



Act I

The warm sun had been welcomed as Natalia left the farmhouse an hour earlier, but now that she and Sister Anne had been moving some furniture to go out on the lawn next to the mission, she could feel the sweat rolling down the middle of her back. The wisps of hair that had been freely moving before were now stuck to the sides of her face. As she wiped her arm over her forehead to try to push them out of the way, she sighed, her thoughts focused on her son. He hadn't been able to make any of their scheduled online chats and she had been getting increasingly worried. Her gut feeling was that something was wrong but there was nothing she could pin it on, and she didn't feel her recent attempts of prayer were doing her, nor Rafe, any good.

The bed frame was heavier than it had looked, but Natalia braced the edge on top of her leg to adjust for better leverage and picked up her end. Sister Anne eased backwards through the doors, tilting down slightly on the left side to make it fit through the tight doorway. Natalia followed the other woman's lead and together they were through the doors of the small office turned storage room in a matter of minutes.

Once Natalia cleared the door, Sister Anne tilted her head to the left and moved toward the nearest wall. "Over here for now."

They set the solid wood frame down and both groaned in relief. Sister Anne laughed. "Wow! That was really heavy!"

Natalia nodded and fell back against the wall. Slipping her cell phone out of her pocket, she glanced at it and then sighed before putting it back in her pocket. She hadn't worked this physically hard in a long time, probably before Francesca was born. She smiled thinking of

her daughter who was having a day out with Frank. For a few weeks there, she and Olivia had been hesitant to let Frank be alone with Francesca, but Eleni had told them how dedicated he'd been to his counseling sessions and how he hadn't touched so much as a beer since his breakdown. At some point, she had to show some trust in him again. This was only for a few hours so she wasn't worried.

"It feels good to work like this though. I haven't worked some of these muscles since I first moved to Springfield." The brunette smiled up at her friend. "Between this and the lessons Anna is giving me, I've been exhausted and sleeping so much better."

"And happy," Anne added as she brushed her hands off on her shorts.

Natalia smiled. "And happy. Some people use hard work and physical labor to avoid thinking or working through their feelings, something I became very good at over the years, but now it actually helps clear my head." She added with a laugh, "You should have seen how spotless the farmhouse was when I realized I was falling in love with Olivia."

"I bet you could eat off the floor," Anne chuckled.

"You have no idea!"

The nun clapped her hands together and looked at her friend. "So, are you ready to get this all the way outside and get to work on it?" She gestured to the bed.

"You bet!" Natalia pushed off the wall and rewrapped her fallen ponytail.

For another hour, the two women worked side-by-side sanding the wood to prep it for a new, darker stain. When Natalia mentioned that Kathryn Howard and her daughter would be offered a room at Buzz's boarding house, Sister Anne immediately offered to donate some new furniture for the room, something suitable for the young girl and her courageous mother, from the mission storage. Natalia had found a worn but cheerful yellow bed set that would go perfectly with the darker stain in some old belongings she'd brought from Chicago but never used again. It would be perfect for the young girl.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sister Anne noticed that Natalia had been checking her phone regularly since she had arrived that morning. "Don't let me keep you here if you need to do something."

Natalia looked up to see the blonde gesturing toward the phone in her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was being that obvious. No, there's nothing to do. I cooked a big meal last night so there's nothing I need to rush home for right now. We're having leftovers." Anne nodded but she wasn't convinced. "But that has nothing to do with checking your phone constantly."

Blowing a strand of fallen hair out of her face and using the back of her hand to brush it aside, Natalia glanced over at the nun, sighing. "We haven't heard from Rafe in a few weeks. His recruiter told me this could happen; that they could be gone on a mission for weeks on end and we wouldn't hear from him, but...I don't know...something just doesn't feel right."

Anne watched her for a few moments before speaking, "What does Olivia say?"

Natalia chuckled. "Not to worry. Typical Olivia. She worries about me worrying. I don't think either of us could handle it if both of us worried about the same thing."

"I'm sure she's worried too, Natalia. She loves Rafe very much."

Nodding, Natalia pushed down the tears that threatened, accepting the fact that her partner was in this with her and that soothed her fears to some degree. But... "A mother knows though," she said with finality.

Pushing her sanding wool and other items away, Anne scooted across the rough concrete closer to her friend, taking Natalia's shaky hands in her own. "Would you like to pray for him?"

Quickly, Natalia nodded. When she looked up tears fell down her cheeks and she lifted an arm to wipe her nose with her sleeve. "I haven't been able to pray as much lately. I'm afraid I'm letting Rafe down. It's the only way I can be there for him now."

Anne fought to bring a smile to her face, but was worried and pained for her friend. "Do you want to go inside where it's more comfortable?"

Again, Natalia quickly shook her head. "No, here's good."

Anne scooted closer to Natalia so they were facing each other, their crossed knees touching. Leaning close, she began to lead Natalia in prayer as the warm, early summer sun rose high in the sky overhead.

The cool air of the Beacon lobby was vastly different from the increasingly warm day outside. Mike Thorne took off his sunglasses and slipped them into the pocket of his navy blazer. As he walked across the lobby, he slipped off the blazer to reveal large biceps straining at the sleeves of the snug shirt he wore.

All Greg could do as he watched the handsome man cross the lobby was swallow. Fortunately, that meant his mouth wasn't hanging open, but he did go momentarily speechless as the man flashed a bright smile his way and said, "Hi."

Greg swallowed again and cleared his throat. He tried desperately to sound professional and not let his voice squeak. "Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to the Beacon. How may I assist you?"

When the handsome man chuckled, Greg flushed a bright red. Only then did he realize what he had done. The delivery of his question had a slight "come hither" tone and Greg had glanced down the man's body, blatantly checking him out.

Appearing unphased the man introduced himself. "I'm the new police chief, Michael Thorne. And you are?"

"Greg," he squeaked out with embarrassment.

"Nice to meet you, Greg. I'm actually looking for someone. Ava Peralta?"

Glad to have something to do, Greg blew out a relieved breath and immediately picked up the house phone. "Of course, I'll call right up to her."

"Thanks," Mike said and turned to look around the lobby. He walked a few steps away, near the hallway that led to the elevators. To kill time, he read the menu of the restaurant and the signs for the Beacon services, including the daycare.

Greg watched him out of the corner of his eye as Ava's phone rang. On the third ring she picked it up. "Ms. Peralta, there's gentleman, a very good looking one I might add, in the

lobby looking for you." He heard the amused chuckle on the other end and a friendly admonishing of "down boy" before she told him she'd be right down and hung up. Considering Olivia and Natalia's relationship, he'd given up the pretense of hiding his sexuality. It was actually nice not having to worry about it.

When Mike turned back toward the desk, Greg caught his attention. "Chief Thorne, Ms. Peralta will be right with you."

Another bright smile. "Thank you, Greg."

When Mike looked away, Greg did a modified happy dance and mumbled, "He remembered my name."

The distinctive clicking of heels on the stone floor caused Mike to turn from the CNN broadcast on the television in the corner. A much more pleasant image rounded the corner as Ava adjusted her suit jacket before reaching out a hand to shake Mike's.

"I thought I paid my time for my crime, Chief," Ava joked.

Mike laughed and handed over something in his hand, neatly folded. "Even though it's warming up, I thought you might want your jacket back. You left it at the station when I took you in."

Ava smirked at Mike's teasing smile. "Ahhh, so that's where it disappeared; I'd wondered. I was a little distracted that day." She took the item from him. "Thank you."

A few awkward, silent moments passed between them. Ava couldn't help but wish there was more to his visit than to return her jacket. When nothing was forthcoming, she pulled out her genetic Spencer charm. With a coy but knowing smile and a slight tilt to her head, she gestured to the restaurant. "Will you join me for coffee?"

Leaning back on the heels of his feet, Mike considered the offer before smiling. "That sounds lovely. Maybe you can tell me more about the daycare?" He pointed to the directional sign behind Ava.

Ava began to speak when she was interrupted.

"What about the daycare?" Leyla asked as she approached Ava.

Ava sighed as she turned and acknowledged the other woman. "Leyla."

Leyla walked up to stand next to the taller woman. She tossed Ava a quick but amused smile before looking at the gorgeous specimen in front of her. She stepped a little closer, just on the edge of Mike's personal space, and reached her hand out. "Hi, I'm Leyla Rivera, owner and director of the Little Light's Daycare. I'd be happy to answer any question you have. Perhaps over dinner?"

Ava's dark eyes jerked in Leyla's direction, but the younger woman ignored her.

Oblivious to the angry glare Ava burned into Leyla, Mike shrugged happily. "Sure, that sounds great! My daughter is staying with family in Chicago until I get settled so I really need a daycare with a great reputation to watch her while I work. Oh, but Ms. Peralta was going to tell me more about it over coffee. I know, Ms. Rivera, join us for coffee and you can give the inside scoop."

For Ava it wasn't a complete victory, but she couldn't help but smile smugly as Leyla looked at her. "Wonderful, let's go."

"Yes, wonderful," Leyla agreed through gritted teeth.

"I'd still like to go to dinner with you though, Leyla," Mike said, getting the younger woman's attention back.

"You would?" Ava questioned him before she could stop herself. Her head was spinning with the shifts in direction.

"Of course," he confirmed. He looked at Leyla and nodded. "I'll call you later this week?"

"Sure," Leyla agreed, having a hard time hiding her amusement. "So, I take it there's not a wife?"

"No, not for three years. She left not long after Breeona was born. She wasn't cut out for motherhood." Mike led the way with Leyla at his side and a not-amused Ava bringing up the rear.

"Hey Em! I have this great idea." Olivia talked out loud as she bounded down the stairs. With the recent stress and distance she'd been feeling with Emma, Olivia thought some old-fashioned girl bonding would be good for them so she set up an appointment at the salon for makeovers while Natalia was helping Sister Anne.

When she reached the last step and glanced up, she realized for the first time that the house was empty. "Em?" Olivia called out. Confusion turned to worry. "Emma!"

Some recently forgotten fears resurfaced especially with Phillip having some strange happenings going on around the house. Olivia went from room to room calling her daughter's name becoming more and more frantic with each silent second that passed.

She ran shaky hands through her hair and cursed into the empty room, "Damn it, Emma! Where are you?"

After covering every inch of the house, she ran outside and called for Emma only to be greeted by chirping birds and crickets. Panic was starting to set in, and she could feel her heart racing frantically. Taking a deep breath, she tried to clear her head and think of any places she may have missed.

Then she remembered Emma's new favorite place to hang out was the barn - partly to practice her t'ai chi, but mostly to be alone in her prepubescent angst. Olivia broke into a light jog as she headed to the barn.

Giving the old wooden bar across the doors a good shove, she lifted it fairly easily and flung the door open. "Emma!"

A frantic scurrying to her right drew her attention. She saw the orange glow and smell of the smoke before the cigarette was ground out against a wooden post. Her mind barely took in the rest of the image - Emma seated on the hay between Blake's two boys, Kevin and Jason, who were smirking up at her and a third boy she didn't recognize - before Olivia yelled, "Emma Spencer Spaulding!"

The young girl pulled back as Olivia marched forward. Olivia wasn't sure if she wanted to hug her or strangle her. The boy's faces went from haughty to terrified with lightening speed. The response pleased Olivia as she glared down at them.

"Get out before I ensure that you three are physically incapable of producing testosterone." The boys were pinned to the spot and Olivia sighed. Her patience worn down to the point of nonexistence, she growled, "Out. NOW!"

Scrambling to their feet, the boys gathered their backpacks and raced out of the barn.

Olivia looked at her daughter as she sulked on the hay. She was disappointed in Emma, but she was also exhausted from the stress and fear of the last few minutes. She fought the urge to let her body crumple in on itself and weep with joy and relief that Emma was okay because now she had a much more serious issue to deal with.

Squeezing the bridge of her nose, Olivia took a deep calming breath. "Get in the house. We need to talk."

"But Mom!" Emma whined.

"NO!" Olivia barked. She wasn't up for a civil discussion with her precocious daughter. There were some lines that couldn't and shouldn't be crossed. This was Olivia's. "You don't get the right to talk right now, young lady. In the house...now!"

Climbing to her feet in a huff, Emma stomped off past Olivia and out of the barn. Olivia watched from the barn door as Emma's stomps turned into a jog. Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she dialed Blake's number.

When the other woman answered and listened to Olivia's recounting of her discovery, Olivia sighed and acknowledged Blake's frustrated tone as she apologized profusely.

"Don't apologize, Blake. It'll be fine. Though you may want to drive out this way and get the boys. I put a good scare into them."

Blake made a joke about bringing a change of shorts for them because Olivia probably scared the crap right out of them.

Sighing, they both hung up their phones.

Olivia walked back into the barn and located the smashed cigarette butt. Then trudging the path back to the house, Olivia prepared herself for a face-off with Emma.

The sun was setting as Natalia walked into the farmhouse. After the physical and emotional day she had put in helping Sister Anne, all she wanted was a hot soak in the tub and a chance to cuddle up with Olivia. Though, after the long talk she'd had with the nun about Rafe, she felt her burden lightened considerably. The prayer hadn't hurt either; it was the first time she had felt remotely connected to God since her kidnapping.

