



Act I

Wind, sand, and gravel combined to whirl around his head. It was deafening, a roar so loud as if an avalanche had taken up permanent residence between his ears. Grains of sand were imbedded in every orifice of his body. Not just any sand; toxic sand, according to rumors that circulated throughout his unit. This sand, rumor had it, was rich in high levels of neurotoxin agents when ingested; as if he and his fellow soldiers had a choice not to swallow this wretched poison.

Loud voices bellowed orders assaulting him. The recurring nightmares were driving him over the edge.

Only one thing would stop all the noise. He groped for the tubes controlling the drug. He knew which tube it was; he wasn't stupid. The nurse had talked her way through the hookup so he knew. More drugs meant no nightmares.

"It was my shift last night. He was so agitated. Dude almost lost his mind," the young nursing assistant said in hushed tones to the on-duty physician. "They gave him a shot to put him out."

"He is not a dude. He is a soldier." Dr. Yamato gave the young man a steely glare. "And, it's not a shot, it's a sedative to calm him down. Aren't you still on probation? You need to learn some protocol here young man, if you're going to make it at the VA." Dr. Yamato roughly handed him the chart.

Chastised, the young man did not argue. He really needed this job. "Yes sir, I'll try."

He was tired of this patient who was bull-headed and uncooperative. He squinted at the name again. Rivera. Must be something in the genes he mused. He himself was a Rivera and as stubborn as they came. Most of the men in the Rivera family were stubborn, one just had to look at his grandfather.

"PFC Rivera." He squinted again at the chart, making sure he had the right patient; he needed to take some vitals.

Rafe abruptly opened his eyes to see a young man, not much older than he was standing by his bedside.

"I need to draw some blood," the nurse sighed.

Rafe closed his eyes again, willing himself to be left alone. "Go away."

"My job is to draw blood. And I'm going to get it whether you like it or not," the nurse gritted out between clean white teeth.

Now wide-awake, Rafe tried to buck and launch himself at this insistent pain in the ass.

"You're strapped down, big man."

Rafe took his chuckling nemesis in. Black wavy hair framed an olive skin face and shadowy peach fuzz covered his upper lip and chin. Like Rafe, he was a failure at trying to grow a moustache. Dark eyes were hidden by black-framed glasses.

The young man pulled on the tourniquet and gave Rafe a rolled up paper to squeeze.

"You could be gentler," Rafe complained. Rafe caught a glimpse of his name badge: Rivera. "You're a Rivera?" Rafe attempted to sit up.

"Uh huh, lay still I'm almost finished." He labeled his last vial and removed the tourniquet. "Here's some juice."

Exhausted, Rafe took the juice and drank it quickly. Closing his eyes, he quickly drifted back off to sleep.

Olivia pushed the Caesar salad around her plate, knocking a few croutons onto the table. "I'm so over salad." A low sigh emphasized her disgust before she took a sip of her iced tea. "I hate Towers iced tea. Tastes like colored dish water." She continued her rant. "*Salad is good for you. It's nutritious. Good for your heart.* Blah, blah, blah." Her mock indignation made Doris laugh. Olivia stared her down.

"Shall I assume those are the words of your better half?" Doris continued to dress her hamburger with mayonnaise, pickles, relish, tomato, and cheese piled onto the double-patty.

"So not good for you, Wolfe."

Olivia watched impassively as Doris popped the top of the bun on and proceeded to take a big bite. She rolled her eyes to heaven. "This burger isn't as good as the one you burned for me the other day. No burger for you? Guess the little woman has you on a short leash, Spencer."

"You're a witch, Wolfe," Olivia growled and jokingly went to stab her hand.

"Tell me what's really wrong, Olivia." Doris downplayed the next big bite. "Salad is not the issue."

Olivia put down her fork and leaned in over the table. "It's Emma."

As Doris was running a French fry through a stream of ketchup, Olivia reached across the table and speared two French fries.

"Ketchup?" Doris asked with her mouth full.

"No ketchup. I'm on a diet and besides I'm sure it's bad for my heart."

They chomped away in silence.

"Is it about what happened at Phillip's the other night?" Doris waited for Olivia to spill, but her patience was running low. "I was busy playing the mayor while you were rounding up Emma, but I did hear some loud voices. Guess that was you?"

"Yeah." Olivia put down her fork and clasped her hands. Her thoughts whirled around her head trying to organize her thoughts about Emma's hurtful remarks. Staring at something over Doris's shoulder, Olivia took a deep breath before continuing. "Anna mentioned something to me the other day. She said that when she and Emma had their lesson the other day, she and Emma had a long talk. Emma said she knew." Olivia paused, regret and sadness evident in her expression but when she looked over and saw Doris's confusion, she added, "She knew about Jeffrey."

"Oh my God! How did she find out?" Doris set the coke down she'd been sipping. Olivia's words seemed to wash over the shocked woman, leaving a heavy feeling of sadness.

Olivia held up her hand. "I'm not sure if she knows Jeffrey..." She swallowed hard. The word was still very painful to say. "I have no idea. Perhaps she had overheard me talking to Ava, or...honestly, I have no idea. It's not something Natalia and I talk about while sitting on the couch eating cookies."

Doris was losing her appetite. She gazed across the table. What she saw tugged at her heart. She had known Olivia to be a strong, take no prisoners kind of woman; instead what she saw was a vulnerable, scared woman feeling overwhelmed about the changes in the family.

Doris reached over and squeezed her hand, her blue eyes filled with tenderness.

Olivia shrugged and proceeded to laundry-list all that transpired over the past few months. Doris had heard it before, but listened politely realizing that Olivia needed to vent.

Olivia tapped over her heart, tears welling up in her eyes. It had become a habit, but she went there when she felt overwhelmed. "I've tried so hard to protect Emma from pain and loss. She lived through Natalia's leaving. She knows little about my relationship with Phillip, except that I didn't trust him for a long time." Olivia refilled her ice tea glass with disdain. "But, Jeffrey." Olivia continued, running her hands through her hair, trying to pull herself together. "She knows Jeffrey is Ava's father and she knows that he hurt me."

Doris shook her head. "It infuriates me that that man is still breathing. And, he's going to be prosecuting Phillip." Doris took a deep breath. "Bastard; he should rot in hell."

She glanced up and saw the sad look on her friend's face. "I'm sorry. I know he's Ava's father, and you've managed to forgive him and all, but he's still an ass."

