted to know why the offer was making her so upset. Slowly she sat down on the edge of the bed and nodded.

"This hasn't been about you, or Gus and offering charity," Olivia started. "At least not directly." Before Natalia had the chance to interrupt, Olivia held up her hand so she could continue. "You were the first person to teach me about giving help without having an ulterior motive." Olivia gave a chagrined smile. "At least taught me to do it and have it stick in my head. The point is, this offer to Kathryn Howard is just about helping because I can. You and I both know what it's like to raise a child on our own, as Kathryn has been doing for most of Dani's life. Hers has been in an abusive relationship. Both of us have been fortunate that the relationships that we've been in haven't been physically and emotionally devastating as that." Olivia stopped for a moment to focus her thoughts. "I don't know if I

can really explain very well why, but on some level I can see a part of myself in Kathryn, knowing that at some point in my life if I'd made different choices that could have been me. I would fight to the death to protect my family. You know that. You've seen that when we thought Phillip's return could have meant harm to Emma. You saved me from facing a similar sentence if I'd actually taken that gun to face Phillip."

Slowly Natalia nodded, starting to understand Olivia's perspective, but still feeling unnerved, with the tightly wound energy she had built up needing an outlet. "Okay, I get that."

"I sense a 'but' there," Olivia said gently.

"But nothing," Natalia said. Standing up, she headed over to Olivia and put her hand on her partner's chest, over her heart. "I just...I need to figure some things out."

"Such as?"

"Like why that bothered me so much. Like why the simplest things have the tendency to make me mad for no reason that I can think of. That's not me. Or at least it's not the me that I can face in the mirror." Taking a deep breath, she gave Olivia a small smile. They'd made some kind of progress tonight, but there was a lot more that she was going to have to face. "Can you look after the girls for a bit? I need to go out for a little while."

"Sure," Olivia said, realizing Natalia needed some space. She pressed a kiss to Natalia's forehead, and whispered softly, "Te quiero, cariño."

"Yo también." Natalia smiled at her. "Thank you."

"Can I ask where you're going?"

As Natalia opened the door to their bedroom and proceeded down the stairs, she turned to Olivia. "To see Detective Li about a punching bag."

"Wait. What!?"

\*\*\*\*

The driving to Anna Li's apartment took about ten minutes, during which time she had called to apologize for the lateness and asked if it was still okay if she came over. Thankfully

the answer had been yes or she would have ended up at the minimart with a pint or two of mint chocolate chip ice cream. Trying to organize her thoughts and think about the reasons Olivia had given for helping out Kathryn, she rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the tension. Before she realized, she had pulled up to the apartment building.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Anna said, as she opened the door to admit her friend. "You seemed a little distant when we talked earlier."

"I know. I just don't know where or how to get rid of the built up anger. Or even why things are making me angry in the first place, where before they didn't, or at least not to this level." Natalia paced the room, her thoughts rolling around her head and she tried to focus them.

Giving Natalia a few minutes, she simply waited by the door to her work out room. "You remember me talking to you about PTSD on the phone earlier?" She waited for Natalia's acknowledgement. "I got you some pamphlets and information for you to take a look at when you're ready. You can put them in your purse or briefcase to read later."

Stopping her momentum, Natalia looked over at the other woman, "Thank you."

"In the meantime, come into the workout room. I'll walk you through a few exercises." Anna said, guiding Natalia into the room.



"Exercises?" Natalia asked curiously.

"Well, stretches to start. You can put your coat up on the bench there," Anna said, pointing to a wooden bench that ran the length of one wall.

"Okay."

Guiding Natalia into the center of the space onto the mats, Anna directed the woman to follow her in a series of stretches of her arms, legs, and torso. As she did so, she talked with the other woman about what kind of things had been making her angry or frustrated, and what she'd been doing to relieve those emotions.

"Cleaning mostly," Natalia admitted with a chagrined smirk. "Olivia said the last time the house smelled this much of bleach was when I was engaged to Frank Cooper."

Anna burst out laughing before apologizing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh, but I could picture her saying something like that."