The loud crash of a door slamming upstairs made Natalia jump, and she immediately dropped her purse to the kitchen table and raced up the steps. She stopped at the top of the landing when she saw Olivia standing outside Emma's room - her head resting against the wood and her hand on the knob.

"Emma, open this door right now!" Olivia yelled.

"Go away!" Emma's muffled, high-pitched scream was heard on the other side.

Bewildered, Natalia took a step forward. "What in the world's going on?"

Olivia turned to her and sagged with exhaustion against the door. Her usually bright green eyes that flashed with passion and intensity were dull and drained. "I don't know what to do. I can't get through to her."

"About what?" Natalia asked her partner, taking another step forward. She couldn't help but worry about Olivia's health. The stress couldn't be good for her.

Shaking her head, unable to find the right words, Olivia sobbed as tears spilled over. Natalia was at her side in an instant. "Come on, querida. Let's go sit down and talk. We'll figure it out." She guided her partner to the stairs and helped her down. First things first, Natalia had to find out what was going on. She walked Olivia to the couch and gently pushed her down then went to the kitchen. Returning with a glass of water and a box of tissues, she sat down by the older woman.

After Olivia drank half the glass and set it down on the coffee table, Natalia took her hand. Raising the delicate hand, she placed a kiss to the back of it and brought it down to rest in her lap. "Okay, start from the top."

Sighing deeply, Olivia used her free hand to squeeze the bridge of her nose. Dropping her hand, she looked at the brunette. "I caught Emma in the barn with Blake's boys smoking."

Natalia pulled back, shocked. "Wait...what?"

"Exactly what it sounded like the first time," Olivia's voice was laced with sarcasm and she grimaced as soon as the words were out. She waved a hand dismissively. "Sorry."

Natalia wasn't even worried about her partner's tone. She was still thinking out what Olivia had said, "Were the boys smoking or was she?"

Unable to stand it any longer, Olivia stood up and began to pace. "Her. Either way, does it matter? She was sneaking around...with boys."

Natalia watched her partner pace and could tell that she needed to word whatever she said very carefully. It wasn't that Natalia wasn't concerned. Sneaking around with boys and smoking behind their backs could be the start of more serious behavior, or it could simply be that Emma was growing up and exerting her independence. The approach she and Olivia took would set the course for whatever they faced next and probably for whatever Emma did to push their boundaries. First though, Natalia had to approach Emma's mother with just as much caution.

Standing, Natalia walked over to the older woman and reached for her. She took Olivia's trembling hands in her own and raised them to her chest the way she always did to focus her partner on their connection. "I'm not happy about this either. Emma's too young to court trouble, and we both know those boys are trouble or they never would have gotten kicked out of school. I also know that Emma's just starting to change from a girl to a young woman. This is a tough time for her, and we need to get on the same page about how we deal with this."

Olivia dropped her head wearily and rested it against Natalia's. She blew out a tired sigh. "I guess locking her in her room until she's forty isn't an option."

Natalia chuckled and squeezed the hands she still held. "I think some would call that child abuse."

"I'm so afraid she's going to get hurt," Olivia choked on her sob and squeezed her eyes shut against the tears brought by her biggest fear. She could see the images of Emma growing up too fast and paying the price for it flashing in her mind. Anger and pain bubbled up in her. "I wanted a better life for her than what I had."

Natalia pulled back, realizing suddenly what Olivia's real fears for Emma were and what they meant. She placed the palm of her hand against Olivia's bowed head before leaning over and kissing the place where her hand had been. She traced her hand down the side of Olivia's face and tugged her face up gently to look her partner in the eyes. "Oh, querida. What happened to you won't happen to her."



Olivia's eyes swam with a mix of anger and sadness. "You can't make that promise," Olivia said flatly.

Natalia stood up a little straighter, trying to convey to her frightened partner the confidence she felt in their ability as parents. "No, you're right. I can't. But...we...can teach her how to protect herself and respect herself and we can be there for her, be firm and consistent. Emma's a smart girl. We need to agree on how to handle this and stick to it. We can't stop her from growing up, but we can prepare ourselves for what that means."

When Olivia nodded, Natalia continued, feeling encouraged, "We haven't even talked about her dating, if she gets a car when she's sixteen, or what her curfew is going to be."

Groaning at the thought of Emma dating, Olivia smiled for the first time since Natalia had gotten home. "We have a lot to figure out."

"Good for you that I've already been through the teenage years with one kid." Natalia grimaced. "I guess that's not the best example."

Olivia pulled her partner in close, feeling comforted and reassured by Natalia's calm approach to their family problems. "Don't. Rafe had some bumps in the road, but he turned out just fine."

"Emma will too. She's going to push our buttons, but we handle it as a team, okay?"

Olivia leaned in close, nuzzling along the brunette's jaw line until she reached a tantalizing ear. "We always were a good team." She lightly nibbled Natalia's earlobe and smiled as she felt the woman shiver in her arms.

"Don't distract me." Natalia tugged at Olivia's hips, her control disintegrating quickly. She pushed back from Olivia and chanced a glance up at the green eyes of her lover. The heated smolder was nearly her undoing, but there was unfinished business that needed to be taken care of first. "Let me go talk to Emma. Let her know that we're going to talk and we'll sit down with her over breakfast in the morning." Olivia took a deep breath and nodded. Natalia leaned in and kissed the other woman tenderly but with a hint of expectation. "I'll meet you in the bedroom."

Natalia ascended the stairs steadily as Olivia closed up downstairs. She rested her hand on the knob to Emma's bedroom. Her hand twitched automatically as she began to open the door then she thought better of it. She lightly knocked instead. "Emma?"

Time stretched and a sudden fear snaked into Natalia's subconscious. What if she climbed out the window? She began to turn the knob again when a muffled but discernable, "Yeah," came through the door.

Relief forced the breath Natalia had been holding out of her lungs and just in the nick of time too as she heard Olivia's footsteps on the stairs. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Emma answered.

Natalia entered and closed the door behind her. The room was pitch black, and she felt this was indicative of where Emma was emotionally at the moment. For as long as Natalia had known Emma, she had slept with a night light. The complete darkness signaled the change Emma was going through - no longer a child, not yet a woman - and it made Natalia incredibly sad.

"Where are you, Em? I can't see a thing," Natalia asked, leaning against the door to keep her bearings.

"On the bed," the girl softly replied.

"Can we turn on a light?"

Emma sighed into the darkness. "I don't want to." Before Natalia could respond, Emma asked, "Mom told you what happened, didn't she?"

"She told me what she saw, yes," Natalia responded honestly and inched her way in the direction of the bed, hoping she didn't kick Shadow accidentally on the way over. When her knees bumped the mattress, she turned around and sat on the edge. "She told me that both of you were really upset."

Natalia waited, giving her daughter a chance to respond in her own time. Finally, Emma spoke up but her voice was tinged with fear, "Are you mad at me, Ma?"

"I could never be mad at you, Em. I am worried about you though, and so is your mom. She's beside herself with worry, Cariño." Natalia reached across the comforter until her fingers found Emma's knee. She rested her hand on the young girl's leg for a moment before squeezing. "Your mom and I want to talk to you in the morning. Tonight, all of us are stressed and tired, and it's not good to talk when our emotions are so frayed. Just promise me you won't do anything crazy between now and morning."

"Like what?" Emma sounded perplexed.

"Oh, I don't know. Like climb out your window or something." Natalia shrugged and tossed out the idea to see what her daughter would say.

"No way, Ma! I'm like way up on the second floor!" Emma chuckled.

"Ah ha! So you have thought about it!" Natalia teased.

Emma giggled. It was a sound that warmed Natalia's heart, and for a moment she believed that everything would be okay. Emma agreed to be there in the morning and to talk to them about what had happened today in the barn.

In the short couple of minutes that Natalia had been in Emma's room, her eyes had adjusted to the darkness. She leaned over where she saw the outline of Emma's head in the shadows and kissed the top of the girl's head.

"Love you, Em," she whispered.

"Love you too," Emma responded through a yawn.

Natalia was almost to the door when she heard the softly spoken, "Ma?"

"Yeah, sweetie?" Natalia stopped and turned back to face the center of the dark room, looking in the general direction of Emma's bed.

A soft sniff preceded Emma's whispered, "Sorry about the barn."

Feeling heartened by the girl's words, Natalia smiled into the darkness. "See you in the morning. I'll even make banana pancakes."

Closing the door quietly behind her, Natalia walked to her own bedroom door. Cracking it open, she was assailed by the sound of water running, lavender and vanilla scented steam wafting out of the bathroom door, and the view of a long leg with a shapely calf rising out of the soapy suds of a tub. Longing immediately clenched in Natalia's stomach. As she walked across the bedroom, she discarded her clothes. Pushing the door open, a rush of desire flared through her body as Olivia casually turned her head and hooded emerald eyes caressed her naked body.

Bracing her hands on the door frame to remain steady, Natalia asked, "Is there enough room for two in there?"

Olivia didn't answer as she stood up in the tub, the warm soapy water cascading down her body. She was pleased when Natalia's eyes followed the rivulets of water and she swayed slightly in the doorway. Crooking her finger at her dark-haired lover, Olivia beckoned her forward. "With what I have planned for you, darling, it won't matter."

Natalia dropped her hands from the door and walked over to stand beside the tub. Reaching out, she lightly ran the tip of her fingers down Olivia's shoulder and the front of her chest until her hand reached the engorged peak of her nipple. Slowly, she drew circles around the nipple moving freely in the soap-slicked water on her body.

A sharp intake of air pulled her eyes upward. Olivia's mouth had fallen open slightly and her eyelashes fluttered. As she began to guide her fingers lower, Olivia reached up to take her hand and return it to her side.

She attempted to move her hand back to its preferred location on Olivia's breast and again Olivia thwarted her. Natalia protested, "But I want to."

Olivia leaned teasingly close, her lips almost but not quite touching Natalia's. "Oh, you will." She breathed. "Many, many times you will. But right now, this is all about you, querida."



The kiss was deep and intoxicating. It made Natalia feel like they hadn't kissed for months, and she was enthralled all over again by the power and allure of her partner. She tilted her head, angling to take Olivia deeper.

For a few seconds, Olivia indulged her lover's exploration, being in the moment with her, tasting her unique flavor on her tongue. It amazed her how Natalia always tasted sweet. It must have been all of those damn cookies she made; the sugary silk of her mouth and body were like some kind of life-giving nectar to Olivia. As if she couldn't live without it.

Moaning, she pulled away from Natalia to regain her composure. Her hands had at some point come up to cup Natalia's face and were now kneading at her naked shoulders. It took all her strength to not reclaim the swollen lips of her lover.

Instead, Olivia dropped one of her hands and caressed the inside of Natalia's thigh. As she edged closer to the damp curls, she watched Natalia's dark eyes flutter shut and her bottom lip disappear between her white teeth. Teasing her fingers in the soft curls, Olivia toyed with her lover until Natalia gasped when one of her fingers dipped into the wet folds.

"Olivia," Natalia moaned.

For a moment, Olivia was mesmerized. She must have been still a little too long because Natalia opened her eyes in confusion. The look in Natalia's eyes did something to Olivia she couldn't really explain; she never was really able to explain it. All she knew was that in that moment the idea of breaking the contact between them and moving to the bed went completely out the window.

"Can you do this standing up?" Olivia questioned.

Natalia shook her head, trying to focus her muddled thoughts. The light touch of Olivia's fingers between her legs wasn't helping. "No...um, I...I've never tried."

Olivia wrapped her free arm around the brunette's waist and brought her closer. "Want to try?"

Bringing her hand up to cup Olivia's cheek, she knew what her answer would be, what it would always be for her. Olivia didn't have to ask her permission. She gave it freely to this beautiful woman long ago, but Olivia asked. She would always ask with her because that's just who Olivia was.

Natalia nodded. "I want you, Olivia." She opened her legs a little wider, offering herself to Olivia.

Her fingers slid easily through Natalia's wetness, coating the tips. Moving back to Natalia's clit, she used her pointer and middle finger to find the shaft of Natalia's clit. When she did, she made small up and down movements.

At first, Natalia wasn't sure what she was doing. Olivia had teased around her opening, encouraging her to spread her legs further in the assumed anticipation of being entered. When Olivia's fingers moved back up to her clit as if in search for something, Natalia almost asked her what she was doing, but everything made sense as she realized that Olivia quite literally was jacking her off as if she was a man. The realization and orgasm hit her at the same time leaving Natalia shaking and hanging on to her inventive lover.

As soon as she was able to take a full breath, Natalia pulled back from Olivia. "Where did you...? How did you...? Jesus!"

Olivia quirked her mouth to the side, trying not to smirk because she felt damn proud of herself. "I was curious if that would work."

"I think that's a definite 'yes'. But you know what?"

Something in Natalia's eyes made Olivia nervous. "What?"

"We're not done."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. "We're not?"

Natalia shook her head and took Olivia's hand to help her out of the tub. She then walked them over to the shower and turned the water on. She climbed in first then helped Olivia step in. Stepping under the warm spray of water, she handed Olivia the loofah and soap. She relaxed as Olivia soaped up her body and scrubbed her back.

Olivia had barely finished washing Natalia when she gave in to her desire. Dropping the sponge, she leaned in close to Natalia allowing her breasts to slide along her lover's soapy back. Natalia's head dropped back to Olivia's shoulder and she took advantage of the access to Natalia's shapely neck, her mouth latching on to the closest skin she could find then teasing along the curve up to her ear.