Both women sat quietly for a few moments alone with their thoughts. "What do I tell her when she asks?" Olivia pushed her salad away with a sigh. "Because, at this point it's not an 'if', but a 'when' situation."

"I honestly don't have an answer for that. You're lucky you have someone who can help you through this minefield." Doris motioned for another coke then reached across the table again to comfort Olivia. She also wanted to change the subject. "Augh, can we change the subject? I'm fond of you Spencer, but I don't do this touchy, feeling thing well."

Doris smiled at Olivia's smirk.

"Yeah, yeah. You're the tough, butch type. Gotcha, Wolfe!" Olivia joked, relieved to move onto a happier conversation.

Doris pulled her hand away in a mock scoff then smiled. "Seriously, I had a good time the other night with you two. It seems like you're getting along better."

Olivia smiled wistfully at the memories of her more intimate moments with Natalia recently. "Yeah, we're doing much better. Sometimes I feel like I'm spinning my wheels and getting nowhere. Between running to the therapist, keeping up with Emma's escapades, now Phillip and worrying about Rafe, we have little time to think about ourselves." Olivia speared another French fry. "Working with Anna seems to calm Emma though."

Doris was mum. *Anna*. Hearing the woman's name ignited a feeling of longing.

Olivia put down her fork and fidgeted with her napkin. "Honestly, there's so much on my plate right now that I can't think straight. My mind is a jumble. I'd love to whisk Natalia off to New York to get married, maybe just elope rather than relive the nightmare. But, I know she wants a real wedding, you know the whole nine yards so I just keep my thoughts to myself."

The sad exasperated look on Olivia's face tugged at Doris' heart. She was mired in her own living hell with Blake. The return of Ross had changed everything. Reconnecting with Blake the other evening at the farmhouse ignited the flame that was burning just below the surface. She knew Blake missed her; she could feel it when they were together. Many times Doris felt herself going through the motions most of the day. She was at war with herself over why she had let the wisp of a woman invade her heart. Straight women break hearts. *Hell, lesbians break hearts too*, she mused silently. Anna. Blake. Maybe she should toss a coin.

"I wish Natalia would bring it up."

"What?" Doris broke free from her fog.

"Are you listening to me?" Olivia was annoyed with her.

"Yeah, yeah." Doris offered a little advice. "Olivia, the woman doesn't know what you're thinking or feeling. She's not a mind reader."

When the waitress returned to see how they were doing, Olivia ordered a latte. "Make that non-fat and decaf, which means a no taste latte." Olivia winced and smiled sweetly.

The waitress just rolled her eyes at Olivia's antics.

"Olivia, don't swallow your own feelings and needs. It'll only lead to resentment. Believe me, I know." Doris started to stand and she put a few bills on the table to cover her meal. "Look, I hate to bail on you, but I have a city council meeting to get to." Doris scrunched up her nose. "So long, my friend." Doris called over her shoulder as she left, "Heed my words."

A few minutes later, Olivia had settled the bill at Towers and was sitting in her car. She pushed the key into the ignition and thought about Doris' words. The past few months had been hellish; a merry-go-round without the laughter and fun that goes with the circus ride. Emma, Jeffrey, Phillip, and now this new detective who rattled her nerves. He seemed to be an equal opportunity heartbreaker by asking Ava and Leyla out. She worried that Ava would get hurt if he dumped her for Leyla. Yet, how could she possibly condemn him? Hadn't she made the dating circuit when she first arrived in Springfield? She wouldn't even call it a 'dating' circuit, more like a 'bed 'em' circuit.

Thinking about it made her cringe. She had been promiscuous as hell not caring if the men were married. She rubbed her eyes. In fact, the prey was more exciting if they were married. God, what a home wrecker she'd been. She had a hard time imagining she was the woman that she now despised.

Her thoughts drifted to Natalia. Natalia knew Olivia 1.0 and still loved her. She wanted to cry; tears of joy because someone loved her, warts and all, and tears of despair for the kidnapping that had upset the safe world they had created in the farmhouse. Olivia was trying desperately to get that feeling back for all of them.

"Hey, are we related?" Rafe twisted and turned, trying to prop himself up in the hospital bed, but his legs were useless. As a result, he pulled out the catheter that made a real mess. Frustrated and soaking wet, he fell back onto the pillows.

He couldn't remember how long he had been at the VA in Chicago. He couldn't remember how long he'd been in Afghanistan. What he could remember was the relentless sand that crept into every crevice. There was always noise in these desolate hovels, people talking loudly in a language he couldn't understand.

"Probably not, you're a pain in the ass." Rafe's constant attempts to get up left a tangled mess of tubes and wires. The young man seemed annoyed with him. "Now I have to change all your bedding, wash you up, and change and your pants. We're doing the best we can here. Why can't you just lay still?"

"You lay in this bed and then you'll see..." Rafe tone was sharp. He was disgusted.

Finished untangling Rafe and rolling him side-to-side to change the bedding, the young man stood up; hands on hips.

"You think people owe you a living, well they don't," the nursing assistant spoke brusquely.

That remark just made Rafe more furious.

"I know your job was hard over there, but there are some hurt worse than you and they don't complain. They still manage to be nice to me. I've seen guys and women with no arms. Or their brain has been fried, yet their attitude is better than yours."

"Just you and me." Olivia dried the last dish and put it away. "A weekend in Chicago, we can stay at the Elysian Hotel Chicago. It's a new boutique hotel near Michigan Ave. I want to check out the competition." Olivia wrapped her arms around Natalia's waist. "You mentioned we should get away."

Natalia snuggled back into her embrace. It felt wonderful lying against Olivia's bosom; this is where she wanted to be, needed to be. Her thoughts drifted back to their tryst the other evening in the barn. Wanting Olivia was not the issue; life just seemed to get in the way.

"Olivia, it sounds wonderful but I don't think now is the time." Natalia knew her lover would be disappointed and felt the need to explain. "I know I suggested we get away, and I'd love nothing more than to have you all to myself, but it was wishful thinking. Olivia, Emma is still unsettled, and I'm worried about Rafe." Natalia turned and draped her arms around Olivia's neck. She nuzzled her nose into Olivia's hair drinking in the scent that was purely Olivia. "You always smell so delicious."