"No, it's just fine. Looking back, I can see her point, and it is kind of funny now." Natalia took a deep breath as they went through another stretch. "Most of my life I've worked in the service industry in some manner, keeping things clean and tidy in various hotels, offices, restaurants. I guess I just focused so much of my attention on doing that in order to put a roof over our heads, especially when Rafe was sick, I didn't really have much time to get angry about things. Sometimes they were things out of my control. By the time I finished one, sometimes two, work shifts, I got home to run Rafe through his homework and make meals for us, and I'd just fall asleep, too exhausted to do anything else."

"What about these days? What do you use to relieve stress, anxiety, anger?" Anna asked.

"More cleaning?" Natalia responded, a wry grin crossing her face. "Or if I'm in a good mood, sex."

The latter comment surprised Anna – not so much that she and Olivia had used sex as a stress reliever, but that Natalia had voiced it. "Well, I'm going to teach you a few methods to relieve those stressful emotions in a healthy outlet." She smiled at her friend as the other woman appeared quite eager to move forward with this process. Heading over to a desk she kept in the corner, she pulled out a leather bound journal and brought it over to Natalia. "First off, I want you to start keeping a journal of your progress. That way, you'll be able to read through it and look back at your progress, but also, you should be able to see a pattern over time about what triggers the strong negative emotions and the powerful positive ones."

Natalia seemed hesitant. "The last time I kept a journal, I was sixteen years old. I stopped after my father found it and learned that I was pregnant."

Anna nodded. That incident in itself would have been enough to make a normal person furious, and she suspected that Natalia was used to keeping her emotions, at least her really strong ones, bottled up, or ignoring them altogether. "This is important, Natalia. I want you to write down what you're feeling when something makes you mad, frustrated, scared, but I also want you to write down things that make you happy. If you get thrown off the path, refocus, breathe and write. Many people find writing things down a lot easier than talking about it. It's all about balance – mind, body, spirit. I will do my best to help with each, but as I said on the phone, you should also see a counsellor."

As Anna waited for Natalia to absorb the information, she went over to a shelf and pulled off a pair of boxing mitts and a pair of trainer gloves. Handing the boxing mitts to Natalia, directing her to put them on, she then pulled on the trainer mitts.

"Anna?" Natalia queried.

"Now, we're going to focus on the body. I want you to try to hit me," Anna said with a smile.

"Excuse me?"

"Part of the problem, as I see it, is that you keep your feelings bottled up. Am I correct on this?" Anna asked and waited for Natalia to respond.

"I guess, yeah." Natalia was wondering where Anna was going with this.

"Boxing, in a controlled training situation, can be a strong stress reliever; you're focusing your throws and punches into a single source. However, we're not going to be using this in any regular routine, unless you find it's something you like. Rather, I'm just going to show you how to do the manoeuvres to use with me, or with a punching bag."

"I'm not sure about this, Anna," Natalia said sceptically. "I don't really like violence."

Thinking for a moment, Anna decided to try something. "How did you feel about Olivia's coming home late this evening, without much word and a sleepy daughter?"

"Frustrated, annoyed," Natalia said, as a shadow seemed to cross over her face.

"And what did you do about it?" Anna inquired, curious about Natalia's coping mechanisms.



"I took a few good deep breaths, called you, took Shadow out for a walk in the field in front of the house, and when she still hadn't come home, I went upstairs to try to read. But I couldn't concentrate."

Anna nodded, surmising as much. "Put them on; I want you to throw a punch at me."

Doing as asked, Natalia threw a relatively light and weak punch.

"Really? That's all you've got?" Anna looked at her askance. When faced with the other woman's exasperated sigh, she continued. "I want you to close your eyes. Okay, now think of something that made you really mad. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Okay, now hit me; a lot stronger than what you just did. I have the gloves on here. Just land a punch on that," Anna added as she prepared her stance. She probably should have put her hands up a little higher to protect her face, but she didn't think the force of Natalia's first real punch would do any damage. As it was, she was knocked on her rear end, slightly stunned as Natalia had done more than graze her left eye and left her with a bloody nose. It surprised the both of them.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry," Natalia said as she whipped the gloves off and went over to help the detective up from the floor.

"No, no. That's my fault. I should have remembered the first rule of boxing: protect your face." Anna grinned suddenly, surprising Natalia. "At least I'll have a fun story to tell the guys at work tomorrow."

Natalia kept apologizing, more than a little mortified at injuring the detective.

