



# When One Door Closes

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## Act I

*Getting away from Greg in full party preparation mode was like extricating yourself from the human octopus*, Olivia mused as she closed the door to her office in the man's face. Whoever he was dating, she felt sorry for the poor guy. She could still hear Greg mumbling in the hallway as he talked up Kiera about color palettes and matching hers-and-hers wedding toppers that could be designed in an exact replica of Olivia and Natalia, if the price was right.

Olivia dropped her forehead to the door and sighed.

"Rough morning, querida?"

Olivia jumped at the amused sound of Natalia's voice behind her and turned around. "God, Natalia! Cardiac patient, remember?"

Walking from the corner where she'd been standing when Olivia came in, Natalia sauntered over to her soon-to-be wife. Well, Olivia was already legally her wife. She smiled as she still hadn't gotten over the fact that Olivia had surprised her with a trip to New York City on a whim to get married. She sighed happily at the warm feeling she got in the pit of her stomach thinking of Olivia as her wife.

When she reached the taller woman, she stood on her toes a little, pressing the length of her body against Olivia, pushing her into the door, to kiss her on the lips. Breaking apart with a pleased hum, Natalia smiled. "Don't worry. I'll sooth your aches, my wife." Natalia kissed her soundly again.

Olivia broke the kiss and grinned saucily at the brunette in her arms. "I think it turns you on to call me your wife."

"Good thing for you." Natalia nodded and kissed her quickly but with no less of the passion.

Olivia nodded in return. "Very good. I should have married you ages ago." Natalia's kisses were coaxing her desire, and with a quick glance at the clock on the wall, she flicked the door lock closed.

Natalia didn't have to be told twice what Olivia wanted. As soon as she heard the door lock slide in place, she reached around and began unbuttoning Olivia's blouse. "As far as I'm concerned, we've been married far longer than we realize. I think a part of me fell for you the moment we met."

Sobering at the comment, Olivia leaned back and nodded, reaching for the hands opening her blouse. She pulled them to her lips and laid gentle kisses along the knuckles, eventually opening one and peppering the palm with kisses, lingering over Natalia's wrist. When she heard Natalia gasp, she looked up at the complete abandon in her wife's dark eyes. She cupped Natalia's face, staring into the endless depths of her eyes.

Finally, Natalia could take the look no longer and her voice came out in a choked whisper, "What?"

Olivia brushed a thumb over Natalia's sweet lips. She shook her head, endeavoring Natalia not to worry, even as her bottom lip trembled with emotion. "I just want to make love to my wife."

Natalia's answer was a slow, deep kiss as she reached for the light switch against the wall behind Olivia.

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Looking up the hallway, Doris tapped her foot waiting for the court session to start. Since her return from New York, her case for self-defence for Kathryn Howard just gotten tighter. The medical documents that she'd requested on Kathryn's behalf finally arrived.

*Bureaucracy.* It had taken an affidavit from Kathryn and a court order for each hospital or medical center to release any medical records. It had taken Doris much of one late evening and lots of caffeine before she'd put together a time-line and escalation of abusive actions

that required professional care. Unfortunately, that didn't count the times where Kathryn had been injured but was able to take care of it herself. However, they were in a better place than before.

The offer of housing and employment from Buzz Cooper was another positive for the young woman that Doris would present to the court. It certainly beat being evicted from her home with limited options available. A manslaughter charge certainly didn't help matters when it came to finding employment.

Looking over at her client, sitting on the wooden bench that lined one side of the hallway, Doris sighed, but at last their waiting was over as the court clerk came out to get them. Filing towards the front of the room, Doris lay her briefcase on the table and directed Kathryn into the second seat. She was just waiting for the prosecuting attorney to take his place, and Doris had been relieved that she wouldn't be facing off against Jeffrey for this case, though it had been a bit of a surprise to hear he'd recused himself, given how much of a name he wanted to make for himself prosecuting in his words an *easy conviction* that would improve his bid for election for District Attorney, instead of his current Acting District Attorney position. Needless to say, her strengthened case, coupled with a young up and coming attorney in the prosecutor's office, made Doris even happier. Finally, the bailiff announced the judge's presence.

Judge Davis banged his gavel on the stone block, bringing the session to order. "I see that Ms. Wolfe is representing the defence," he said, nodding in her direction before turning his attention to the prosecutor. "Mr. Thomas, is it?" The young man nodded. "Well, sir, are you ready to start?"

"Yes, your honor," Carl Thomas started as he glanced down at his legal pad. "Your honor, Ms. Howard is charged with the fatal shooting of her husband. The photographs in evidence of the crime tell of a violent act and one that needs harsh punishment. The post-mortem indicates that Michael Howard was shot at close range, and that their daughter was also present at the time of the shooting. Mr. Howard was an upstanding man of his community, a man who owned his own business and cared for his family. Ms. Howard has also removed their daughter from their home several times, crossing state lines on more than one occasion without the permission of her husband. The evidence, I believe your honor, speaks for itself."

Doris rolled her eyes. *Really? That's all you can come up with?* But she was spared voicing that thought when the judge spoke up.

"Thank you, Mr. Thomas. I'll keep that in mind." Judge Davis nodded and turned to face the defence. "Are you ready, Ms. Wolfe?"