Olivia closed her eyes, soaking in the intimate connection she desperately craved.

"I have an idea though," Natalia whispered in her ear. She leaned back and saw how Olivia's smile lit up the room. Natalia went back to finishing the dishes, while Olivia threw down the towel and headed off to the computer.

Natalia wiped up the sink, her mind whirling in a million directions. She felt terribly guilty that it was taking her so long to feel whole again. She felt guilty when they took some quiet time for themselves. Olivia had taken the brunt of her wrath and she was still here, trying to make it all better, loving her regardless of her wicked moods.

Saturday couldn't come soon enough. Olivia had arranged everything. At Natalia's suggestion, she had booked a day at the Touch of Healing spa that had been recommended by one of Olivia's business associates. Even if for one day, she and Natalia would be pampered and pamper each other. A massage, hot oils and body wrap, and the rest of the day luxuriating in a suite with built-in jacuzzi. The moment Natalia had suggested a day trip, Olivia asked Ava to keep an eye on Emma, while she swapped a weekend with Frank to take Francesca. They wouldn't have to rush back home which made Olivia giddy with delight.

In spite of her quirky moods as of late, Natalia was excited about the prospect of a day at the spa, considering her one and only experience with a massage was the first time she and Olivia had gone away to figure out their relationship. She didn't find it particularly sensual, perhaps because there was a third party in the room. Afterwards, she and Olivia had tiptoed around each other, then Emma showed up and which made any chance of cranking the relationship up a notch was a mute point. This time though she had greater expectations.

When they arrived at the spa on Saturday, Natalia mused about the grand foyer, taking in the waterfall and the plants that curved around the cedar staircase that led to upstairs rooms. The airy breeze almost felt tropical even though they were just outside Chicago's

heart. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed contentedly. Before long, a guide took them to the first of the day's planning.

"Oh, Olivia...this is just divine." Natalia settled herself next to Olivia for their couple's massage. The massage table held the both of them; two masseuses would work on them side-by-side.

"Just you and me." Olivia smirked recalling the previous fiasco with Blake. "Let's enjoy our time together."

Olivia had requested the whole nine yards. Massages, facials, and a relaxing bath in the lavender scented infinity pool. Afterwards, there would be a light lunch and two hours of alone time in one of the well-appointed luxury guesthouses.

"Umm, yes...," Natalia dreamily sighed. She never had the money to be extravagant. She couldn't remember ever being massaged in her entire life before she met Olivia, but now with Olivia's coaxing she allowed herself this luxury. She could feel herself drifting as the fingers expertly kneaded knotted shoulders and worked their way down her spine. She turned toward her partner and found the table empty.



Alarmed, she rose partially off the table only to feel soft two hands push her gently back down.

"Natalia, relax. I've got you." Olivia had paid off the two masseuses who quietly left the room. "I didn't want to share you with anyone." Olivia positioned herself over Natalia's shoulders and began her work. For the next hour Natalia luxuriated in Olivia's touch.

Olivia helped her partner off the massage table wrapping her in a luxurious, fluffy robe.

"Olivia, your hands are marvellous." On her tippy toes she leaned in and kissed her lover thoroughly. "But I already knew that. I want to feel them all over me."

She couldn't remember feeling so relaxed. Olivia had taken liberties others would not have dreamed of...her hands smoothing oil on the inside of Natalia thighs close enough to touch her sensitive mound, her palms rubbing the sweet almond oil over her breasts circling her nipples, but never touching. Olivia ministrations had revved up her libido. "Take me back to the room." Natalia tugged on Olivia's hand as the older woman donned her robe.

Cobb salads, mineral water and a bottle of chilling champagne greeted them. Natalia smiled as her lover had been so thoughtful. Her body tingled with anticipation as she heard the door lock click. The jacuzzi looked so inviting.

When Natalia let the robe drop where she stood, Olivia sighed as she took in the sight of her lover. She wasn't thin; she wore the few pounds she could never seem to lose after the pregnancy in all the right places. Her partner's breasts were still firm and large and Olivia watched as the areolas had pebbled, the nipples at attention. Natalia's eyes, deep dark chocolate in color, never failed to mesmerize Olivia. She was truly a sight to behold and Olivia never got tired of gazing at her Venus.

Natalia held out her hand to Olivia beckoning her to the bed. "We have all afternoon."

Olivia's eyes were riveted on Natalia's breasts. As Natalia took her hand, drawing her closer, she felt her partner removing her robe and letting it fall by the wayside.

"I need to feel you all over me." Natalia's voice dripped desire and she could see Olivia shudder.

The bed had been turned back and the luxurious pale blue satin sheets looked very inviting. Natalia settled back into the softness and gently pulled Olivia on top of her, each revelling in the supple curves of the other. As Olivia adjusted her breasts so they were lying comfortably and directly on her lover's, Natalia gasped.

Olivia smiled. "I never thought two women could fit...together, you know...until you."

Natalia adjusted so their nipples were touching. "Olivia, you once told me we fit, and look..."

"Yeah, we fit. And we have plenty to fit." That drew a chuckle from Natalia who snuggled more intimately into Olivia's chest.

"I love how you move against me," Olivia whispered as she intertwined Natalia's hands in hers and raised them up, stretching both women to their full length. They wiggled around until all the parts fit perfectly. "We'll always fit perfectly." Olivia's voice dripped mushiness and Natalia giggled. "Too mushy?"

Natalia closed her eyes. "Never too mushy."

Natalia needed more and her hands began to explore. Olivia lay quietly, allowing her to love her. Finding the soft fuzz at Olivia's hairline, Natalia dropped petite kisses. She gently fondled the softness of Olivia's earlobe, drawing a finger down Olivia's jawbone. Then she kissed Olivia's eyelids and moved down to kiss the bridge of Olivia's nose. She worked her way slowly down to Olivia's lips that were moist and begging.

Olivia responded by brushing across her lover's luscious lips, teasing her with her tongue, then she sucked Natalia into a kiss that the other woman must have felt to her core. They kissed, long and luxurious to the point neither knew or cared for how long. It wasn't rushed; the kisses were slow, full of newfound discoveries and beyond words. It felt like the very first time. Everything about this moment felt fresh and sublime.

"Olivia...please." Natalia's urgency raked over Olivia.