Suddenly, Natalia spun around. "You had your turn. This is mine."

Natalia kissed Olivia as her thigh insinuated itself between Olivia's legs. A low moan was Olivia's response and even through the water, Natalia could feel the unique texture of Olivia's arousal against her leg. In spite of her earlier orgasm, she could tell her body needed more. She raised her outside leg and set her foot on the built-in marble seat behind Olivia. Without ceremony, she reached for Olivia's hand and guided her fingers to her center.

There was no need to tell Olivia twice. Three of her fingers slid easily into Natalia, and she could feel the way her lover pushed down that she wanted more. Bending her knees, she angled to reach deeper, and that was exactly what Natalia had been waiting for because she quickly slipped her hand between them and entered Olivia.

"Oh, Jesus!"

"Oh, God!"

Both women spoke at virtually the same time, and Olivia would have laughed at the invocation of the deities if it didn't feel so fucking good. Their gasps, grunts, and pants were muffled as they held onto each other - kissing, touching, and tasting any part of their lover they could find. Both of them kept going, orgasm or no orgasm, until they slid to the shower floor in an exhausted heap. Olivia was still buried deep inside Natalia as the younger woman curled into her side, and she tried to free her hand but Natalia had other intentions.

She looked up into the dark but content eyes of her lover as long fingers wrapped around her wrist. "Don't go. Stay. Just a little longer."

Even with the cooling water beating against their skin, Olivia couldn't deny Natalia anything she wanted.

Act II

Emma looked at the clock on her bedside table and groaned. It was 7:15. She would barely have time to gobble up her breakfast before racing for the bus. Her moms wanted to talk to her about smoking and probably put her on restriction. She felt better after talking to her Ma last night, but she still dreaded it all the same. Sitting on the side of the bed, she tied her tennis shoes before grabbing her backpack and walking downstairs.

"Come on, Shadow. Let's go face the music," she said to her dog on a sigh and the dog obediently followed. Being put on restriction was a crappy way to end her school year! She had an idea though, and she hoped it would work. In her head, she envisioned her plan working and that made her happier. Bounding down the stairs, she skipped lightly into the kitchen.

"Morning!" Emma called cheerfully. She opened the door to let Shadow out then came back to sit at the table.

Olivia almost choked on her coffee, not expecting her daughter to sound so chipper after last night. Natalia, on the other hand, turned from her pancake-making to smile. "Well, good morning to you, too! You're right on time." The brunette picked up Emma's plate and slid a pancake onto it.

"Thank you, Ma," Emma smiled and responded politely.

Olivia raised an eyebrow and felt the hair on her arms begin to stand up. Emma was up to something. She glanced up at her partner who turned to her with a pancake and slid it onto her plate as well. With a wink and a happy smile, she turned back to the stove.

Suddenly, Emma set her fork down and looked back and forth between them seriously. "Mom, Ma...I just want to say that I'm sorry about the cigarettes. I was curious and wanted to see what it was like. It was the only time I did it, and I promise I won't do it again."

The two women shared a look. The decision they had come to last night spoken in their eyes. Natalia nodded her head slightly and Olivia looked back at their daughter. "Thank you, Emma, for accepting responsibility. I'm sorry if I came across angry as well last night, and I'm sorry I raised my voice to you." She took a deep breath then continued, "Your Ma and I have talked it over and feel that, while we accept your apology and that certainly works in your favor, some kind of punishment has to be dealt out."

Emma nodded. Everything was going according to plan thus far. "I understand. Smoking is really bad for my health. It was a mistake."

"Right, so, our decision is a one month restriction. During this time, we'll confiscate your cell phone and you won't be able to attend any events without one of us or your father or Beth present."

The girl tried not to visibly grimace. A month of restriction was pretty harsh, but it could have been worse. At least she could still go places and see her friends. "Okay, I can do that." Olivia took a deep breath. She wasn't quite done yet. That was the easy part. "Good, but there's one other part to the agreement." Emma swallowed and waited. "You can't see either Kevin or Jason until we tell you otherwise."

Emma's eyes went wide and her mouth fell open. "But Mom!"

Olivia held up a hand. "No, Emma. This is not negotiable. That's our final decision."

Inside, Emma seethed. She couldn't believe her mom could be so mean. The boys weren't even smoking! She apologized. What else did she want? Pushing around her pancakes, Emma realized she'd lost her appetite for them. She pushed her plate away and stood up. Two feet from the door, her mom stopped her.

"Hold up, Emma. I'm taking you to school. Since you have a short day, Anna's going to pick you up for your lessons." Olivia finished her coffee and stood. After giving Natalia a quick kiss, she grabbed her purse with her agitated daughter in tow.

The small café wasn't the usual place Blake would have suggested for meeting someone. Company was her comfort zone, but considering the person she was meeting was Ross and the reason for meeting had to do with their sons, she felt that the familiarity of Company would have made such a serious conversation difficult.

She followed the hostess who guided her to a corner booth exactly as she had requested. She had been comfortably seated a few minutes, enough time to check her emails, when she felt eyes on her. Looking up, she felt her stomach do a lazy flip when she locked eyes with the dancing blue eyes of her husband – ex-husband, former husband, back from the dead husband, whatever he was. His nonchalant charm and easy mannerisms had wooed her from the start, and she couldn't deny that Ross still had some effect on her.

Leaning over, Ross brushed his lips against her cheek. She shifted uneasily in her seat as his cologne, familiar yet foreign, invaded her senses. For years, she had mourned the loss of him and been able to eradicate these small memories from her everyday existence. Walking down the street, she'd catch a scent of his cologne on a passing man and begin to weep. However, in recent months, she'd replaced sad and painful memories with thoughts of a hopeful future with a person very different from the one standing before her. Doris was so much of what Ross wasn't.

Shaking her head, she brought herself back to the present and gestured to the seat across from her in the booth. "Please."

"It's good to see you, Blake. You look gorgeous today," Ross gushed and took delight in the blush that flared on Blake's cheeks.

"Thank you. You're looking typically handsome as well."

The waiter came to take their drink orders and left them to make a decision on their meal. After a few moments of light conversation, the waiter returned. He inquired, "Will this be on one or two checks?"

"One."

"Two," Blake corrected quickly and proceeded to place her order before Ross had the chance to protest. "I'll have the special with wheat toast and sausage.

Ross smiled recognizing her sidestep but allowed her some leeway. "And I'll have the eggs Benedict."

The waiter disappeared with their orders. Ross watched until he was certain they were alone. "I can take care of the check, darling. We are married after all."

The redhead bristled at the assumption. "I seem to remember a 'til death do us part' clause in the contract."

"But I'm not really dead," he smirked.

Blake sighed, tired of the game already. At one time, she would have relished the teasing and banter, even found it a turn on, but not anymore. "And this isn't why we're really here."

Ross leaned back into the leather of the booth seat and gave up the pretense. "Of course. Very well. Let's talk then about the boys. What happened?"

Blake, relieved that Ross had accepted her change of topic, waited until the approaching server placed the food in front of them and left before responding. "Olivia caught them in the barn with her daughter, Emma."

Ross seemed to contemplate her comment as he sat forward and stirred his coffee. "Hmmm, yes." He tapped the spoon on the side of his mug and placed it on the table. "From what I understand though, Olivia Spencer also became quite upset and even threatened our children." He interrupted Blake as she began to respond, "Really, Blake, you're running with pretty unsavory friends."

"That's not a relevant point, and you know it." Blake took a deep, calming breath. "The fact is that our sons need discipline. They've been uncontrollable for years."

"I don't seem to remember them that way." Ross shrugged. "They're perfectly well-behaved for me. Sometimes having a father around can do that."

Looking down at her uneaten food, Blake realized she had completely lost her appetite. Coming to a conclusion, she nodded. "Well then, since you're back now, I guess you can

make yourself useful again by being a proper father to them. A nice, long summer vacation with you may be just what they need."

Ross's face blanched when Blake called his bluff. "But..."

"I'll talk to Mel about having an amendment written up to our child custody paperwork. She'll be in touch." Standing, Blake dropped money on the table to cover her bill and left the café.

All Ross could do was watch as she walked away.

Digging her feet into the grass, Anna focused hard on keeping her footing as Emma spun and kicked the target guard that Anna held tightly in her grips. The young girl's strength and confidence in her skills were increasing and Anna felt it in every inch of her body this morning. She braced her body as Emma spun again and placed another forceful kick in the center of the target.

Anna agreed to forego their usual calmer t'ai chi session for a little kickboxing. It had been at Emma's request. Before the girl even uttered a greeting to Anna, she had asked for it, and with the hard and frustrated look on the normally smiling girl's face, Anna had a feeling that Emma needed this outlet.

Emma quickly assumed the position for another kick and Anna dropped her hand and stepped back. "Hold up! Let's take five." The older woman dropped her target guard to the ground then reached into her bag for a Gatorade and tossed it to Emma.

"But we just started," Emma grumbled and leaned against a nearby tree, taking a small sip of the drink in her hand.

For a moment, Anna watched her young friend as Emma picked at the label around the bottle before ripping off a long strip. Finally, she sat down and patted the ground in front of her. "Hey, come over here and sit."

Emma did a first with Anna – she rolled her eyes. However, she did eventually push away from the tree and sat down in front of her trainer turned friend. "Okay."

"You don't have to bullshit me, Emma. Something's bothering you."

Still looking down, Emma kept picking at the label, not answering.

Finally, Anna reached across and placed her hand over the young girl's hand. "Stop please, and look at me."

Sighing with defeat, Emma looked up and Anna was taken with how much she looked like Olivia right then – the fierce determination captured in soul weary eyes. Just like Olivia, the pain and loss were laid bared for the whole world to see, if it ever bothered to look. Anna did look, probably one of the few people that did.

Emma shrugged. "I don't want to talk about it really."

The older woman smirked a little at Emma. "You know I don't buy that. Everyone needs to talk sometime."

"Well, I don't!" Emma tried to stand but Anna latched onto her wrist.

"Bullshit! Now sit down and talk to me," Anna insisted, giving the girl's arm a slight tug.

Flopping back to the ground, Emma threw her hands up in the air. "Fine! I had a fight with my mom, and I guess I'm not over it yet."

"What was it about?" Anna asked. She was surprised that Emma and Olivia had a fight. They rarely got that upset with each other that it didn't blow over quickly.

Picking up a nearby stick, Emma began to draw in the dirt with it – a little house with the sun shining bright in the sky. "She caught me in the barn yesterday smoking."

Anna furrowed her brows, thinking. *Not that Olivia condones smoking, especially by her child, but that doesn't seem like something that would get her that upset.*

Emma looked up from adding a tree to her dirt art masterpiece and bit the bottom of her lip. "I wasn't alone. Blake's sons were there, too. She went on and on about them and how they're a bad influence. But they're nice to me. At least they have been since I kicked their butts." She smiled at the time they had picked on Clarissa by the pond almost a year ago and how she'd reacted. "They don't treat me like I'm a baby."

"And your mom does?" Anna concluded. Emma shrugged but didn't respond. She smiled at the young girl. "You know that's what she's supposed to do, right? It's a natural instinct. She can't help it."

"But it's annoying, Anna!" Emma fussed. "She's always protecting me from everything. As if I don't know what's going on! Well, I do. I know more than she realizes."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. She knows you know. You're very smart, Emma, and you've always seemed older than your age. The thing is, you're her baby and you always will be. That woman could be seconds from taking her last breath on this Earth, but I swear, she'd tell God that He just had to wait because she had to take care of you...one more time." Even as Anna spoke the words, she knew they were true; she wasn't exaggerating just to get through to the girl.

Tears had welled up in Emma's eyes. She propped her arms over her raised knees and subtly wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I know. I just wish she'd let up a little. It was just a stupid cigarette. One stupid cigarette."

Anna sighed. "She probably will with time, but honey, I don't think her biggest concern was the cigarette. She caught you in a precarious situation, Emma, with two older boys. You may think you know them, but something bad could have still happened to you. They could have hurt you, and just because they're Blake's sons doesn't mean they wouldn't have."

Emma rocked a little thinking as awareness suddenly sank in. "Like my mom was hurt when she was young?"

Anna sucked in a breath, not sure whether to confirm or deny. "Emma."

"I know. They think I don't, but I do," Emma confirmed sadly. "I overheard them talking once."

"She doesn't want it to happen to you, too. It terrifies her. Hell, it terrifies me. Every woman!" Anna choked out.

The young girl nodded sadly then looked up at Anna with a renewed determination flickering in her eyes. "That's why I'm training. I don't want it to happen to me either."

Anna nodded back in solidarity. "Let's get back to it then."

Winter was gone and the warm May air doing wonders for Olivia's mood; it felt good to get out and pound the pavement rather than the treadmill. Running helped clear her head particularly when she felt overwhelmed.

She enjoyed this route as it lead past the river and the train tracks, then looped around for three more miles before it ended at the path to the lake. Natalia had encouraged her to get back into running. It was good for her heart although Natalia warned her to not overdue it. Rick encouraged her as long as she took it slow.