"I think maybe, we shall focus today's attention on the punching bag," Anna laughed. "Today, you needed a way to learn an immediate response in a healthy outlet. Next time we're going to focus on learning some t'ai chi moves. Start at the beginning and I will show you the moves and the reasons behind them."

After another half hour of teaching and demonstrating with the heavy bag that hung from a steel crossbeam, Natalia was breathing heavily but feeling much better. Anna was pleased that the younger woman took to the activity with relative ease, happy to be learning something new.

When she caught her breath, Natalia asked, "When can we do this again?"

Anna laughed. "How about Tuesday? I have training sessions at work tomorrow, Friday and Monday. We'll start again with the stretches, but then we'll go into t'ai chi first, then if you're up to it, you can go again on the bag. Keep in mind, tomorrow, your shoulders, arms, and back will feel pretty sore as you're not used to these movements." Grabbing a protein bar out of her desk drawer, she tossed it back to Natalia. "Here, eat one of these on your way home. We'll look at your food routine over the next few weeks as well."

"What should I bring to wear?" Natalia asked, looking down at her jeans and t-shirt attire, which wasn't very practical for the workout she'd been through.

"A loose t-shirt and a pair of shorts, or stretchy leggings. Something you can easily move around in but will allow your skin to breathe. And a pair of good sneakers." Anna was glad for her new student's enthusiasm, but on a serious note, she reiterated to the other woman that between now and then, she wanted her to write down what she was feeling when and why. "I also think you should let Olivia know what you're doing. She can help to support you as you progress and if things aren't going as well as you wanted. Let her be that support. Okay?"

After letting out a long breath, Natalia agreed.

"And, if you have trouble talking to her about it, on occasion you might feel better letting her read parts of the journal. It will help her understand what you're going through as well."

"Okay. Thank you, Anna."

"No thanks needed. It will be thanks enough to see you progress and learn to deal with the aftermath of the kidnapping." Anna looked down at her watch. "Now, it's time for you to go. One of my favourite shows is coming on."

Natalia laughed. "Which one?"

"*'Criminal Minds'*. Don't you think our new police chief looks an awful like one of the characters on that show?"

"Good night," Natalia said, smiling as she picked up her belongings and left the apartment, feeling a lot better than when she arrived.

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## Act IV

Again as Natalia entered St. Margaret's Mission the next morning, she could hear the sounds of music being played, and to her amusement when she spotted her friend stacking boxes, Sister Anne was belting out The Rescues song, '*Break Me Out*'. Natalia chuckled as she made her way closer.

"You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you like to toy with people's expectations of what nuns are like," Natalia said with a big grin.

Shrugging and grinning, Sister Anne said, "I tend to buck traditions. Makes life interesting." Returning the affectionate greeting, she went around the long table to give her friend a hug. "Morning, Natalia. Bright and early I see."

"I wasn't sure how long we'd be, so I took the morning off. There's nothing heavy going on today at the Beacon, and our first business meetings weren't until this afternoon. Might as well take advantage of the good days," Natalia said, as she shrugged out of her light jacket. "So, what are we doing this morning?"

"Well, I got into a rhythm yesterday after you left and got the office all packed up and transported to my new office upstairs. I even got some of it put away," Sister Anne said with a pleased grin. "Today, we're sorting the donations that came in this week into containers. I have labels and Sharpies. Clothing is on that table, toys on that one over there. I'd like to be able to sort the clothes by gender and sizes for adults and children, rather than just have them in bins. We could probably just sort them extra small, small, medium, large, extra large for adult sizes and for kids by age groups?"

"That sounds good to me. I'll grab one of the Sharpies and labels and start over here," Natalia said, picking up the supplies. As she pulled up a chair to the table, she started writing down the sizes on the labels and applied them to the large Rubbermaid bins. Taking a breath as she ordered her thoughts, she turned to see Sister Anne looking over at her.

"How are you doing?" Anne responded.

"Better today," Natalia said as she actually felt more relaxed than she had been in some time. She knew there was a long journey ahead of her, but she felt like she had a goal to

work toward instead of feeling like she was floundering. "I went to see Detective Li last night." Natalia smiled as she continued, "It was rather interesting in many ways."

"How so?" Sister Anne said curiously, as she noted her friend's improved mood.

"I had talked to her on the phone when I got home from picking Emma up. We talked a little about the continued nightmares I've been having, and she mentioned a few things about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." As Natalia thought about the discussion she'd had with the detective, the more things had started to make sense with regard to her mental health.