"You said you wanted my hands all over you," Olivia said as she licked her lips. With an amused grin, she added, "I'm going treasure hunting." As her fingers massaged through Natalia's hair, she kissed her again, exploring her partner's tongue in a light licking motion. Olivia tickled the roof of Natalia's mouth that made the woman squirm. Feeling Natalia's impatience, shifting restlessly under her, she feathered fingertips down her torso, bit the swell of Natalia's breasts, and then swirled her tongue around the areola and nipple. When Natalia had pushed her breasts together to give her better access, she smiled warmly at her little helper.

Olivia held up the heavy breasts, running her tongue over them making Natalia moan. It emboldened her and she used her tongue to skirt the entire surface of Natalia's breasts. Natalia showed her appreciation by grabbing Olivia's hair and holding her head in place. "Ummm..." was all she could muster.

"Natalia, I need to be inside you," Olivia whispered, hoarsely.

Natalia spread her legs wide for her lover and grabbed Olivia's hand.

Her breathing coming more staccato, she commanded Olivia, "Finger me."

Olivia obeyed, circling her opening, parting her.

Natalia's eyes rolled back, she clutched the comforter gaining purchase. "Inside, Olivia." Olivia continued to tease and stroke her. "Now, Olivia. Now!" Her voice was raw with desire. Olivia could feel her throbbing as she pumped one, then two and finally three fingers into Natalia and she when Natalia raised her hips to meet her, she could hear her groaning into her thrusts. Situating herself perfectly over Natalia's thigh, her own clit feeling the friction of their rhythm. The two women were in perfect sync, each one of them holding on until they reached a crescendo.

"Come with me, Olivia...yes, yes..." Natalia hissed loudly. She cried out and shuddered taking Olivia along on this exhilarating ride.

Natalia stepped into the jacuzzi and offered her hand to Olivia. "Let me help you." They had dozed for a few minutes in each other's arms after making love. Natalia knew about Olivia's obsession with jacuzzi's. Unfortunately, her heart condition made it difficult to stay in past ten minutes so she decided to make the most of the time.

Gingerly, she lowered herself while Olivia entered the perfectly heated tub, kneeling in front of Natalia.

"Guess we should have showered before, the massage oil is very slippery," Natalia said as she cupped Olivia's mound, drawing a finger through her folds. "Something else is slippery; I so like slippery."

Natalia rested her head against the back of the tub as Olivia adjusted the jets. She jumped a little. "Hmm, right there."

Olivia straddled her lover's thigh, her hands resting on Natalia's shoulders. Natalia grabbed her ass, pulling Olivia down and closer. "This is heaven..."

When Olivia threw her head back, Natalia pulled her closer and kissed her pulse point, her hands moving slowly down Olivia's torso. Olivia's body was on fire and it wasn't from the 103 degree temperature.

"Let me." Olivia surrendered to her lover's hands that opened her up, allowing her the intimate sensation of rubbing against Natalia's thigh. Natalia bumped up her thigh into Olivia's center that made her whimper and begin to slide up and down. "Oh God." The friction against Natalia's thigh was almost too much and she clung to Natalia's neck as the other woman continued to move and it took little time for Olivia to tumble over the edge.

"Like my moves?" Natalia rolled her eyes as she helped Olivia out of the tub and wrapped her in a towel. She tucked in the edges and pulled Olivia close.

"Yeah, guess learning the electric slide for the weddings came in handy." Her eyes twinkled.

"I didn't realize how much we needed this." Natalia's words were loaded with sadness. All of the past six months came flooding back.

Olivia's eyes glistened. Her emotional response took her by surprise.

"Don't cry." Natalia wiped a renegade tear that rolled down Olivia's cheek. "I never stopped loving you, you know." She sighed as Olivia snuggled into her chest. "We've been through so much, but we're still together."

Reaching up, Olivia brushed her tongue over Natalia's lips.

Natalia continued, "My love for you has gotten stronger."

"Don't start with me, else we'll never get out of this room." Olivia waggled her eyebrows and laughed.

Natalia tossed a clean towel at her. "You. Shower. Alone."

Act II

Ava had been infuriated over her interaction with Michael Thorne; first the arrest, then the coffee fiasco at the Beacon. Over the course of a few weeks though, she had warmed up to him much to her mother's chagrin.

"He's trouble," Olivia spouted with an emphasis on trouble. She pinched the bridge of her nose and muttered. "Thinking he's going to make a name for himself over Phillip's trumped-up murder case." She looked at her oldest child with pleading eyes. "I know I shouldn't tell you what to do, but trust me, Ava, you need to stay away from that man."

Ava hastily threw the files onto her mother's desk. She could feel her ire rising. Who did her mother think she was telling her what to do? And, about a man no less! Her mother's track record with men had been dismal.

Regardless, she was too old to be told how to live her life. "Mom, if he asks me out I'm going to say yes."

"But Ava, he's also dating Leyla." There was no love lost between the two young women and adding a good-looking stud into the equation would be a fiasco. Natalia had gently reminded Olivia that Ava was her own woman but it fell on deaf ears.

"Didn't you date the same man as Reva, and Dinah and Reva again, then you took Josh from Reva, and oh, let's not forget the woman who wound up marrying Rick, or was it Matt? You went after almost every man in Springfield."

Olivia slammed the ledger book on the desk. "Yeah, I know I'm not a saint. Far from it. Don't. Don't do that!" She angrily pointed a finger at Ava. Olivia had lost her patience. Ava may have been a grown woman, but she was still her child and she knew from past experience this scenario was a recipe for disaster.

Ava jumped back at her mother's outburst.

"What I did was wrong, and hurtful," Olivia said as Ava kept silent because Ava knew she was far from finished. "People talked about me. They used words like slut, and worse."

Olivia walked towards the window that overlooked the lake. She wrapped her arms tightly around her as if to keep the pain she felt from spreading to her daughter. Turning, her eyes were wet. "I don't want that for you, Ava. You're not that kind of woman."

Ava rewound that conversation in her head as she headed for Company.

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Chief Mike Thorne had a few words with the bailiff then walked briskly outside scanning the street for Ava. He was glad the ticket hearing was over; he wanted to ask Ava out and was reluctant as long as he was the arresting officer. His date with Leyla had gone well, but he had to make it clear that he was not looking for a wife. What about Ava? What was she looking for? He knew so little about her.