Natalia was working through her angst with Anna, taking t'ai chi lessons twice a week. That, plus her chats with Sister Anne was helping Natalia put the kidnapping and other worries in perspective. She would never forget the incident, it was engraved in her memory but she was finding tools to help her reconcile with the trauma. Natalia feeling more settled made Olivia more settled.

Now, if Emma could only settle down. Her little girl was not so little anymore. She turned away from the railroad tracks and saw the bank of the river in view. She and Natalia used to roll their eyes and laugh at Emma's antics, anticipating what the little girl would be like when she became a teenager. She and Natalia weren't laughing anymore. Just a few days ago she found Emma and Blake's two sons out in the barn smoking cigarettes. It was so obvious, the obnoxious smell wafting out through the barn door. After a strong reprimand, she called Blake and told her to come and pick up her boys. As she continued her run, Olivia replayed the conversation with Emma over in her head, haunted by her daughter's defiant look. Where had her sweet girl gone?

"It wasn't what you think, mom."

"I know what I saw." Olivia stood with hands on hips, the smashed cigarette between her fingers. "Care to explain yourself?"

Emma didn't really have an excuse and she accepted the two-week ban on texting without much fuss. She'd figure out how to get around it.

Olivia knew it wasn't about smoking. She had snuck a cigarette or two when she was only twelve. It was the terrifying thought that this was just the first step down the road to Emma's reckless behavior, the same kind of reckless behavior that had gotten Olivia in trouble years ago. This is what kept Olivia tossing and turning at night.

She tried to wipe that image out of her mind as she felt the warmth of the sun on her back, and the rush of the river indicating the warmer weather was definitely here to stay. That thought made Olivia smile as she puffed along, and stripped down to her T-shirt. She felt a little clammy and slowed to a trot. She loved this part of the riverbank the best; there were a few twists and turns and then a large oak that had been uprooted years ago was laying half covered by the swirling current.

She continued to jog in place as she stopped a moment to catch her breath. Something caught her eye near a branch of the old oak. She jogged closer to the shore, trying to make out a bulky bundle that was being sloshed around. She stopped moving and continued to peer down into the murky brown. It appeared to be a cloth of some kind. She looked around for a stick and began to poke at it. A jacket she assumed. Working the stick she brought the jacket nearer to the shore and managed to flip it over.

She threw a hand across her mouth to stifle a scream. *What to do?* How would she explain that she had found a jacket with the remnants of an arm in it floating in the river?

Natalia was thankful for the day off so she could simply relax and catch up on some work around the house. Olivia had assured her that she could handle the meetings with the vendors and Greg would take care of settling the contract to host an election night extravaganza. Today was Natalia's to do what she liked.

After cleaning and putting away the breakfast dishes, she logged onto her laptop and checked her emails to make sure nothing had blown up at work. She felt assured that she'd have been called if that was the case, but she made sure to check her email just to be on the safe side.

Ah, yes, the safe side. That was something Natalia was good at doing – erring on the side of caution, being reserved, contemplating her options.

She tapped the table next to her computer before clicking the Skype icon. She knew it was fruitless. She kept the program open at work and when no one was looking she logged in at home. But...Rafe was never there.

Nothing new this time either.

Setting the volume on the computer to its highest setting and turning off the screensaver, Natalia stood up and began picking up around the living room. When she finished that, she found the furniture polish under the sink and started at the fireplace mantel, dusting her way back toward the kitchen. She was nothing if not methodical in how she cleaned. Even when she was a housekeeper at the Beacon, she would start in the farthest corner and at the highest point of a room and worked her way out and down. Vacuuming was always last because if everything else has been cleaned above, the remaining dust and dirt should be on the carpet and ready to pick up.

With precision, Natalia worked the room, inching closer to the small hallway that led back to the kitchen. Her mind wandered when she cleaned. She found it interesting that something that most people dreaded became her must-do activity simply so she could think clearly.

She turned to the left and dusted the shelves along the wall. She picked up each knickknack and dusted beneath it. The final item she always dusted was her Mother Mary statue. She had had the statue since she left home as a teen, pregnant and alone. Mary had kept her company many sleepless nights or at least nights she wasn't bone weary from working so many jobs. Next to God and Rafe, Mary had been her best friend. Mary was also the last item she dusted and cleaned because it gave her an excuse to take the statue and sit down with it at the table. As she cleaned, she talked, opening up about problems or worries she was facing.

In those early days, her problems were always about Rafe. Was she doing the right thing? Was he safe and happy? Could she do more to give him what he needed? Rarely did she ask for anything for herself except the endurance and patience to be a good mother to her son.

These days though, her prayers had expanded so much, including much more than just Rafe and herself. Olivia, Emma, Francesca, Ava, and Leyla. Her parents. Phillip and Beth. Even Frank. All of them were a part of her circle of family and friends that she prayed to Mary for to intercede and help them.

When she was sure the last speck of dust was gone, Natalia placed the statue on the table in front of her and looked at it for a long while.

"Yes, it's been awhile." The statue stared back at Natalia without judgment. Eventually, she continued, "If you have a moment though, there's a lot I need to talk to you about."

Grumbling in frustration, Ross yelled into his empty car, "Aw, come on!" The traffic was moving at a snail's pace, and while he could see the flashing blue lights of police cars, he was still aggravated at all of the people rubbernecking as they went by the scene.

The fight with Blake wasn't helping his mood either. Ross was having trouble understanding why Blake seemed so difficult and argumentative, even agitated, now that he was back. Of all people, he thought she'd be happy to see him, and he had hoped that they could rebuild their life together. Certainly, being gone six years didn't help matters, but it wasn't exactly his fault. Phillip Spaulding had sabotaged his plane after all. If anyone was to blame it was Phillip!

Thinking about Phillip Spaulding didn't help his mood either. He'd tried so hard to help his nephew over the years and being nearly killed by him was how he got repaid for his troubles.

Ross tapped his steering wheel impatiently. "We'll see who gets repaid in kind, my dear nephew."

As Ross came upon the scene, he understood why the traffic was moving so slow. It wasn't a wreck like he'd expected. Easing across the bridge, Ross saw the yellow crime scene tape stretching in a large swath from the side of the bridge, along the side of the road perhaps a hundred feet and then diagonally across to a large fallen oak tree by the river.

Within the scene, he didn't see many familiar faces. It had only been six years that he'd been gone, but so much had changed. Finally, he spotted Olivia Spencer standing next to a police cruiser, talking to a tall black man and a shorter but serious-looking Asian woman. When he was well past the scene, Ross pulled his car off the road and got out when there was a break in the traffic. The lawyer in him couldn't help but wonder what was going on.

It was clear that the two officers were asking Olivia some questions, so in deference to respect for the law and confidential questioning, he stood off to the side behind the yellow tape. At one point, Olivia looked up and locked eyes with him. She was in the middle of talking but stopped short upon seeing him, drawing the attention of the officers to him. She said something to them and walked over to Ross.

Smiling, Olivia leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "So, the rumors are true!"

"Yes, yes. The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Ross joked with a charming wink at the beautiful woman.

Olivia turned to the two officers and introduced them. "Ross, this is Detective Anna Li, and our new Chief of Police, Michael Thorne." She gestured back to Ross, adding, "This is Ross Marler, Phillip's uncle and Blake's, ummmmm..."

"Husband," Ross finished for her.

Anna's eyes went wide. "Oh!" She reached her hand out to shake his. "It's nice to meet you. I've...heard a lot about you."

Ross smiled teasingly at her. "Really? I hope it's been good."

"Mostly," Anna mumbled as she looked up at a smirking Olivia.

If Ross heard the comment, he didn't let it phase him. Instead, he greeted the tall, handsome man among them. "Chief Thorne, nice to meet you." He glanced at the trio then. "What in the world's going on here?"

Anna looked to her boss for his lead. Michael didn't hesitate. "Well, Mr. Marler, it seems we may have a dead body that's washed up."

"Please, call me Ross, Chief. Do you have any idea who it is?" He asked.

"Only if you'll call me Mike, and no, not yet. Forensics is on it." He gestured with a nod of his head to the navy jackets milling around close to the river's edge. "Hopefully, we'll know something soon."

"Chief!" A woman with curly dark hair called from the middle of the crime scene team.

"Excuse me," Mike said, walking down to the woman who had spoken.

Ross smiled as he spoke, "Is that Eleni Cooper?"

Olivia crossed her arms as all three regarded the scene by the river. "Yep."

"And what in the world are you doing here, Olivia?"

She looked back at the man she had considered a friend at one time. Probably one of the few men in Springfield that she automatically felt was off-limits to her. Seducing Ross Marler had just never really crossed her mind. "I was the lucky girl to find the body."

Ross grimaced and nodded his head. "Nice! Well, at least you weren't the one to put the body there."

"I've had my moments," Olivia quipped. He knew the tumultuous relationship she'd had with Phillip so the comment came as no surprise to him.

"I better get going," Ross said and looked to Anna. "Nice to meet you, Detective Li. Hopefully, I'll see you around, Olivia."

"Oh, I'm sure you will." Olivia commented then added, "But I'll be quite happy if I don't see your boys near my house anytime soon."

Ross smirked at the comment but continued walking.

Olivia and Anna watched as Ross left and then Anna turned back to the crime scene whispering to her friend, "So, that's the infamous Ross Marler." Anna continued when Olivia nodded, "He's... handsome. Charming, even. Doris told me once that Ross was Blake's one true love. I don't think Doris was too happy about that."

Olivia sighed. "Blake has a lot to figure out."

"And in the meantime, Doris is sitting in the middle waiting...worrying," Anna's tone was protective, even angry sounding.

"Don't, Anna," Olivia warned.

"What?"

"Don't! Don't get in the middle. Trust me; let the situation take its course. It'll work out the way it's supposed to in the end," she advised.

Anna smiled up at her friend. "That's ironic coming from you."

"Hey, I did let it take its course with Natalia! I went completely off script with her, and it worked out." She looked over at her friend, who was reluctantly accepting her advice. "I

know it's hard, and you won't hear me say this often, so make a note of it but...have faith. Just have faith."

Olivia followed Anna's line of sight as she looked up to the sky and then stepped away. Olivia laughed. "What?"

"I'm getting out of the way. Lightening could strike!"

Olivia swatted at her friend. "Oh shut up! So, am I done here? I called Natalia so she wouldn't freak out because I wasn't back on time from my run, but I need to get into the office for a meeting. Thank goodness I have a change of clothes there!"

"Sure. I'll call you if we need anything else."

Eleni acknowledged Anna as the detective walked up to her and Mike. The tall man turned to Anna and asked, "I know it could go without saying because of my new position and all, but I don't want to step on toes. Would you mind if I handle the footwork on this case?"

Anna shrugged, a little relieved actually that she didn't have to deal with what could be something major, especially with the Howard trial starting soon. Springfield may not be the hotbed of criminal activity like Chicago, but strange shenanigans always seemed to be going on here and a little down time would be a relief. "Not at all, boss!"

He raised his hands in the air and turned to smile at Eleni as he began to walk backwards. "See? I love Springfield! Teamwork!" He pointed to Eleni. "Call me when you have something."

"Will do!" Eleni smiled.

Both women chuckled but Eleni stopped first and turned to her friend, mumbling, "Newbie...he has NO idea!"

Anna laughed because all she could do was agree. When she first arrived here, there was an air about the town that it was boring and quiet. Time had proven to her that her first impression was way off base. "Even though this isn't my case officially, I'm terribly curious by nature. What's the deal?"

"The good news is that there's enough left of whoever this is to probably be able to make an ID. We've found a partial skull, various other bones, clothing, and even some teeth." Eleni paused from talking to Anna and spoke to a member of her crime scene team, "Hey, go get the mud boots out of the van and pan for some gold on the river bottom." The tech ran off to do as he was told and Eleni turned back to the other woman.

"How did the body get here? This is a well-traveled bridge and a lot of people take walks out here. Surely, someone would have noticed the body before." Anna thought out loud.

Eleni nodded and tucked a strand of curly hair behind her ear when it fell free. "That's exactly what I was thinking and considering the rate of decomposition and destruction done to the body, I'm thinking this person met his or her demise up river, got trapped by the winter freeze, and floated down river with the thaw and the recent heavy rains. Of course, I won't know exactly from where the body came until I can examine the sediment on the bones and compare it to the different parts of the river."

"It sounds like you have your work cut out for you." Anna felt a little bad for her friend. She was going to have a lot of long, tiring nights in the lab ahead of her.

Eleni beamed at her. "Are you kidding? I live for this!"

"Oh, you live for dead people. Nice!" Anna joked and got a slap on her arm for her trouble.

"Besides, I have Frank to make coming home worthwhile," the medical examiner said, giving her a wicked smile.

"Ugh!" Anna threw up her hands, waving them in the air. "On that note! Damn, Andros, you sure could clear a room with that visual!"

As she walked away, Anna could hear her friend giggling like a teenager. She was happy for her, but she still needed to find some bleach quick to clear the image in her head.

The last several days and nights had been long and arduous for Eleni as she leaned against her desk and rubbed her tired eyes. With a big yawn, she reached for her coffee mug sitting on her desk and took a sip. It was cooler than lukewarm but passable so she drank the rest quickly. She needed the caffeine more than she needed the warmth of the brew.