"Olivia was late getting home and then we had an argument. I just felt so frustrated even though we'd sorted through the disagreement, so I headed over to Anna's to see if I could find out some more information."

Sister Anne waited as Natalia processed her thoughts and she was pleased that her friend was feeling a lot better than when she saw her yesterday. "And?"

"She gave me some pamphlets about PTSD to look over later and then we talked some about the practice of t'ai chi and balance of mind, body, spirit." Natalia paused a moment.

"She recommended that I see a counsellor, but I had a hard time seeing Dr. Tremaine."

Pursing her lips a moment, she looked up at her friend, concern etched on her face. "I was wondering if you'd be able to take me on in a professional capacity?"

"I'd be happy to, Natalia," Sister Anne replied. "You need to feel a level of comfort to be able to talk about certain things you've been going through, and for each person that is different."

"Anna also gave me a journal to write down what I'm feeling, like triggers that make me angry and frustrated. It made more sense once I got home and thought about it more as I read through the pamphlets." Thinking about last evening's events, she stretched her shoulders and rolled them as the detective had been correct on the muscles being tender. Grinning, she pictured the other events of the evening. "You know how I don't particularly like violence and fighting of any kind?"

Sister Anne nodded and looked amused by the change in Natalia's expression.

"She had me boxing." Natalia nearly laughed at her friend's surprised response. "Well, not in a boxing ring or anything. She had me throw a punch at her with boxing mitts on. I accidently hit her in the face instead of hitting her trainer mitt." Despite the initial

mortification of hitting her friend last night, she smiled. "Then she had me using a heavy bag, showing me how to throw punches on it to relieve stress. Now we're not usually going to be boxing, but I think she realized how frustrated I was last night and figured that was the best way to relieve it at the time."

"Sounds like you had a very productive evening," Anne said.

Mood brightened, Natalia said, "Oh, I did. I never thought I would have felt as good as I did, given the state I was in when I arrived."

"Increased physical activity will do that for you. Sounds like you got a good head start on working on your overall health. That's given me a few ideas on how to approach the therapy sessions so that will work to your benefit." Sister Anne realized that she hadn't been working as much on the sorting as she'd been paying more attention to her conversation with Natalia. "If you don't mind, and this is not a requirement so don't feel you have to, but I was wondering if you think you could share your journal with me after a couple weeks. Detective Li was right on the mark with having you detail that kind of information to help you understand the kinds of triggers and patterns that develop on how and why things bother you, or situations that might make you panic. Writing that down will certainly help you in the long run, and even in the short term, you should quickly be able to notice changes."

Natalia nodded at her friend's request, realizing that it would probably help, but she wanted to work on it first.

"The other thing that Anna may have mentioned is that when you write in your journal, don't think about it too hard, trying to make everything come out 'right'. Write what's first in your thoughts because those thoughts are often the most honest. If we think about it too much, we try to rationalize the feelings we're having rather than them being raw, even if it is painful."

Bemusedly, Natalia realized that that was most often her tendency – processing or rather over-processing her thoughts and feelings; sanitizing them so she could then deal with them later.

"What did Olivia think about all of this?" Sister Anne asked, knowing there had been some tension between them before she had gone to the detective's place.

"You mean after I explained about going to see Anna about a boxing bag?" Natalia giggled, surprising the other woman with her response.

Sister Anne joined in on the laughter. "Okay, I need to know the story behind that."

"Well, I was so ticked off and frustrated when I left the house last evening that I just blurted out that I was headed over to Detective Li's to see her about a boxing bag, then I just left, leaving Olivia to stew on that." Pursing her lips together as she remembered her partner's worried expression when she returned. "We sat down on the couch and I told her what Anna and I had spoken about. We talked for a while, just curled up together and I think it helped both of us a lot." Natalia smiled at the memory as she took in a deep breath.

"Good to know." Anne was happy for her friend and glad things were looking up for her. "Okay, let's get moving on this so you can head back to work."