As he strode down the street, he had a little conversation with himself. Ava was the mysterious dark haired beauty that sparked his curiosity. The incident with Ava had been unfortunate, but now it was behind them. A clean slate, Thorne concluded. It was time to move on with his life.

He caught up Ava in Company. Smiling at the brunette, he stood next to her waiting for her to order.

"Coffee, please." Ava glanced at Mike then pushed two dollars toward Buzz.

"Allow me," Mike said, handing Ava back her money and told Buzz to put it on his tab. "Ava, I'm relieved the hearing is over," he said as Buzz nodded then poured two coffees.

Ava was relieved the amount of the ticket had been reduced.

Ava's eyes gave him the once over. He was attractive: anyone could see that. It had been a dry spell lately. San Francisco had looked appealing compared to the decent and straight, if not terribly boring men in Springfield. Yet, this is where she felt she belonged.

"I'm wondering if we could perhaps have dinner next Friday night?" Thorne ran his finger around the lip of his cup. "There's a new French bistro that opened across town."

Ava eyed him skeptically. She had told her mother she'd accept an invitation, now her nerves took over.

"Look, it's hard when you're new in town." Mike pleaded his case. "My daughter takes most of my time. I'm not looking to settle down, just to talk and have a good time." Ava imagined what he meant by a 'good time.' If he thought she was going to sleep with him on the first date, well...

"Umm, okay, dinner sounds good. I need to run. Call me later in the week?" Why am I so nervous? Thank god, I didn't say anything embarrassing. Ava quickly headed off to the safety of the Beacon.

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Rafe digested what the nurse had said; he saw first hand how soldiers came out of combat. He couldn't afford to make an enemy of the person who had been tending to him since he woke up. He would try to be nice.

"I'm a Rivera." Rafe said guardedly while the attendant finished tucking in the blanket.

"I know. You told me you're a Rivera. I told you I'm a Rivera. Besides, it says so on your chart." The young man continued to straighten Rafe's pillows focusing on his work, his head down to obscure the eye roll.

"Rafael Rivera." Rafe held out his hand.

"Paul Augustine Rivera." Now he fussed over Rafe's water jug.

Rafe's eyes widened. "No way. My middle name is Augustine."

"Way," Paul said, sitting down at the edge of the bed. "Named after some saint or something."

"How long have I been here?" Rafe asked, frustrated at not really knowing anything about his condition. After Paul explained that he was not authorized to discuss a soldier's diagnosis or how they got there, Rafe asked, "Can you call for the nurse? I'm in terrible pain."

"The nurse will be here in a few...I'm going on break." Paul stood and walked toward the service entrance and pulled out his cell.



"Yeah, says his name is Rafael Rivera." He wiped his eyes. "His mother? Don't know. Want me to ask?" The young man paced, picking at his nails and making sure he sidestepped the pile of garbage dumped in the back of the hospital.

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Olivia turned toward the laptop that had taken up permanent residence on the breakfront. She discreetly loaded the Skype account, but there were no messages. She was careful not to let Natalia see her checking; something she did a few times a day.

"Oh, hey you." Olivia fumbled with the computer as Natalia walked into the room; her step quieter than usual.

Natalia smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "It's okay. I know you check probably as much as I do." "Natalia, I don't know what else to do. I've got Doris working on it, the governor's been poking around." Olivia confessed, frustration evident in her voice.

"Governor! Doris went to the governor?" Natalia squeaked out. Sometimes she forgot just how well connected her partner was with people of influence.

Natalia tilted her head to the side and reached down for Olivia's hand. "That's so sweet, but why didn't you tell me?" Natalia pulled Olivia in for a hug.

"I didn't want you to get all hopeful, and then be disappointed. Like you are now." Olivia sighed and adjusted her chair before sitting and pulled Natalia onto her lap. She hung onto the younger woman as if she needed an anchor in a stormy sea.

Natalia's sensed that something more was bothering this beautiful woman who meant the world to her. "Querida, is it Emma?"

Olivia's head shot up; her eyes wide. "How do you always know what's bothering me?"

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Blake peeked through the window at Company. She let out a huff when she saw Ross sitting at a booth in the back. *This better be good*, she thought as she tugged at the door.

"Where are our sons?" Blake had thought Ross was going to take the boys to a Cubs game. "What happened to the ballgame?"

Ross seemed unperturbed. "Something more important came up." Ross continued to scan the newspaper, then jotted down a few notes.

Blake moved over to the table and hastily closed the paper. "Reading the paper is more important?"

She was close, very close to rolling up the paper and giving him a good whack with it. Since their last tense conversation about Ross's attempt to frame Phillip for Grady Foley's murder, something definitely had shifted for Blake. She did not like the new Ross very much.

Blake was far from naïve. She was older and smart enough to know that people change; Olivia Spencer was a perfect case in point.

Blake had changed as well. Who ever would have thought she'd have fallen for a woman? Not just any woman either, but Doris Wolfe, the irascible, fiery blue-eyed force to be reckoned with mayor of their fair town. Their time together the other evening over at the farmhouse confirmed something that Blake had pushed out of her mind, but not out of her heart. She still loved Doris Wolfe.

She had loved Ross with an intensity that had astounded her. At one time she would have thought no one could compete with the love of her life. Now, she reconsidered that declaration. Having him around was becoming a burden. She forced herself to focus on the issue at hand. Staring at the father of her children, who turned back to the newspaper, she continued what had become a one-sided conversation. "Ross, the boys have been grounded except for parental activities. Where are they if they're not with you?"

He rose and put his hands on her shoulders, squeezing lightly. "Blake, calm down. I gave them money to go to the movies. I'm working on the Spaulding case."

No, she did not like this new Ross at all.

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### **Act III**

It was late, well after visiting hours when Paul crept quietly to Rafe's room. "Rivera, you awake?"

"Paul, what's wrong with me?" Rafe tried to hoist himself up but it was useless.

Paul pushed him back down, flicked on the overhead light and pushed it away from shining directly into Rafe's eyes. "I can't tell you that," he replied, his voice thick with emotion. "What can you tell me then?" Rafe's voice drifted off.

"Says you've been here for two weeks," Paul said as he sifted through the chart. "Your chart indicates that you didn't want kin notified." Paul couldn't fathom that he didn't want to see family. He'd want to see his mother first thing.

"You called for your ma. Why don't you want to see her?" In spite of their contentious start, Paul was curious about the young man's situation.