She tilted her head from side to side and rolled her shoulders working out the tension built up in her muscles. She was close to figuring out who the dead person was that washed up in the river. Samples of skin, what little remained of it anyway, and scrapings of bone were being analyzed by her techs. The few teeth that were left were examined and photographed according to their approximate location within the deceased's mouth. The results were now being run through an FBI database of missing persons and known criminals. By studying the fibers on the remnants of cloth, Eleni had figured out the deceased had been wearing a cotton blend shirt and there was material similar to that used in making feather down jackets – shiny, slick, and black – and minute traces of wool. Her best guess at the moment, based on the various types of clothing, was that the person died during the winter.

Hunter or fisherman, criminal on the run, hobo that ran the trains in and out of town, suicide, bear attack, or a simple random murder victim...all of these were possibilities for who the person could be.

Eleni was frustrated that she was nowhere nearer knowing the dead person's identity now than she was three days ago. Sighing, she walked back over to the table and stared down at the loosely rearranged bones.

"Talk to me. Tell me your secrets."

She walked around the table close to the head, talking to herself. "Blunt force trauma perhaps. Not enough skull left to determine with any certainty. Some hair left, looks to be brown." She walked down the side of the table and continued talking out loud, "Cracked ribs, broken arm. Either you got a bad beating by someone or you took a nasty..."

The door to the lab burst open and Shawn, her newest tech, barreled through the door waving a sheet of paper and smiling. "Lt. Andros! We have a positive ID on the deceased."

She pumped her hand in excitement and relief. "Yes! Who is it?" She took the paper from Shawn's hand as he scampered to a hasty stop in front of her, his breathing coming in uneven pants.

She read over the paper then spoke the name out loud, "Grady Foley."

Anxiously, Leyla waited outside the Beacon. She had grown nervous waiting for Mike to call her and truth be told, she had given up on him ever doing so until he had called yesterday to

make good on their date. Initially, she had only made a play for him to antagonize Ava. She wasn't sure why she got such a charge out of getting under the older woman's skin, but she couldn't seem to help herself. Oddly enough, they'd have some fairly reasonable conversations from time-to-time, but other times, all they needed was a boxing ring and Jell-O to make the picture complete.

Sighing, she checked her watch for what seemed like the tenth time in the last fifteen minutes. Mike wasn't terribly late because she'd shown up only a few minutes before seven, but still, she didn't like waiting for any man.

The doors opened to the lobby and Leyla glanced in that direction expecting to see a hotel guest exiting. Instead she saw Ava Peralta and she couldn't stop the groan of frustration. She really didn't need this right now.

Ava looked down at her watch and tsked in a fake Spanish accent, "Oh, this doesn't look good, Señorita Rivera. Not good at all." Olivia had told her about Leyla's date so the fact that Prince Charming was late tickled her pink.

"Suck it, Peralta!"

"You wish," she looked the other woman up and down then gestured to her. "But it takes more than what you've got to satisfy me."

"That's it," Leyla growled and took two threatening steps toward Ava.

"Hi, ladies!" Mike called a few feet away. A little girl with curly dark hair stood next to him holding his hand. "Am I interrupting something?"

Leyla stepped back and put on a charming smile for her date, brushing down her dress with her hands to just have something to do. "Nothing important. You look very handsome this evening." He truly did in his dark button down shirt that fit snugly over his muscled arms and khaki pants. "And who is this beautiful young lady?" Leyla complemented and stretched out her hand to the little girl, who had the same warm and caring eyes of her father.

The girl took Leyla's hand and smiled. "I'm Breeona."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Breeona. I'm Leyla." Leyla smiled down at her.

"You're really pretty," Breeona complemented.

"Awww, thank you, sweetheart. So are you!"

Mike leaned over and kissed Leyla on the cheek in greeting. "Her father thinks so as well."

Ava watched the entire exchange and finally she couldn't take it anymore. Rolling her eyes, she made her escape. Faking like she was receiving a call on her cell, she gasped, "Oh! Looks like a 911 from Greg. He probably found a wrinkle in a drape or something. If you'll excuse me."

"Do you need any help?" Leyla asked.

Ava shook her head. "Nope, I've got this." She disappeared quickly back into the hotel, leaving Leyla and Mike alone.

He shuffled on his feet and glanced down nervously, then tilted his head to his daughter. "I guess we should get her checked into the daycare."

Leyla smiled and nodded. "Yeah, let's do that."

On the way in, Leyla drew up short as she saw a familiar face walking toward them. This was just not her day! "Hi, Jonathan. How are you?"

The good looking man hesitated a moment, glancing between Leyla and the man next to her holding a little girl's hand. He assumed the man was the girl's father. "I'm good. And you?"

"Fine. I'm fine." An awkward moment of silence passed as Leyla stumbled with something to say. "Oh, this is Mike Thorne, the new police chief."

Jonathan shook the hand the man offered. "Good to meet you, Mike." Awkwardly, Jonathan ran his hands through his hair and pointed to the door, before saying to Leyla, "I, um...I better get going. I'm meeting Josh and some others at Farley's. I'll see you around."

Leyla nodded and watched him walk away.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in Mike's car and driving to a restaurant on the north side of town. Leyla tried to put the uncomfortable run-in with Jonathan out of her mind and just try to remember the fun of going out on a date as Mike pulled the car into the lot and parked. She was always so busy working that she rarely had a chance to treat herself to places she didn't get to visit otherwise. Behind the rustic, cabin-looking restaurant was a

waterfall that cascaded over rocks and down into a lake. Even from the parking lot, she could tell that colored lights were built into the rock facing to shine on the falling water. With the sun almost completely below the horizon, it created a romantic and unearthly feel.

"This is beautiful! I had no idea this was here," Leyla spoke in awe.

Mike offered his arm to her. "You think this is great. You should see inside!"

Together, they ascended the stairs to the front door of the restaurant and as they entered they were greeted by the maître d'. "Bonjour. Do you have a reservation, sir?"

Mike stepped forward. "Yes, it's under Thorne."

"Ah yes, here you are! Please, follow me." The maître d' found Mike's reservation and the table location he requested before guiding them to their seats. A young woman in a tuxedo stepped up to the table at the same time the maître d' did and pulled out Leyla's chair.

"Morgan will be your hostess tonight. Enjoy." The maître d' bowed and quickly returned to his post as Morgan, a pleasant woman with thick, curly blonde hair adorned by a bright streak of pink, took their drink orders and sauntered away with a wink at Mike.

Once she had left, Mike leaned across the table slightly. "So...who was the guy at the daycare?"

Leyla was hoping that he wouldn't bring that up. "That was Jonathan."

Mike raised his eyebrows. "And?"

She sighed and decided to just spill it. "We dated for a little while, and I thought he really liked me. He made this excuse about wanting to create a solid, dependable life for his kid, and he needed someone he could depend on."

Mike sat back in his chair and watched her for a moment before speaking. "I'm not so sure that was an excuse. If he wants to find someone to settle down with for the sake of his daughter, then there's nothing wrong with that."

"Is that how you feel?" Leyla couldn't help but ask. If Mike was going to be Jonathan all over again, she wanted to find out sooner rather than later.

He laughed slightly, amused at how the pretty woman had a no-holds-barred approach. "My view is a little different. I love my daughter very much, and I certainly want her to feel loved and cared for. However, I'm the one that will be providing that for her. I'm not expecting it out of other people that may be in her life. Even though she's young still, I've tried to explain to her that sometimes daddy needs non-Breeona time, and sometimes she needs non-daddy time. Both of us need more than each other in our lives to be happy and healthy."

Morgan returned with their drinks, interrupting the conversation. Leyla picked up her wine and took a sip of it. "It sounds like you have a positive attitude in raising your daughter."

Mike leaned forward again. He looked serious and it made Leyla hold her breath. "Look, I like you. You're an attractive and interesting woman, and I'd like to spend more time with you. But I'm not trying to find another parent for Breeona. That job's filled, okay? I want to meet a lot of new people and make some new friends, and no matter where my future may lead me I want to do it with as little drama as possible. Now, it looks like you have a little drama in your life with Jonathan and your bickering with Ava. But I have no interest in being more drama for you. Let's simply enjoy each other's company. Deal?"

Leyla was strangely relieved by his clarification. It became clear to her all of a sudden that she wasn't ready for settling with anyone yet, and even though she loved children, she didn't want the job of being someone's mommy right now either. Her plate was more than full. Reaching across the table, she said, "Deal, friend."

Mike shook her offered hand and laughed. "Good. Now let's eat. I'm starving!"

Act III

Eleni stretched her arms over her head and leaned back. She had been in one position for so long, bent over the microscope that she could literally hear the popping of her vertebrae as they realigned during her stretch.

She groaned and stood up, sliding the stool out from under her, and glanced at the clock on the wall. "Six o'clock!" She had been in the lab since seven that morning and only paused long enough to go to the bathroom and drink more coffee to keep going. But Frank had asked her to dinner earlier in the week and the time had been set for an hour ago to meet up. Quickly, she scrambled through her briefcase until she found her phone to call Frank.

When she turned it on though, three texts and a voice mail were waiting for her from Frank. "Shit!"

Listening to the voice mail, Eleni grimaced. *"Hey, El, I guess you got stuck at work. Don't worry. I understand how that goes. Anyway, it works out fine because this new medicine the doc has me on for depression is kicking my ass. I think I'm just going to call it a night. Call me tomorrow, okay? Sweet dreams."*

Eleni sighed and turned the phone back off. No sense in calling him now if he was asleep. She spoke into the empty room, "I'll make it up to you, Frank. I promise."

Deciding a power nap would do her good, Eleni opened the foot locker behind her desk and extracted a well-worn blanket and pillow. She set the alarm radio on her desk and curled up, her eyes already half-closed before her head hit the pillow.

The bar at Towers was busier than usual and Ross was having a hard time finding a spot to settle in for a drink. Walking around to the other side of the bar, he chanced upon a familiar face.

"Well, well...I wondered when I'd run into you," Ross said smoothly and patted the surprised man on the shoulder.

Jeffrey O'Neill laughed when he realized who had surprised him and held out his hand to give Ross's a hearty shake. "I'll be damned! The rumors are true."

Ross smiled amicably, acknowledging their shared past. "Now these rumors are true, yes."

"Please, join me for a drink," Jeffrey said as he motioned for the bartender. When the barkeep came over, he added, "Get him whatever he wants. On my tab."

The bartender nodded, happy to do as was requested since Jeffrey was a big tipper. "Yes, sir, Mr. O'Neill!"

Jeffrey stood when Ross's drink was handed to him and motioned for him to follow. The taller man took the steps to the back of the restaurant that overlooked the bar area. Behind an expanse of heavy curtains, reminiscent of an old-fashioned theater, were several more secluded tables. Ross followed Jeffrey's lead as he took a seat. The remote location and heavy drapes blocked much of the noise from the bar and allowed for easier conversation.

"That's much better." Jeffrey smiled at him as he got comfortable in his chair. Curious about Ross's circumstances and experiences, he couldn't help but ask, "So, how has your return to the land of the living been treating you?" He couldn't help but wonder if Ross was getting treated with the same disdain he faced.

An amused laugh preceded Ross taking a sip of his martini. When he set the glass down, he looked at the other man. "It's been...interesting."

For a moment Jeffrey watched the contradiction of the man's laugh play out beside his unamused smirk. "Let me guess, Blake's not as enthusiastic about having her husband back as you had hoped she'd be."

Ross sighed and leaned forward placing his elbows on the table as he stared into the murky liquid of his glass. "I don't begrudge her finding someone else. Really, I don't. I just wasn't prepared for her to not be exactly the same person she had always been. I feel oddly the same, but the entire world around me has shifted."

"I know that feeling well," Jeffrey agreed. Having lost Reva to Josh and finding no forgiveness from her upon his return, and knowing he had no right to ask for it, he truly felt for Ross. Soon, Ava would be joining him for dinner, and now wasn't the time to become melancholy. "Please tell though that something good is happening in your life."

Ross's chuckle was real this time. "I don't think seeing a dead body is good in anyone's book, but it certainly helped me see that my life could have turned out worse!"

"Wait, you were the one to find Grady Foley's body? I thought that was Olivia." Jeffrey asked confused.

Ross sipped his martini and chewed an olive slowly, nodding his head. "It was Olivia. I came along later, just snooping around." He looked at the other man curiously. "Have you heard anything about how it happened? I hear this Foley guy wasn't exactly squeaky clean."

"That's an understatement! He gave most of the troublemakers in Springfield a run for their money while he was in town," Jeffrey commented drinking the last of his beer. He signaled a waitress to bring him another and looked back at Ross. "Your buddy, Phillip, hated him because of what he did to Lizzie."

Ross scoffed, "Do I even want to know? Then again, that bastard had it coming to him after sabotaging my plane."

Jeffrey nodded in remembrance. Seeing how Ross was deep in thought, tapping a finger nervously against the table, and also knowing how much Ross hated Phillip, an idea came to him. "You know, Phillip had a lot of run-ins with a lot of people in this town, but no one got under his skin quite like Grady Foley. Phillip's fiercely protective of his children. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a hand in Grady's demise."

When Ross stopped all movement and looked up at him, the wheels nearly visible turning in his mind, Jeffrey knew he had him.

The shrill ring of the alarm on her desk caused Eleni to jerk awake. She rubbed her eyes and sat up on the couch, yawning. After shuffling over to her Keurig machine, she popped in a coffee container into the holder and set it up to brew.