Natalia nodded, slightly blushing at the remembered heated make out session that followed that talk with Olivia. Cold shower, cold shower, Natalia thought as she went back to working on the task ahead of her. Maybe she'd pin Olivia in their room later. *Mmmm, yeah, that'll work.*

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The large kitchen at the Spaulding mansion was warm as Hilda started to prepare another batch of muffins. The first batch of carrot walnut muffins were cooling on a rack when Phillip passed by, pilfering one as he made his way to the coffee pot. It earned him a smack on the hand by the long term housekeeper.

"Scoot!" Hilda said with a laugh, knowing Phillip's sweet tooth.

Sniffing the air slightly, Phillip grinned. "I will if those are chocolate chip muffins going in next." Pouring himself a cup of coffee, he sat at one of the stools that surrounded the breakfast nook, newspaper in front of him.

"You're as bad as your daughters," Hilda said in fondness for the girls.

"Where do you think they got it from?" Phillip laughed. Both Lizzie and Emma also had a sweet tooth, but he refrained from telling Hilda that Emma's preference in cookies came from Natalia; he had to admit Natalia made fantastic cookies. His son, James, however,

tended to take more after Beth in food likes and dislikes. Spreading the newspaper out in front of him, he flicked over to the financial section first. The *Springfield Journal* wasn't a big paper by any stretch of the imagination but it did provide the essentials. Once the stock information and overnight international financial news was checked, he checked the political columns and shook his head at the idiocy of some of the politicians. If nothing else over the past few years, Phillip's brush with a near fatal disease made him appreciate his family much more, and that included his extended family.

Over the past year, he had fought and won a decision with his Board of Directors to initiate provisions for non-discriminatory clauses within Spaulding Enterprises, and extending benefits for employees in same-sex relationships and their families. It had been one of the first private sector businesses in Springfield to do so.

His reading was interrupted as Beth came into the room and kissed him on the head as she passed to the fridge for some orange juice.

"Hey, you. Sleep well?" Phillip asked.

"Better last night, thanks." Sitting at an adjacent stool, she glanced fondly at her husband. Pointing at the paper, she asked, "Anything interesting in there this morning?"

"Same as usual. I see that Judge Harris has scheduled the Howard trial to start next week."

"Yeah, Jeffrey seems to be gung-ho to get this trial started and finished so he can focus on the official DA position," Beth said, as she reached over and snagged a muffin.

Phillip looked up at Hilda, giving her a mock frown when she hadn't scolded Beth as she had him. Then, turning back to his wife, he gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Just wondering since we don't have any plans tonight if you minded if Emma and Francesca stayed the night? It would give Olivia and Natalia a chance for some time to sort through some things?" He'd been a little worried when he'd gotten an email from Olivia the previous night after Natalia had left the house. His ex had been increasingly concerned about Natalia's well-being over the past couple months and he thought she might like a break from the kids for a night.

"No, that's not a problem at all. They're great girls. We can set Francesca and Peyton up in the same room again."

"Sounds great. Thanks, love," Phillip responded as he kissed Beth. Standing, he resorted up the paper, leaving it for Beth to read. "I'm just going up to the study to get stuff ready for the office."

"Okay, I'll see you in a bit. Just going to check the phone for messages, then I'll be up to get ready for work." Grabbing the phone on the wall unit, she pushed a couple buttons and waited for the messages.

*"Hello, Beth, this is your mother. If you get a chance, can you call me back later,"* Lillian's voice came recorded on the voice-mail as Beth picked up her messages. Checking the timecode on it, she realized that it had come the previous evening when she and Phillip had been out. Looking at her watch, she couldn't remember if her mother was working today or not. As she pressed down on the release button she heard an extra click on the line that wasn't normally there, but it stopped so continued not thinking any more of it. After a few rings without an answer, the voice-mail started its introduction.

"Hey, Mom. Just got your message. Heading to the office shortly, but give me a call when you can. Phillip and I will be home this evening, as Emma and Francesca will be staying over night." Beth shook her head as she thought she heard the clicking on the line again just before she hung up and thought she should mention it to her husband to check the lines.

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When Ava arrived at the Little Lights at 7:30 in the morning, it was already three-quarters full of children and staff and there were still parents arriving. Bearing a couple travel mugs of coffee along with her briefcase, she handed one of the mugs out to Leyla.

"I come bearing coffee."

"Oh, you are a goddess," Leyla said with relief. She hadn't had much time to get some before she left her apartment this morning. "Thank you."