"Yeah, her name's Natalia. I don't want her to see me like this; she'll only worry about me."

"Don't you think she's worried anyway because she hasn't heard from her soldier boy?" Rafe tried to explain his reasoning, but Paul threw up his hands in exasperation. "You're killing her either way. She probably thinks you're dead."

The young men sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I can't feel my legs," Rafe's voice was barely audible.

Paul rubbed his chin not knowing what to say. He usually could keep the wall up, but this was proving more difficult.

"Why did you become a nurse?" Rafe was curious. It wasn't a typical career path for men.

Paul shrugged and adjusted his glasses. "I'm just a nursing assistant. It was either this or JV."

"Hey man, I was in JV. Then jail. When I got out, I joined the Army. My ma was heartbroken." Rafe sighed heavily. "Long story."

"I got all night." Paul shrugged again and offered a guarded smile. This Rivera guy was growing on him.

Rafe wasn't sure he wanted to talk about his mother and Olivia, after all, Paul might not understand. Hell, he didn't really understand but his time in Afghanistan made him realize one thing; life was too, too short to waste time thinking about something you couldn't

control. And, his ma seemed happy. Didn't he always say that he just wanted that he just wanted her to be happy?

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"This is nice." Ava sipped her cabernet. "Conversation with someone other than small children, a sister who is going through puberty and has just discovered boys, and hotel guests who are complaining about scratchy towels."

Mike Throne rose his glass toasting her. "I agree. I'm thrilled to have a night off from listening to citizen's complaints and giving traffic tickets."

"Then stop giving those damn tickets." Ava glared at him. "Sorry." She regrouped. "Surely, it's more exciting than that."

Mike nodded and agreed. "Chicago and Springfield are like two different worlds." But, now with Edmund Winslow winding up on Detective Li's doorstep, the Howard case, and the Grady Foley murder case, yes, the job was getting much more interesting.

"This may sound so...cliché, or '70s but, tell me about yourself." Mike laughed good-naturedly at his own corniness. He soaked in the woman who sat across from him shrouded in the dim candlelight; her warm smile was a needed respite from his world of crime. With her doe-shaped eyes, short bobbed hair, and rich full lips, she certainly was a beauty. He could tell she was Olivia's daughter, who was a very stunning and sexy woman in her own right. He had been at the receiving end of Olivia's sharp tongue when she dressed him down last month, and he could tell that Ava had her mother's fiery spunk.

Ava wasn't sure how much to divulge. Everyone in Springfield was such a busybody, he could ask the postman and probably get an earful. She decided that this very handsome and engaging man sitting across from her didn't need to know too much about her life. "I lived in San Francisco for a few years, then moved back last year. My family is here."

"Your mother?" Mike refreshed her glass.

"What about her?" Ava became a little defensive.

"Well, the first time we met was in Towers which was a tad bit tense, then I pulled her over for speeding, and the third time she came to the station and chewed me out." Mike paused to order another bottle of wine. "I know she's with that woman, Natalia?"

Ava knew he was fishing and she wasn't offering any bait. Not that she was ashamed of her mother; it just wasn't any of his business. She wanted to be tactful which was not her strong suit. "I don't talk about my mother's personal life." A soft smile crossed her face. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, Mike left it at that.

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"So your ma had to get married?" Rafe shook his head solemnly. "Funny, so did mine. A Rivera trait?" Both laughed, not yet comfortable enough with each other to say there might be some truth in the words.

Paul leaned back in the plastic chair, his eyes scanning Rafe. *Without my glasses, we could be brothers* he mused. "So what did your ma do to get you so pissed off?"

Rafe bristled at the question, turning his face towards the wall.

"Hey, I'm over here. You said it was a long story." Paul burped. "Excuse me. Too much spice."

Rafe couldn't help but laugh at Paul's antics. "I'm listening." Rafe didn't think he had laughed once in the past year.

He spilled his guts. And it felt good. Rafe hadn't felt that light in years. Now, if he could only feel his legs.

"Wow, soap opera stuff. My ma loves soaps."

Rafe was never one to share, he kept his thoughts hidden away in a locked box, but talking to Paul unlocked something inside.

"Your ma has a woman." Those words still could make Rafe cringe. "And you don't like it."

Rafe tried to explain, saying that his mother was happy and that should be enough for him. "I didn't like it at first. In fact, I hated it. First, Olivia gets my dad's heart, and then my ma falls in love with her? Who saw that coming?"

Rafe paused, strong emotions of remembered anger and confusion stirring in his head. Then he thought of Ashlee and Daisy and smiled. "Some really great friends helped me through it, if it weren't for them I'd still be in that frame of mind."

A soft smile crossed his lips. "My ma's finally happy. I saw it in her face before I left. She was standing there all weepy when the bus came and Olivia was holding her, comforting her." His smile got wider. "Olivia really, really loves her, 'ya know? For years, my ma went through the motions, taking care of me, working three or four jobs just to pay the rent." Rafe smile turned somber. "I don't think she was truly happy."

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Mike walked Ava to her suite. It had been a fun evening, a delightful evening really, but something seemed off. Mike was attentive, held her hand as they walked to the Beacon, they laughed and flirted, but Ava just wasn't feeling that this man was genuine. Something was amiss and she couldn't put her finger on it. Too forced, maybe? He kissed her cheek goodnight and didn't ask to come in.

She threw her purse onto the bed and took out her earrings. If she and Leyla were on speaking terms she'd call her right now and gossip about this enigma late into the night.

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"Olivia, you and Emma need to have a talk." Since the incident the other evening at the mansion, both mother and daughter had been tiptoeing around each other.

"I don't do talk well, I get all nervous...I just don't want to say something that's wrong." Natalia assured Olivia that the right words would come. She just needed to have faith. The two Spencer women took a slow walk down to the pond to feed the ducks.

Emma sat quietly as she watched her mother tear up the bread and toss it into the pond. She didn't know if feeding ducks was baby stuff, because if it was she wanted no part of it anymore. Maybe she'd ask her mom.

"Mom, is feeding ducks baby stuff?" Olivia continued to feed the noisy things as they dove for the little chunks of bread, honking and quacking.



"No Em. Feeding ducks is for everyone. It fills me with delight to see them all excited when I shake the bread bag." Dumping the last of the crumbs into the pond, she headed over to the bench. "Em, it's been a difficult time for all of us right now. Surprisingly, I do understand how you feel. I was there." She watched as Emma stared at the ground. "Not quite a child, not quite a young lady. It's very confusing."