While she waited for the coffee to finish brewing, she checked for any new messages from her techs. A soil sample came back with high readings for material common to several different parts of the river, though the northern, outer boundary of Springfield was sandier than the southern portion closer to town that was heavier in clay. If she had to make a guess at the moment, Eleni would say that Grady Foley's body was transported down river by the winter thaw. If he had died in the winter though, the degree of decomposition wouldn't have been as severe. Unless the decomposition had occurred over several winter thaws, and that would add in the possibility of bears and other animals using the dead body as a convenient meal.

She shivered a little at the thought. "What a horrible way to go," she said to herself.

Eleni walked over to her microscope and removed the fiber she'd been examining before, placing it back in its holder. She looked through some of the other samples and decided to take a new approach. Unless she found something out of place soon, Grady Foley would be nothing more than an accidental death. Who's to say he didn't get stinking drunk and wander off into the woods to be eaten by a bear? With the scant evidence she had at the moment, it was as good of an explanation as any.

Hearing the hiss of her coffee pot as it finished brewing, she walked over and removed her mug before settling down again behind her microscope. With another yawn, she placed one of a handful of hair samples she'd recovered from the remains. Cross checking hair samples was easy enough now that she had some DNA to go on. She guessed within a couple of hours she'd be finished and would call it a night.

Jeffrey reclined casually back in his seat as he waited for Ava to arrive. Planting the seed of Phillip's hatred of Grady Foley in Ross's mind had been almost too easy. The former mayor and congressman had been quick to latch onto the tidbit and for some reason that amused Jeffrey.

He was mindlessly scanning through some news headlines when he saw an alert pop up on his phone: *'Body found in river now classified as a murder. Suspects not named.'*

"Holy shit," Jeffrey mumbled.

"What's going on?" Ava asked curiously and her father glanced up at her as she approached the table.

He waved his phone in the air. "It seems Grady Foley was murdered."

Ava slumped down in her chair. After all these years, the man who had intended to kill her was dead. She couldn't help but feel a little pleased even if it was still a shock. "Wow...do they have any idea who did it?"

"Not yet, but Grady had enough enemies in this town, even you. I guess we shouldn't be too surprised." Jeffrey smirked and flagged the waiter to come over. Since both of them seemed to visit Towers often, looking at the menu was unnecessary so they quickly placed their orders.

Curiously, she wondered what her father thought of the potential suspects. "Excluding myself, of course, who do you think had the best motive for killing Grady?"

Jeffrey sipped at his beer and leaned back, smiling at his daughter. He thought it strange how they seemed to fluctuate between love and animosity. Then again, that was how their relationship was forged so many years ago when he was stupid and cruel with Olivia. Was it any surprise that he and Ava couldn't seem to find a happy medium as father and daughter?

He sighed and entertained her question, put the other thoughts out of his mind and simply tried to enjoy the moment with her. "Honey, we could be here all night with theories on who could have done it. However, I wouldn't be not surprised at all if it was Phillip. With the

horrible things Grady did to Lizzie, who could blame him?" He smiled at the pretty woman that reminded him so much of her mother. "If anyone threatened you or hurt you, they'd have to deal with me and that wouldn't be pretty."

Ava smiled and looked down. "Thanks."

He shrugged. "A parent's love has no bounds. It just is." Pausing for a moment, he couldn't help the gleeful smile that crossed his face. He leaned across the table, speaking in a conspiratorial whisper, "Imagine though if it was Phillip who did it. Getting Phillip Spaulding convicted of murder would set my political career."

For a long moment Ava sat perfectly still simply looking at the man she shared DNA with before closing her eyes and dropping her head in a sigh. "You should have stopped talking while you were ahead."

Realizing a little too late what he had said and how it was taken, Jeffrey tried to backtrack, "Ava, honey."

The lanky brunette raised her hand and stood from her chair. "Don't. Just...don't. Okay? I need to go." She grabbed her purse and walked briskly from the restaurant before anyone saw the tears fall from her eyes.

The weather set the pace for the busy weekend ahead as Olivia and Natalia prepared Emma and Francesca for the long holiday weekend with their fathers. Olivia, already drenched with sweat, walked back into the house after putting Sweet Pea's bag of toys and goodies in the car. She walked straight to the living room to stand in front of the floor fan she'd bought yesterday.

Natalia smirked as she descended the stairs with Francesca in her arms. "Hot much?" She put the little girl on her feet when they reached the bottom of the stairs so she could climb on the couch. Climbing was Francesca's new favorite thing to do and she climbed on literally everything and everyone she could.

Turning from the fan, Olivia sauntered over and wrapped her partner in her arms. "Hot for you," she husked out.

"Oh my God, Olivia! You're so sweaty!" Natalia giggled and playfully pushed the older woman away.

Olivia gave the brunette a saucy smile and leaned closer to Natalia's ear, whispering, "Tell me you don't want to lick every inch of me right now." She was pleased at the soft whimper that escaped Natalia's lips as she placed a soft kiss under the younger woman's ear.

"Olivia," Natalia sighed, but with a hint of warning that she better stop now.

Olivia pulled back and winked. "I know...later."

Taking a deep calming breath, Natalia called up to her other daughter, "Hey, Em, you ready?"

"Coming!"

Olivia had snuck off to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of water. "Don't forget your bathing suit, Bean! Your dad said the pool will be up and running."

"Got it!" Emma came out of her room with her backpack over her shoulder and descended the stairs with Shadow right at her heels.

Natalia scooped up Francesca, grabbed the bag of dog food for Shadow, and walked her girls out to the car. She hooked the little girl into her car seat and handed her a toy from her overnight bag. She gave the little one a kiss and then walked around to the other side. She waited on Emma to get Shadow settled beside her and then leaned over.

"Love you, Em. Have fun!" She gave the girl a kiss and stood up to close the door.

"Love you too, Ma. See you Monday."

She closed the door and turned to Olivia who was waiting by the driver's side door. Shrugging at Olivia, she gave her a kiss as well even though Olivia was only dropping the girls off and coming right back home. Natalia was glad to see Emma in such a good mood. She was almost like her old self again. A weekend with Phillip and Beth, and playing with Peyton, would do her a world of good.

"I'll pick up some veggies for the grill," Olivia said. "Anything else?"

"Nope, I got everything else yesterday. Blake texted earlier and said they were still coming tonight."

"Good. I have a feeling she and Doris need some quality time," Olivia commented and sighed. She worried for her friends and their relationship. Ross's return had thrown both of them for a loop and everything was still so uncertain.

"They're not the only ones." Natalia smiled.

Olivia leaned closer and smiled, giving her lover a slow, tender kiss. "Two words for you, my dear...all...weekend."

Natalia watched her partner get in the car and drive away. She waved and then turned to walk back in the house, practically skipping to the door.

Doris wandered out through the back door, an extra martini in her hand, heavy on the olives. "How are those burgers coming along, Butchy McStuddly of the Grill?"

"Watch it, Wolfe, or I'll flick a hot charcoal on you," Olivia joked, threatening Doris with the spatula, before taking the proffered martini. "Thanks!"

"Ohhhhh, I'm so scared." Doris laughed.

Turning back to the grill, Olivia checked underneath one of the burgers and moved it away from the flame. "I say another five minutes and these will be perfect. Natalia doesn't let me indulge in bad food often so when I get a chance, I want to make it count."

Olivia looked over her shoulder, making sure that neither Natalia nor Blake were coming outside, before glancing at Doris. "So, um, have you heard anything from the governor about Rafe's troop?"

Doris knew the question was coming. She had been making calls for several weeks and urging the governor to call in his own favors with his military contacts. The weeks had been dragging on with no word from Rafe, and Olivia was worried and anxious. Perhaps even more so than Natalia, or at least that's the way it seemed to Doris.

"All the governor can find out is that Rafe's troop was deployed on a mission that was very secretive, but that's as far as he got." Doris shrugged and shook her head. "I'm sorry. Believe me, I want to know too. Ashlee's been driving me crazy with the texts and calls."

Looking up to the sky as if she'd get some answer from the heavens, Olivia shook her head and sighed. "I'm really worried, Doris."

"Natalia seems to be holding up better," Doris said, hoping it would make Olivia feel a little better.

"So it seems," she conceded and began taking the burgers off the grill. Olivia changed the topic, not wanting to think too much about Rafe at the moment when he was halfway around the world and nothing could be done about it. "How are things with Blake and the Ross situation?"

A smile returned to Doris's face as she thought about what had happened a few days ago. "The other day she came over and she was hot over him."

"With the way you say that and the smile on your face, I take it to mean 'hot' as in a totally non-sexy way," Olivia said as she closed the grill lid and turned to her friend.

Doris's eyes got big. "Definitely non-sexy. It seems they had words over the incident with the boys and Emma." She hesitated, not sure if she should say the rest of what Blake had told her. Olivia's green eyes took on a cold look and it appeared to Doris that her friend was bracing for something.

"Let me guess, it was all Emma's fault," Olivia deadpanned.

"Uhhhh," she was speechless at Olivia's accurate observation. "How did you...?"

Olivia tilted her head. "Don't you know? It's always the girl's fault."

"Or the result of poor parenting," Doris added and waited for the fallout from her friend.

"Oh really?" Olivia's voice rose and she set the plate of food down before she threw it. She touched her forehead where she knew the vein there was beginning to pulse.

Doris put a hand on Olivia's shoulder. "Calm down, Olivia. He was directing that at Blake when he said it. Mostly."

Olivia felt her anger at the surface, barely contained. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she let it out. "Ross Marler better hope he doesn't run into me anytime soon. If I had known the other day what he had said, I'd have put him next to Grady Foley in that river."

"But you won't," Doris clarified as encouragement. "Because Ross is Dinah's father, and she's your friend, so..."

Olivia threw up her hands. "You're right! Damn it, you're right. Wait a minute, when did you become a good influence on me? That's Natalia's job. Old me would have been over there by now kicking his ass, but oh no, I have to be good!"

Doris picked up the plate Olivia had discarded. "Yes you do. For your family."

Olivia harrumphed. "When did Ross become such an asshole? I thought my days of dealing with asshole men were over."

Laughing, Doris began to walk back into the house but said over her shoulder, "Just because you're a lesbian doesn't mean you don't deal with them. It just means you don't sleep with them."

A low, contented moan was the first sound Olivia made as she stirred and felt warm, soft skin against her own and gentle curves under her hands. She couldn't resist running a hand over a rounded hip. Hearing an answering sigh from her partner stirred her body to life and hips rolled forward into her lover's beautiful, naked ass.

Memories of last night played in her mind drawing out another deep moan as her lips found Natalia's shoulder and she placed slow, lingering kisses across the younger woman's shoulder and back.

"Good morning!" The brunette in her arms was fully awake now and reached back to grab Olivia's hip and pull her closer. "What a wonderful way to wake up."

Olivia scooted back and rolled Natalia over, kissing her deeply. "I'm not done yet," she said as she broke the kiss before diving back in for more. She could never get enough of Natalia.

Last night, they had made love slowly, grateful to have the opportunity to savor the feel of each other without anyone in the house. Having the kids nearby always made them hold

back a little for fear of making too much noise, but last night, Olivia had heard screams coming from Natalia that were guttural and raw. More than once, the brunette had demanded that Olivia "fuck" her, and she did...gladly and repeatedly.

She felt Natalia smile into the kiss. "Querida, I'm not so sure I can even walk this morning much less do anything else."

Olivia stopped and looked down at her naked lover. She tried to keep a serious face but found it nearly impossible as Natalia smiled up at her. "What part of 'all weekend' didn't you hear? Honey, I am going to have you begging for mercy, but before you do that, you're going to beg for more." She rolled her hips into the younger woman, making Natalia gasp, then proceeded to kiss her again.

As she trailed kisses down Natalia's neck and chest, she became lost in the feel and taste of her partner. She was so lost that she didn't hear the pounding on the front door.

"Olivia," Natalia said, tapping her on the shoulder to make her stop.

Sitting up, Olivia finally heard the banging. "Shit! Worst. Timing. Ever."

Both women climbed out of bed and slipped on their robes hurriedly as the knocking increased. They nearly ran down the stairs and before they could get there, they heard Doris on the other side starting to yell, "Goddamn it, you two! I know you're in there!"

Olivia flung the door open. "Doris, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Doris was frantic, out of breath, and dressed uncharacteristically casual in tennis shoes, shorts, and a threadbare t-shirt. "Get dressed. Now! We have to get to Phillip's!"

Their first thought was that Emma was hurt. Natalia gasped in fear as Olivia lunged forward grabbing Doris's arm. "What is it? Is it Emma? Is she hurt?"

Doris shook her head, wincing at the force of Olivia's grip. "No, she's not hurt, but she is freaking out."

"Why?" Olivia and Natalia said at nearly the same time.

"Phillip's being arrested for Grady Foley's murder."

Olivia looked at Natalia with fear written all over her face. This was the last thing any of them needed, especially Emma. A long moment of shocked silence passed between the three women. Finally, Doris nudged Olivia. "Go, get dressed. I'll drive. The car's running."

In shock, Olivia looked at Natalia who turned her toward the stairs. "Come on."