"I was thinking about your plans for the center and I had a couple funding ideas that might work for you to keep costs down, if you're interested," Ava offered.

"Do you have a few minutes? I can get Katie to run things for a bit." Leyla gathered up her paperwork from the front desk where she'd been working as people came in.



"Not a problem. My first official meeting is not until nine o'clock." Ava nodded and waited until Leyla got her assistant to cover the front desk, then they headed to the small office Leyla had in the corner. "Busy this morning."

"Yeah, this is normal. Part of the reason for the expansion plans." Leyla directed Ava to sit in the chair opposite her. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking you might want to find out what you can set up with the Springfield University's Early Education program to do clinical rotations and non-paid internships, giving you some extra help, with the potential to turn them into actual employees on graduation."

"That sounds good. I had a couple places in Chicago where I did my internship that had similar set-ups," Leyla agreed. "If I can get a few extra hands on deck this weekend, I think we can get that other unused boardroom cleared out. Olivia mentioned one of the suites needed some desk furniture replaced and I know I saw about four or five desks in the boardroom just being stored."

"Not a problem. I'm sure we can round up some bodies if we promise food." Ava grinned, knowing Jonathan, Bill and Shayne would likely be able to lend a hand; especially if that food included some beers afterward. "Any particular time?"

"9:30 work for you?" Leyla asked as she grabbed a pen to make a few notations on her plan. "I'll send out an email this morning to them." The ideas that Ava had given her would keep her busy for the rest of the morning and she smiled thinking of the planning going into the expansion project. She still had to wait for the official approval from Olivia and the board of directors but she'd gotten positive response from Olivia thus far. Standing up, she accompanied Ava out of her office, bringing her coffee and her laptop with her. "Thanks again for the coffee. Anytime you want to drop some of that off, you're welcome."

Ava smirked. "Something wrong with that coffee pot over there?" she asked as she indicated the one on the upper counter.

"Yeah, it tends to burn the coffee or something. Tastes like crap."

"You could buy a new one," Ava quipped, as she shook her head.

"Yes, I know, and I keep meaning to when I'm out, but by the time I get home I'm so wiped out and I forget to add it to the list of things to do." Leyla put her laptop down on the reception desk allowing her assistant to return to her previous task.

Ava laughed in understanding then waved goodbye as she headed to her own office, leaving her sometimes friend to go back to work.

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Knocking on her daughter's partially ajar door, Natalia smiled as Emma sat on her bed reading a book, Shadow lying on the floor beside the girl's bed.

"Hey, Em," Natalia started pensively. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Emma looked at her Ma curiously for a moment before responding. "Sure. What about?"

"Just about some of the stuff Detective Li has been teaching you." Natalia sighed, as she thought about how to address some of her own concerns with Emma. "We haven't had much chance to talk lately about that and how it's working for you."

"I like it," Emma said with a smile, though a little nervous. She knew she'd been acting out a bit more than she used to. A growth spurt, along with other things about her body, was a source of confusion for the newly adolescent girl. She wanted more independence but she still craved the support and comfort of her family. Curiosity winning out, she asked, "Why do you ask?"

"You know how upset and angry I've been at times since the kidnapping?" Natalia asked with hesitation. She acknowledged that her daughter was bright enough to know something was wrong and she waited for a response from Emma. When she saw the girl nod, she continued. "Last night I went over to Detective Li's and she's going to help me much the way she has been helping you."

Emma's face brightened and she smiled. "Really? Maybe I can help."

Natalia hadn't realized how much she worried about Emma's response until it came. She relaxed her whole body and gave the girl a hug, gently running a hand over Emma's head. Finishing with a kiss to her daughter's head, she pulled back and smiled. "Perhaps you can. Maybe we can practice sometimes out on the lawn now that it's warm."

Looking over at her Ma, Emma's eyes glinted and she smirked. "Maybe we can even get Mom doing the exercises so she doesn't feel left out?"

"Well, we can certainly ask her," Natalia nodded, laughing gently. "But first, Anna's going to teach me the mechanics of things, and then we can practice, okay?" Remembering Olivia's earlier email, she added, "Have you got all your stuff packed to go to your Dad's for the night?"

Emma nodded with enthusiasm; she loved going to her Dad's as there was so much to explore in the house and she sometimes let her Dad win at the video games...well, after she finished her homework. And sometimes she just sat in the study while he worked and she read her books.