"Mom, I know some things." The intensity in Emma's eyes took Olivia by surprise. "I know Daddy was mean to you. Were you mean to Daddy?"

"I was. I'm not proud of it." She'd be as truthful as she thought necessary. Though admitting to dancing on Phillip's grave would probably go beyond the realm of Emma's believability.

"Did Daddy shoot someone?" Whoa, that came out of left field.

"Daddy may have hurt someone," Olivia conceded.

Frustrated, Emma kicked at the dirt. "Why won't you tell me the truth?" When Olivia explained to her that they didn't know the truth, yet, she wasn't really satisfied with that answer. She pondered some more. "Jeffrey hurt you, too."

This one would be more difficult. Olivia scooted closer to Emma, wrapping an arm around her. "Yes, he did."

"Did he touch you?"

Olivia swallowed hard. "Yes, Emma he did. He did not have permission." Olivia held her breath for the next question. None came. Emma looked up at her, nose scrunched, her eyes glistening. They sat in silence as both absorbed the conversation, and what it meant for each of them.

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Paul studied Rafe. Same stature, the curly black hair, the infernal chip on the shoulder. Yeah, they were definitely related. "Look, I have to go home. Let me tell you something." Paul leaned over him, into his personal space that made Rafe twitch. "Your shoulder must be pretty heavy. Chips will kill you." Paul backed up realizing that Rafe was the helpless one in that bed. "I know. I've carried one my whole life."

Rafe eyes searched his newly found friend.

"My dad. Blew me off as a kid."

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## **Act IV**

"Olivia, I'm very proud of you," Natalia said as she kissed Olivia's cheek.

Olivia recalled the conversation that she and Emma had down near the pond. Olivia knew her daughter was processing. She was so much like Natalia in that way. Unlike her, shoot first and ask questions later Spencer. It was Natalia who coined that title for her when she grabbed her 9 mm. Glock that frigid February day and was going gunning for Phillip. Olivia just shook her head. It seemed like centuries ago.

Everyone was tucked in for the night. Olivia wrapped her legs around her partner who was sitting at the dressing table performing her evening ritual, and then she tucked her arms around Natalia's waist. "Three hundred twenty two." She counted. Brushing her hair soothed and calmed her. "Remember, when you were carrying Francesca and it hurt to hold your arms up?"

Natalia recalled those long ago days; it made her smile. "Yes, you were my arms, and my legs and my feet..." She rolled her eyes. "You were my everything." Olivia kissed her bare shoulder. "I was just a roly poly, but you loved me anyway."



"I *was* your everything? What am I now?" Olivia asked with a mock glare. Natalia reassured the still insecure woman that she was the love of her life.

"Five-hundred percent more of everything." Natalia put down her brush and leaned back into Olivia's embrace. "I treasure everything about you. You're my healing balm and I love you." She turned to capture Olivia's lips.

Sated, they lay quietly thinking about the past few minutes. Natalia marvelled at how a kiss could still ignite the intense desire she felt for the raven-haired beauty cuddled next to her. All Olivia had done was kiss her; well, she also began playing with her nipple, and Natalia came. They scrambled to the bed and within minutes Olivia pushed out an orgasm that probably was heard in the next county. "You're incredible."

"Huh?"

"You, you're incredible."

Natalia rolled partially on top of her. "You certainly are the noisy one in this relationship." She gave Olivia a playful rub on the nose. The other woman paused; her iridescent green jewels a deeper shade of dark.

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"Morning, soldier boy." Paul grinned; for some odd reason he liked calling Rafe that.

Rafe got right to the point. "Your dad walked out?"

Paul busied himself around Rafe's tray, filling the water bucket, putting out a new box of tissues. "My ma threw him out; he was a hothead. Got hot around her one too many times."

Rafe chuckled at the insinuation. "Did your ma have help?" Rafe wanted to know everything about Paul.

"Yeah. My grandmother's sister helped. My granddad wanted nothing to do with any of us."

Rafe chimed in. "I don't know much about my grandparents. 'Cept that they weren't too happy when my ma told them she was pregnant." Rafe idly fiddled with the blanket hem.

Paul continued to busy himself; wanting to leave but being pulled to Rafe like a magnet. He would wind up telling him the truth, that he and Rafe were related. That would blow the top off the can.

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"We give thanks for this new week. Bless this family and the food we eat. Amen." For the first time in a week, the Spencer-Rivera clan, minus Rafe and Ava, were all seated at the breakfast table. Emma was playing hide the spoon on Francesca, and the little one was frustrated, babbling and whining.

"Jellybean, give your sister her spoon," Olivia told her calmly.

Natalia, dishing up scrambled eggs turned to look at the commotion but Olivia's eyes signaled she had it under control though Emma continued to tease.

"Now!" Olivia's voice boomed.

Natalia quickly placed the dishes in front of everyone. Leyla hid herself at the bottom of the coffee cup.

"I'd like for you to listen when I ask you to do something," Olivia said. When Emma pouted, then went to excuse herself from the table, she continued, "Finish your breakfast."

"Why should I listen? You don't listen to me. You're still hiding something about daddy." Her tone was defiant.

Here came the brick to the head. Olivia was waiting for Emma to process their conversation from the other day. Troubled brown eyes met angry green. A moment of understanding crossed between the two women. Emma was still harboring resentment against Olivia for not telling her about her father.

Phillip had been accused and would likely be put on trial for an incident that was committed years ago. That Jeffrey was all too anxious to persecute infuriated Olivia and Ava. "I need more information from your father before I tell you anything."

The school bus blew its horn. Emma hurriedly grabbed her backpack and headed for the door. As Olivia pushed back her chair, Emma responded, "Don't bother." Olivia was wounded.

"Emma, don't talk to your mother that way." Natalia quickly threw down her napkin and closed the door, stepping in front of the testy young lady. "Wait right there, young lady." Natalia dismissed the school bus. "I'll drive you to school. I want to talk to you."

Emma fumed. She would be late for school yet again. When her mommy was sick with her heart; she was late. When Olivia was recuperating from her heart transplant; she was late. When Natalia was laying in that hospital bed recovering from her wounds; she was late. Emma was having a really crappy day and it hadn't even started.