Upstairs in the bedroom, Natalia pulled out some clothes for Olivia as the older woman stood silent in the middle of the room. "Here," she handed the clothes to her partner and began to get dressed herself.

"Shit," Olivia mumbled suddenly. Then, "Shit!" She added more forcefully.

Natalia looked up at the expletives and she saw Olivia pushing her hair back with one hand and gripping the strands tightly. She was about to say something to get the older woman moving, but Olivia snapped out of it and began to get dressed at record speed.

The drive out to the mansion was mostly quiet except for Natalia asking about how Doris found out. "Beth called, of course. Phillip's going to need representation and she obviously can't do it."

"But you're handling the Howard case," Natalia observed. "Both are so high profile."

"Mel could take it, I guess," Doris shrugged.

Olivia chuckled and commented, "Cyrus won't like that too much. Besides, Phillip has some of the best lawyers in the state on retainer. He'll be fine."

"He fired all of them," Doris said, tapping nervously at her steering wheel as she took a left at the traffic light. "Beth said he did it because all of the lawyers were beholden to Alan and he wanted to be free of that."

"Fabulous," Olivia said without humor.

As Doris pulled the car up the long driveway to the Spaulding Mansion, the gates were open and the guards were gone. Further in, they were greeted by four police cruisers. "Overkill much?" Doris grumbled as she parked and got out, heading directly for the house.

Olivia and Natalia got out as well and immediately started scanning the unfamiliar faces for Emma.

"Mom! Ma!" They spun at the familiar voice and saw Emma running out of the front door of the mansion with Shadow close behind and Beth trailing them. At that moment, Olivia didn't give a damn that she was a heart transplant patient. She scooped up her little girl and held her close. She took comfort in the familiarity of her and the feel of Natalia wrapping her own arms around them both in protection.

"Are you okay, baby?" Natalia asked Emma as she pulled back and stroked the girl's hair.

At first Emma nodded then she shrugged. "I guess. What's going on? Why is Daddy being arrested?"

Olivia put Emma back down on her feet and looked up at Beth questioningly. The blonde shrugged. "I didn't know how much I should tell her."

"Did Daddy do something bad? Is he going to jail?" She looked between the three women that she trusted the most. She wanted the truth. She wasn't a kid anymore and she could take it. "He is, isn't he?"

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose then looked down at her daughter. "I don't know, baby. The police seem to think he did something wrong and that he hurt someone." She bit the bullet and jumped right to the heart of the matter. "If they can prove it, he could go to jail. It's possible."

The young girl's eyes glistened with tears and her face reddened as she fought the need to cry. She said resolutely, "Daddy's not a bad man. He loves us."

"You're right," Natalia confirmed. "He does love us, especially you, Emma. If, and that's a big if, he did hurt someone, then I'm sure there was a good reason for it. All we can do is wait to see what happens and stand by him, be strong for him."

Olivia took Natalia's hand and squeezed it, thankful to have a partner that always looked for the good in every situation. Natalia handled difficulty the complete opposite of her, with grace and strength, and that was exactly what Emma needed right now.

Beth leaned over and spoke quietly to Olivia, "He convinced the police to wait to handcuff him and take him away until Emma was gone. He didn't want her to see that."

Nodding, Olivia gave Natalia a look to convey that she needed to follow her lead. "Doris brought us over. If you can get her, we can get out of here."

"I'll do you one better. I'll get the driver to bring the car around and take you home," Beth said and turned to walk away.

"No! I'm not leaving!" Emma yelled. She knew they'd try to do this.

"Emma," Olivia said with a warning tone.

The girl spun around to face her mother. "I'm not a baby anymore, Mom. I'm staying here. I can handle it."

Caught off guard by Emma's tone, Olivia lashed out sarcastically. "Oh, yeah, like you handle your problems so well by skipping school, running around with boys, and smoking, right? You're a child and I'm your mother, Emma. You do as I say!"

Fresh tears sprang to Emma's eyes. Pain laced her voice as she spoke quietly, "But not as you do. Right, Mom? Are you afraid that I'm going to use a bottle to kill my pain?" Emma swallowed at the look of heartbreak her words caused her mother but she had to say this, "I know you've been hurt by a lot of people – Ma, Dad...Jeffrey. But have some faith in me. I'm not a baby anymore."

Olivia was shocked to hear Jeffrey's name mentioned. How could Emma possibly know about Jeffrey and her? She looked at Natalia who was crying too.

"I'll take her in to say goodbye to Phillip," Beth said as the two women stood silently and watched.

"Natalia?" Olivia reached for her partner and felt herself enveloped in protective arms.

"I've got you. Just hold on until we get home, okay?" Natalia whispered in her ear, feeling the weak nod against her shoulder.

Blake paced in her living room as she waited for Doris to call her. Instead of going back to either of their places where temptation was waiting for them to succumb to the antsy feelings that time and distance had caused, they decided to hang out in an all-night diner near the outskirts of town simply drinking coffee and talking. An early morning call from Anna had interrupted them and the news that Eleni had found, not just one but three, hair

strands of Phillip Spaulding on Grady Foley's remains had set Doris into motion and straight over to see Olivia and Natalia.

When the door bell of her townhouse rang, Blake was taken back by who she saw there. "Ross! What are you doing here?" Kevin, Jason, and Clarissa barreled past before he could answer. The boys went straight to the kitchen in search of food while Clarissa ran upstairs.

Blake turned back to Ross who was standing there with a smirk and his hands stuffed in his pockets. "Can I come in?"

Feeling a bit overwhelmed, she waved her hand. "Sure, I guess." She watched him walk into the living room and casually made himself at home. Sighing, she decided she didn't feel like fighting him right now. "I made some coffee. Do you want some?"

"That would be wonderful!" He smiled up at her.

She walked into the kitchen and poured two cups of coffee. The boys were making a king sized mess with their Pop Tarts and juice. They started to leave the kitchen and head upstairs when Blake stopped them. "Hold up, you two. Put the top on the juice and put it back in the fridge."

Kevin sulked but he did as he was told. Then he followed his brother out of the room. Sighing, she stirred the sugar into the coffee mugs and took them into Ross, handing one off to him.

He accepted the mug and leaned back in his seat, sipping the coffee and sighing contentedly. "I guess you heard the good news. Phillip's been arrested for that guy's murder."

She set her mug down on the table next to her chair, not really in the mood for it, and nodded. "Yes, I heard. Whether it's good or not is a matter of perspective."

Ross shrugged. "Murder is murder. There's no middle ground here."

Blake rubbed at her tired eyes. "Except that Phillip is the father of my best friend's daughter."

"You forget so soon that Phillip was the one that had my plane sabotaged?" He asked then leaned forward and set his mug down on the table in front of him. "I understand this puts you in a tough situation, Blake, but Phillip did something wrong, more than once, and he

should pay. I just wish I had been the one to find the smoking gun on him. Not that I didn't try."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Excuse me?"

Ross shrugged. "What can I say? None of us are innocent, are we?" He hesitated but eventually continued, "I...I kind of snuck around the mansion, looking for something. Anything, really, to take Phillip down."

Standing, Blake began to put some pieces together and she walked to the other side of the room. "Last night, Olivia was talking about Phillip hearing some strange noises around the mansion the last few weeks. That was you."

He shook his head, a slight smile still gracing his face. If Blake didn't know better, she'd think he was pleased with himself. "Awww, come on, Blake. Don't look at me like that. It's not like you haven't done some unsavory things too, as long as the ends justify the means."

"Those days are long gone for me, Ross. I wish they were for you, too." Blake walked across the room and sat down on the couch next to the man she had loved so desperately at one time. "Let it go, Ross. For yourself because this vindictiveness...it's not you. That's not the Ross I knew, that I loved. If you can't do it for yourself though, do it for our boys. Kevin and Jason need you. They need their father, the real one, not this cold-hearted one you're pretending to be. And if you had any hope of ever mending things with me, you'll get back in touch with the Ross you used to be because the one I see sitting here now, I don't like."

Natalia stood in the doorway to Emma's bedroom watching her sleep. The little girl kicked restlessly in her sleep causing Shadow to jump down off the bed and settle on the rug next to her instead. Dinner had been a quiet affair. Emma had disappeared to her room to read, and Olivia had said she needed to take a walk after helping clean the dishes.

Closing her eyes, Natalia said a quiet prayer for her family. "Please watch over them," she whispered quietly into the darkness.

Pulling the door almost closed, Natalia turned from Emma's room and descended the stairs. She walked out onto the porch and gazed at the stars twinkling in the clear sky. In spite of the oppressive heat of the day, the night was cool and comfortable.

A familiar creaking sound drew her attention to the barn and backlit by the nearly full moon was the outline of her lover disappearing into the darkness of the barn. Much like the moon in the sky and the tides that it affects, Natalia couldn't resist going to the woman that was her world. Going back inside the house, Natalia took the house keys from the hook and locked the front door. Comforted that Emma was safe inside, she moved down the steps and quickly across the field.

As she drew closer, the smell of old hay and damp wood assaulted her senses, but the hair on her arms tingled as well as she moved into the darkness and could already feel Olivia's presence.



When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, helped by the light of the moon streaming through a hole in the roof, Natalia inched closer to the shadows Olivia was tucked behind.

The intoxicating scent and warmth of the older woman's body was the first sign she was close by. Reaching out a hand hesitantly, Natalia's fingers brushed over the warm skin of Olivia's arm. Stepping closer, she trailed her hand up to a muscular shoulder, soft hair rolling over the tops of her fingers as the hand moved closer to the center and then traced down a strong back.

The desire to touch, comfort, was too strong for Natalia. Moving within inches of Olivia, she allowed her hands to trace the curves of Olivia's shoulders, enjoying the shiver as her

fingers teased along the hourglass curve of the other woman's waist to rest at her hips. She drew in even closer, burying her nose in the heavenly scent of Olivia's skin and hair as her hands pulled their hips together.

Olivia sighed at the contact and dropped her head back to Natalia's shoulder. The brunette read the movement of her lover's body and the soft sounds as the first stirrings of arousal. Natalia knew Olivia's cues better than she knew herself. Their love was an unspoken language reminiscent of how it had grown between them over that first year – slow, steady, and silent. No words were needed. They never had been. When Olivia's hands settled over her own, it wasn't a sign to stop. This Natalia knew.

Reaching around with one hand, Natalia easily unsnapped the button of Olivia's shorts. She untucked the t-shirt and traced the muscles of Olivia's stomach with her hand, feeling the rise and fall of Olivia's breathing pick up speed the more confident her touch became. She gently nudged Olivia forward with her left hand and slipped her hand under her shirt to unfasten Olivia's bra. Any thought of control on Natalia's part vanished into the cool night air when Olivia rolled her hips wantonly back into her. She yanked the shirt and bra over Olivia's head and tossed it aside before latching fiercely onto Olivia's large breasts, her fingers squeezing and rolling the taut nipples until Olivia hissed from the pain and the pleasure. Natalia loved the way Olivia made her feel alive and powerful, the way the passionate woman gave up control to her, allowed her access to a part of Olivia no one else got to see. It was a heady addiction as powerful as any drug, and Natalia was helplessly addicted to loving Olivia. She came so close to losing all of this – this passion, this family, this raw feeling of desire and hope. Natalia felt the desperate need to give that back to Olivia, to take away the fear of the day, of the past few weeks and months, hell...over Olivia's entire damn life. One thing Natalia knew with absolute certainty was that their days on this earth were numbered. Tomorrow, all could be gone. Love, in all of its wonder and beauty, could only be guaranteed in the here and now because tomorrow everything could change. Aside from the assuredness of their love, the only constant Natalia was certain of was change. It was all the more reason to love Olivia as completely as possible...right...now.

Moving one hand away from Olivia's breast, Natalia dipped it under the waistband of her panties. The evidence of Olivia's desire and love greeted her fingers. It was heaven on earth. "Na...Natalia," Olivia gasped as her knees began to buckle. She reached down and held the younger woman where she needed her most. "Please."

Natalia pulled her in close, wrapping her arm around Olivia's waist to steady her. "I've got you."

Olivia whimpered as Natalia's fingers teased at her opening. "I can't stand...up."

Natalia eased her lover down to her knees where she could be steadier. The position had opened Olivia's legs wider and Natalia took advantage of it, dipping inside. Overwhelmed, Natalia dropped her head to rest between Olivia's shoulder blades. She closed her eyes and allowed herself the simple joy of feeling Olivia, wrapping herself tightly around her. She didn't think she'd ever get used to the awe and wonder she felt when she was inside her lover; there were no words to adequately describe the emotion.

Time seemed to stand still and the only perceptible movement was the synchronized thrusts and arcs of their bodies moving together as one.

A sudden tightening around her fingers was followed by a gasp from Olivia, her voice strangled and raw, as her body shook, "I love you. Oh, God, I love you, Natalia."

Wetness coated Natalia's fingers and hand, even up to her wrist. Olivia turned in her arms enough to reach up and pull her down for a kiss. Natalia was turned on so much it was painful and it didn't help imagining the playful dance of Olivia's tongue on another part of her body.

Olivia pulled back and stared into her eyes. Natalia was lost in the dark green depths and her hand began to move again.

"We're not done?" Olivia asked, sounding amused and aroused all over again.