"Okay, I've got to get Francesca all ready to go as well. They'll be here just before suppertime. Phillip said he's taking you girls out for supper before heading out to the house."

"Yay!" Emma said, bouncing off the bed to put her books in her backpack. Shadow quickly stood up next to Emma looking at the promise of going out."

"Tell you what, why don't you take Shadow out back for a little bit while you wait, and when you get back if you want you can help me surprise your mom with her favourite supper."

"Tuna noodle casserole?" Emma asked grinning.

"Yep. Go on. I'll see you in a few minutes." Natalia smiled as she headed for Francesca's room to get the young girl's travel bag, stocking it with some clothing and her favorite blanket.

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After the girls had gone with Phillip and Beth, Olivia and Natalia sat at the kitchen table, a half-empty bottle of white wine, and a partially eaten dish of tuna noodle casserole gracing the table.

The house was quiet except for the low playing sultry music, and Natalia held her hand out to Olivia. "Dance with me?"

"Sí, cariño," Olivia said as she took her partner's hand, standing and wrapping an arm around Natalia's waist. Pressing a kiss on Natalia's lips, she started to lead them in the dance, swaying to the music. "I love you."

As Natalia pressed against her partner, following with the movements of the dance, she said contentedly, "I had a talk with Sister Anne this morning while we were at the mission getting clothing and toys sorted. We spoke about what Anna had said, with regard to what I've been feeling and ways to resolve some of those issues."

"And?" Olivia asked with a little hesitation. While she was happy that the love of her life was starting to come around and find a goal, she wondered how she would fit into the whole scheme of things.

"And she was in agreement with Anna's ideas for working on balancing physical, mental, spiritual aspects of my life." Natalia paused as she buried her face in the crook of Olivia's neck and started pressing kisses to the skin there.

Olivia turned her head back and to the side to allow Natalia more access. She was barely able to think as her partner's kisses drove her to distraction. With a hoarse voice, she whispered, "And what part of the plan is this?"

"Oh, this would be a combination of all three," Natalia said softly as she moved her kisses forward along Olivia's jaw line and up to her lips, capturing the flesh with vigor. "Upstairs, now."

"Oh, yes," Olivia said as she was led by Natalia in a way that left no need for interpretation.

As soon as they got into their bedroom and clothes were removed, Natalia pushed Olivia back on the bed. "You are mine," Natalia whispered in her partner's ear as she pressed the length of their bodies together and sighed.

"Te quiero mucho," Olivia whispered in adoration as she submitted to Natalia's loving kisses.

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Emma knocked on her father's bedroom door rapidly and waited for a response. She'd been woken up by the sounds of someone in the hallway, but when she went to investigate as she went to the bathroom, she thought she saw a shadow of a person moving down the hall. But

with only a small hall light illuminating the large hallway of the old house, the shadows unnerved her. She had hoped it was her father or Beth, or one of the house staff that had stayed late. With no response, Emma knocked again, this time adding her voice to the alert.

"Daddy? Beth? It's Emma. Can I come in?"

"Just a minute, sweetie," Phillip called out. Grabbing his robe, he opened the door and noticed the scared look on her face. "What's the matter, Em?"

"I...I saw someone in the hallway coming back from the bathroom. I don't think they were supposed to be there."

"When?" Phillip asked, knowing that all the staff had gone home for the night. Beth was in their bed and the little girls were tucked in for the night. There shouldn't be anyone else in the house. It bothered him, especially as Beth had mentioned hearing clicking noises when she used the kitchen phone that morning. He'd found bugs in the phones when he'd gotten home from work and had them removed, checking all the landlines at the time. "Okay, sweetie. You go back to bed and I'll go take a look."

"Okay," Emma said hesitantly. Sighing she added, "I wish Shadow had been able to come."

"I know, Em." Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he went into tell Beth what Emma had said before heading back out into the hallway, catching Emma before she went back to her room. "Em, Beth said you can go in and stay with her until I get back, okay?"

Emma nodded vigorously and quickly disappeared into her father's bedroom.

Phillip was mad. If someone had gotten into the house, they knew enough to bypass the detailed security system he had in place. He'd have a few words for his security service chief in the morning. If someone screwed up, the shit is going to hit the fan so quick. No one messed with his family without penalty. Law be damned.

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