"I'm tired of being late, Ma." Natalia quietly shut the pantry door. They sized each other up.

"I want to talk to you." Emma dropped her backpack and sat down on a small stool, her legs tucked under her chin. She grasped her knees to keep her balance.

"Emma, I'm surprised. I felt confident that we were okay." Just the other day they had a good talk. The old fun-loving Emma seemed to be back. Maybe it was just a case of hormones.

"Do you hear what you say?"

Natalia seemed startled by the question. "I want to talk to you." *What was the troubled youngster getting at?* Natalia wondered.

Emma was impertinent. "You always want to talk to me. Why don't you want to talk with me?" Emma teared up. "You talk to me, or at me, but never with me."

Natalia sat dumfounded. Emma was right. Recently, it was Natalia or Olivia doing the talking, or reprimanding, or just telling her what she had done wrong.

Natalia reached for her blindly. "My Jellybean, I'm so sorry." Emma threw her arms around Natalia's waist, grabbing tightly for any solid connection to her other mommy.

"I want it to be the way it was...back when you and Mommy and I were a family. Here together, in the farmhouse. Now it's all scary and confusing."

Natalia gave Em a kiss on the head and rubbed her back. "Come on, we'll get you to school on time."

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Both women were happy to go to work; they both needed a distraction. "She's scared and confused, Olivia," Natalia said as she closed the conference room door.

Olivia mumbled under her breath. Natalia stood across from her. "What's that?"

"I said, she's not the only one." Olivia stood, a worried look on her face.

Natalia quickly came to Olivia's side. "Querida, I told you what Emma said...try not to worry."

Olivia blew a tendril of hair out of her eyes. She sounded off, "Just when I think everything is getting better; it's not. Phillip is being framed; I just know it. And Emma, she's still a little girl and I feel her slipping away."

Natalia ran a hand down Olivia's arm needing a connection. "And you, you've been so brave...you know, not hearing from Rafe." Her voice cracked. "I should be comforting you."

"We'll comfort each other. We're a team, remember?"

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It had been a hellish afternoon; there was one crisis after another at the hotel. Natalia was exhausted and happy to be heading home. First, she'd pick up Olivia and then they'd head to the new Chinese restaurant for take out.

"Mel, how have you been?" Natalia said as she noticed the counselor on her way towards the elevator from Olivia's office. "It's been a while."

"Hey Natalia," Mel replied in greeting. "Olivia might need you right now. This case with Phillip is getting ugly."

"Thanks. Have a good evening." Natalia headed to her partner's office, quietly opening the door, finding Olivia standing against her desk, arms wrapped tightly around her middle. "Hey you," Natalia whispered as she embraced her, nuzzling into her hair. "I saw Mel."

"Hey yourself." Olivia took Natalia's hand and together they went to the sofa. "Mel is going to defend Phillip."

"That's good news, isn't it?"

"Cyrus is upset with her." Olivia went on to complain about Jeffrey who was hell bent on getting a conviction. "Phillip warned Jeffrey that he will use the rape against him, to destroy him if he doesn't drop the charges." Olivia rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Natalia, it will be all over town. Emma knows Jeffrey hurt me, that he touched me without permission. I don't want her to know any more..."

"Don't think Emma doesn't know already, Mom," Ava said by way of announcement as she stood in the doorway. "Sorry. I knocked but no one answered."

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Paul was eavesdropping; Certified Nursing Assistants had no business doing Grand Rounds with the docs and interns, but a bunch of them were hovering over Rafe's bed and he was desperate for information.

"We're not sure if it's complete," one doctor said.

Paul had listened enough to know that complete meant total loss of function. Rafe was scheduled for an MRI that afternoon.

"Want me to call your ma?" Paul sat on the edge of the bed afterwards.

Rafe shook his head vehemently. "No, I don't want her knowing until they know what it is."

"You're a crappy son." Those were fighting words and Rafe's eyes got wild as he struggled to swing his legs over the side.

"Settle down, Mr. Army man."

"Why you say that?" Rafe spat, both panicked by his situation and pissed that Paul seemed to know more than he was saying.

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Chief Thorne, Eleni, and Anna huddled into the small interrogation room. "Okay, let's go over this one more time." Eleni walked them through the injuries and the evidence.

"Motive?" Thorne tapped his pencil on the desk.

Anna filled them in. "Well, we know that Phillip Spaulding and Grady Foley were bitter enemies, but whether Phillip pushed Grady off the cliff or Grady lost his footing and fell is up for grabs."

"The prosecution is going to push for a murder conviction," Chief Thorne said, recalling an earlier conversation with the District Attorney.

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Blake knocked then stood near the door. She had stopped by Ross's office to drop off new custody documents but when her estranged husband continued to tap on his computer, she called him out, "Ross!"

He glanced up and calmly removed his glasses. He gazed at her with genuine confusion.

"You don't know what happened up on that cliff that day, Ross." Blake was losing patience. "Why are you trying to hurt Phillip? You hurt him and you hurt his family, Beth, and Lizzie." Blake's words seem to be falling on deaf ears. "And what about little Emma? She almost lost her Dad once. She needs her father."

He twirled his specs. "You've been editing too many of those romance novels, my dear." His voice held a touch of sarcasm.

"Don't mock me." Her blue eyes bore a hole in him.

"Blake, if I get this conviction I'll probably get to be mayor. My political career will be resurrected."

Blake stood, hands on hips. "I thought you wanted a family. You vowed that once the children came, you'd rearrange your schedule, prioritize your time...the boys really need you right now."

"That was years ago, my love."

"Don't call me that. You lost that privilege years ago," she said, seething.

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Sundays were always quiet on the ward. It looked like Rafe was going to be in for a long stay. The MRI was inconclusive and another round of tests was scheduled for next week.

How messed up was all this? It's like he didn't learn anything from JV and going to jail. He thought joining the military would miraculously make him a man; whatever that was, he wasn't sure anymore. There were times he was so scared in combat, he wet himself. Now, he was laid up in this hellhole, paralyzed. He knew what paralyzed meant.

Frustrated, he tried to throw the blankets off his legs. *Don't cry. Don't cry.*

"Hey, Rivera." Paul pushed open the door and stuck his head in. "Got time?"

Rafe wanted to throw the water cup at him but he couldn't reach it.

"I got someone who wants to see you."

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