Natalia could only shake her head in response, and Olivia stopped her hand from moving. Standing, she removed her shorts and panties and kicked them to the side. Taking Natalia's hand, she brought her to her feet. She kissed the brunette tenderly on the lips and kissed her way down Natalia's neck and over to her ear.

"Take your clothes off," she whispered.

Olivia stopped her pleasant assault on Natalia's neck to look down the younger woman's body as Natalia unbuttoned her shirt and pants, quickly stripping naked. She brushed the backs of her fingers between full, tan breasts and down to the patch of hair between Natalia's legs.

With a contented sigh, she let her fingers play in the damp curls. Looking up into Natalia's dark, sultry eyes, she confessed the truth that she could never say enough, "My darling, you...you are absolutely the most beautiful creature God ever created."

Natalia raised a shaky hand and traced Olivia's lips with her fingers. "Are you saying you believe in God?"

"I'm saying that you make me believe in Him with the way you love me." Wrapping Natalia in her arms, she kissed her with adoration and wonder. Pulling back, she raised a finger. "Don't move."

Natalia watched in confusion as Olivia gathered their clothes then stretched them out on the hay-covered floor. She then got down on her knees and motioned Natalia over with a curl of her finger. "Come here."

When Natalia was close enough, Olivia ran her hands up along the outside of Natalia's thighs to her hips. Natalia wasn't sure what Olivia was up to but she wasn't about to stop her.

Olivia ran her hands over Natalia's stomach, allowing her thumbs to stretch downward until they dipped between her legs. Pulling her thumbs back, she opened Natalia to her and she smiled as she leaned forward, tasting the sweet honey of her arousal.

Letting out a sharp gasp, Natalia tangled her fingers in Olivia's soft hair holding her close. "Jesus, Olivia!"

Olivia teased the younger woman with her tongue a little while longer before leaning back. Using her grip on Natalia's hips, she moved her over to the clothes. Laying back, she stretched out and took Natalia's hand. "Join me?"



Dropping to her knees, Natalia hovered over Olivia before leaning down to kiss her with abandon. Her hand slid up Olivia's thigh, her destination already in mind, when Olivia stopped her. "No."

Natalia furrowed her brows confused. "Olivia, if you don't want to..."

Olivia put a finger to her lover's lips, stopping the words from continuing. "That's not it. I want you. I want to taste you." She tugged at Natalia's hip. "Turn around."

Realizing what Olivia wanted made Natalia flood with new arousal. She loved making love to Olivia in so many different ways, but this had to be one of her favorites. She took Olivia's hand in her own and pressed it to her lips. "Olivia," she whispered.

Olivia bit her lip. "We can go inside if you'd be more comfortable there."

Natalia quickly shook her head. "No...no, I want you too. Right now, right here."

Under any other circumstances and with anyone else, Natalia never would have considered making love practically in the open, but there was something about Olivia, perhaps that dangerous and reckless part of her, that knocked down all of Natalia's inhibitions. It was only with Olivia that she felt safe enough to take risks and skirt the edges of danger because she knew Olivia would keep her safe and make it okay. Loving her in whatever form it took was somehow always okay.

With a slightly nervous quiver, Natalia turned around on her knees and allowed Olivia to guide her backwards by her hips. Moving an arm to the other side of Olivia's waist, she hovered over her hips, a wave of desire rolling over her as Olivia raised and then opened her legs in offering. She could feel Olivia carefully lift her leg and scoot over underneath her.

Even though she knew it was coming because she could feel Olivia tugging on her hips, pulling her down, the air was still sucked from her lungs at the first touch of Olivia's mouth.

"Oh, God!" Natalia's eyes slammed shut as Olivia's amazing tongue caressed her so intimately. She could feel, more than hear, the low growl in Olivia's chest.

"Dear God, Natalia, you taste amazing." Then Olivia's mouth went back to work.

Natalia was losing herself in the incredible sensation when Olivia's hands slid up her sides and one hand gently pushed her head down. Smiling at her own abandon, Natalia used one of her hands to spread Olivia open. It was like an out of body experience as she watched her fingers disappear inside Olivia. She pushed in as far as she could go and then pulled out, raising her fingers and looking at the glistening arousal. Her eyes fluttered shut as she took the fingers in her mouth.

"Mmmmmm, Olivia." She wanted more. Without hesitation, she entered her again and then hissed in welcome as she felt herself filled with Olivia's fingers. "Oh, God, yes!" She pushed back against the wonderful feel of Olivia's fingers stretching her. Olivia was matching her movements. The faster and harder she pumped into Olivia, the faster and harder she was filled by Olivia. She was close. Oh, so close, but she didn't want it to end. Not yet. She pulled out her fingers and began to use her tongue, tilting Olivia's hips into a more open position. She groaned as she felt Olivia's tongue plunge deep inside.

Neither of them wanted to stop. The sweet metallic taste was addictive but the ache and need became too much. Eventually, Olivia reached up and began to move in fast, light circles over Natalia's clit while her tongue stayed buried. As much as she wanted to give Natalia an amazing orgasm, she wanted to taste the woman she loved as she came.

Natalia panted as she felt her orgasm beginning deep inside, building in her. She did her best to keep her mouth on Olivia, but she was quickly losing control, the waves of pleasure about to overtake her. She wanted Olivia to come with her so she used her fingers to massage the other woman's clit. As she felt Olivia's clit stiffen, her orgasm hit her with violent force and she let out a primal scream. She was pretty sure she'd never been that loud before. Olivia hadn't orgasmed but she was so close, panting and digging her heels into

the clothes beneath her. Leaning forward, Natalia plunged her tongue inside Olivia and almost instantly, Olivia screamed and dug her nails into Natalia's lower back.

Both of them collapsed in an exhausted heap, and they didn't care how undignified their positions may have seemed. They caressed and kissed tired and quivering thighs, teasing and kissing swollen lips. Olivia rolled Natalia over and ran her tongue through her swollen folds, not to tease or arouse, but in simple adoration. Natalia asked if she could do the same to Olivia and they took turns casually touching and tasting each other, fingers dipping inside for more but not lingering.

When both women were satisfied, they curled up on the clothes. Natalia ran her fingers over Olivia's stomach, making various designs of no meaning but finally, she did a little something that she remembered kids doing in school, except it was usually the palm of your hand or across your back. She wrote out: I love you.

Olivia's eyebrows crinkled, realizing that Natalia was doing something purposeful but she couldn't tell what it was exactly. When she did recognize the words, she smiled and reached up for the beautiful woman she was blessed in this life to love. "I love you too."

Act IV

Mel climbed out of bed in frustration. She looked back at the angry and sullen expression on Cyrus's face. He was propped up against the head board of the bed with his arms crossed over his broad chest. Turning back around, she closed her eyes for a moment before pulling a drawer open and rifling through for some underwear.

For some reason, Mel felt compelled to take on Phillip's defence. She couldn't really explain why, but Cyrus was furious about it.

He threw the covers off and searched for his pants. He didn't like the feeling of vulnerability being naked in bed gave him considering the circumstances. It didn't help that they had made love before Mel bothered to tell him.

Finding his shirt, he slipped it on, not bothering to button it. Walking over to her, he leaned over to look her in the eyes. "How can you really expect me not to be mad? Grady was my brother and you're defending the man that killed him."

She sighed and looked up at Cyrus. "Allegedly killed him. We don't know the facts or what transpired. It could have just been a horrible accident. Phillip may not have even been there when it happened. It's not like Grady was squeaky clean, honey. He had a lot of enemies."

Cyrus slammed his fist on the dresser in frustration. "That doesn't change the fact that he was my brother, and I loved him," he yelled as his voice shook with emotion. He fought back the tears, trying to maintain a small piece of dignity. "I can't stay here. Not right now."

"Cyrus!" Mel called out pleadingly as he bolted for the door. "Please," she begged him to understand.

He stopped in the doorway and looked back at her. "I need some time." He bit his lip to get control before finally saying, "I love you," and closing the door behind him.

Natalia finished cutting up the chicken breast into small bite-sized pieces then handed the small plate of food to Francesca. The toddler was beginning to feed herself but the control wasn't there yet, so she made sure to give her daughter pieces she could grasp but not make a huge mess with either. The smile she gave her little girl was cut short as Olivia stormed into the kitchen and put the phone back on the hook.

"I can't believe this!" Olivia fussed. "Michael Thorne has the nerve to want to ask me questions about Phillip's whereabouts the day Grady disappeared. As if I was in my right mind back then! Hell, I wanted Phillip dead myself at that point, if you remember. On top of that, Chief Thorne has the unmitigated gall to also be dating my daughter."

Natalia looked up shocked. "Wait a minute, I thought he was dating Leyla."

Olivia nodded her head frantically and had that wild-eyed look. "Oh yeah, apparently he's dating both."

"Ohhhkay!" Natalia shook her head in confusion. Just another day in Springfield! "The guy's just doing his job. If it was Frank asking the questions or even Remy, you'd be mad at them too."

Olivia crossed her arms and shifted from one foot to another. Her partner had a good point. "Well, I still don't trust him."

The brunette stood up and walked over to Olivia. She cupped her face in her hands and kissed her sweetly. "I know, darling. I can't say I'm terribly happy about Jeffrey wanting to prosecute Phillip either."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "I know! Ava told me. She's pretty upset about it, too." She sighed and opened the fridge. Finding a bottle of water, she took it out, twisted the top off, and took a healthy swallow. "Is it just me or does it seem like our family, and those connected to us, never get a break?"

Francesca spilled her milk and began to fuss. Olivia snatched up a paper towel and cleaned up the mess from the table and her daughter. She kissed the top of the child's dark head. "It's okay, baby. No harm done."

The little girl giggled and reached up for Olivia. "Mama. Pick up." Olivia couldn't resist the dimpled smile Francesca gave her. Lifting the girl in her arms, she pushed up the girl's t-shirt and gave the little one a raspberry on her belly, making her giggle even harder.

"I think we should get away for a while," Natalia said out of the blue as she watched her partner interact with their baby. She shrugged. "I mean, Springfield is kind of nuts. Maybe a break would do us all some good."

Olivia tilted her head. "Do you mean like a vacation or like moving?"

Natalia shrugged again. "I don't know really. It was just a thought."

Jeffrey O'Neill better be glad he was on the other side of the prison bars because if Phillip had his way, he could be brought up on a whole new set of murder charges. He had never really liked the man and after what he'd heard about Jeffrey raping Olivia when they were kids, he had even less use for the man now.

Phillip paced his cell as Jeffrey smugly antagonized him with pieces of knowledge and information on Grady's death. To his credit, Phillip was smart enough and had seen Alan in sticky enough situations to know when to shut up and when to talk. This was a shut up moment if there ever was one.

"The facts are the facts, Phillip. We have more than enough evidence to put you away for a long time. You'd be smart to accept a plea, but if you don't, it's no skin off my back. I would enjoy nothing more than giving you life in prison for murder," Jeffrey said with a smirk.

Phillip walked over to the bars that separated him from Jeffrey and looked into the dark, empty eyes. "How do you sleep at night, O'Neill?"

"Very well, actually."

"Even after all the horrible things you've done, the sins you've committed? Who are you to point fingers at anyone?" Phillip countered and he was pleased to see Jeffrey look away. Maybe there was a piece of humanity left in the man...maybe.

Jeffrey seemed to pull himself together and looked at Phillip confidently as he adjusted his tie. "I have no idea what you mean. I've always been on the side of the good guys, doing what's right."

"Always? Really?" Phillip, like the shark he was raised by, could smell the blood in the water. Even though he was deliberately living his life better and more honestly, there was a thrill in playing the game. "Even when you were a mere teen at diplomatic functions having a little too much to drink and having some...indiscretions that needed to be covered up? Even then, Jeffrey?"

Jeffrey swallowed at the mention of the incident, something he was still ashamed of and wondered if he'd ever get out alive. "Think about what I said, Phillip."

Phillip leaned forward, his face close to the bars. "And you think about what move you should make. Think long and hard, okay? I'd hate for you to make a mistake that could cost you everything."

Phillip glared in amusement and pleasure as Jeffrey O'Neill quickly left.

The darkness weighed in on him from the edges of his psyche. Everywhere he turned, everywhere he looked there were wires and tubes and machines beeping. Panic set in. He shouldn't be here. He should be home. He should be in college, dating, and maybe planning a wedding. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"Doctor! He's awake!" A nurse called from the other side of the room.

A bright light was flashed in his eyes and it made him jerk back. "What is your name, son? How many fingers am I holding up? Do you feel this? Try to move your toes."

The commands and questions came faster than he could respond and he wanted to scream. He tried to scream but he couldn't. Tears coursed down his face as he felt the weight of his body, a body that couldn't move.

He shook and jerked his head back and forth but it was all that would move.

"Sedate him," the doctor commanded.

"No! No! No!" But his mouth didn't move.

"No!" A needle was jammed into his arm. "Nooooooooo!!!!"

He jerked awake, a dim light from the street casting a soft glow across the bed. Panting, he heard his own heartbeat pounding in his chest.

It was just a dream. Just another dream.

He fell back to the bed, the chill of his damp sheets a minor annoyance. His hand reached up and came to rest on the dog tags against his chest and the small coin he always kept close to his heart.

He sobbed, the tears flowing down his face, and he said the only word that mattered, "Ma."