"Yes, your honor. While the defence will contend that my client, Kathryn Howard, did kill her husband by shooting him, we will stipulate that there are extenuating circumstances, particularly the pattern of escalating violence towards her and the threats of physical and sexual assault on an eight-year old girl." Doris looked directly at the judge, before handing over copies of the medical records to the bailiff to pass to both the prosecution and the judge. "Your honor, I present here a copy of the records from each of the hospitals and clinics where Ms. Howard sought medical attention following an abusive attack from her husband over the past few years. I also ask you to look at the results and photographs of Ms. Howard taken at Cedar's Hospital the night of the attack." Doris handed the second bag of evidence and the accompanying paperwork to the bailiff. "A positive rape kit done the night of the attack was performed and matched against the deceased. As you will notice, there were heavy bruises and tearing of the pelvis and vaginal wall, as well as bruising on Ms. Howard's thighs." Doris paused and looked over at her client, whom she noted was pale and tired. Reaching a hand down to the young woman's hands which were near white as she gripped the table, Doris tried to give her as comforting a presence as she could before returning her attention to the judge. "Your honor, since Ms. Howard is the sole guardian and provider for her daughter, and has not proved to be any flight risk since she was charged, I ask for continued leniency as you decide on her fate. Thank you."

"Thank you, Ms. Wolfe. I have these along with the police statements provided and the witness statements. Ms. Howard, you are still released in your own reconnaissance; I do advise that you do not leave town. I will make my decision soon and will inform the court. We will take a recess until that time, or until I have need to question the defendant further. Court is adjourned." Judge Davis banged his gavel, then gathered the paperwork and evidence in his arms before leaving the room.

Doris sighed; she hated waiting but she had a good feeling about this case and its outcome. Reaching out her hand again, this time to Kathryn's shoulder, she indicated the young woman to stand as they were escorted out of the courtroom.

"Ms. Wolfe, will my daughter have to testify?" Kathryn asked nervously. It was bad enough that she had to go through the trial, but she didn't want to put her daughter through more than she had already endured.

"No. The judge and the prosecution have a copy of her statement, plus the psychological evaluation reports from Dr. Tremain. The judge will look those over but the case is strong. He may have some questions for you, but I wouldn't worry. Just answer them honestly." Doris gave the young woman a confident smile. "Look, it will probably be a while, so why don't we go get a bite to eat."

Kathryn looked down at her hands which had been nervously fidgeting with her blazer hem. "I don't know if I can eat; my stomach is a bundle of nerves."

"You'll be okay. Now, come on, we'll go down to the cafeteria. There's usually some decent sandwiches in there. And tea or coffee." Doris led them down the hallway, passing the young prosecutor along the way. The poor man looked worse than her client did as he paced the hall, his cell phone held to his ear. As she waited for the elevator, she grinned as she heard the young man say, *'But, Mr. O'Neill, there's not much I can do with all that evidence they provided.'* Doris had to agree. The prosecution's evidence to the contrary was really rather pitiful, which again had surprised her, given how gung-ho Jeffrey had been to get the case. She would have thought he'd pull in a tighter case. She shrugged, maybe with the finding of Grady Foley and the murder case against Phillip Spaulding had redirected his energies, but still, she wondered. At any rate, she needed caffeine, so once the elevator door pinged, she and Kathryn were on their way downstairs to the small cafeteria.

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"Okay, Greg needs to step back from all this wedding stuff or I'm so going to have to bitch slap him," Ava Peralta grumbled with a slight grin as she slipped down into the booth by the far window at Company. "Now he wants to hire some guy to make ice sculptures of Olivia and Natalia's heads for the buffet table."

Leyla choked slightly, her eyes going large with suppressed laughter, nearly gagging as she tried to finish swallowing her sip of iced tea.

"He thinks it will be romantic. Seriously? Can you imagine it? Help me, I'm meeeelllting...I'm meeeelllting!!" Ava drooped lower in the booth as if wilting, laughing as Leyla waved her hands and frantically tried to gulp down the drink in her mouth while giggling at her antics. She sighed as she finally got her mouthful of fluid down and could take a breath.

"Let me swallow before you do stuff like that," Leyla gasped, tossing her scrunched-up napkin across the booth at the other woman, as Ava just laughed at her harder.

"Ah, timing is everything, Rivera. Don't you forget it," Ava said, straightening up as their server arrived with a jug of ice water and a menu. Already knowing what she wanted, Ava waved the menu off and they both quickly ordered their fully loaded Buzz Burgers before slipping back into their conversation.

"So are you ready to hit the mall this week with the Bean?" Leyla asked, stirring the ice in her drink with a straw. "I almost dread what type of bridesmaids dress we'll have to wear."

"All I can say is thank God Emma's moved out of that horrid Barbie pink stage," Ava shuddered. "As long as she doesn't move straight into that gothic black and moody stage right away, I'll be happy."

"Well, no guarantees there either," Leyla sighed. As they both well knew it had been a war zone the last little while at the farmhouse. "Emma has a good handle on the moody part already, I'm sure the black clothes and piercings aren't far behind. I guess it's all a part of growing up, pushing the envelope with parents."

Ava shrugged, slipping into thoughtful silence. Her adoptive parents had been lovely and it still broke her heart sometimes that they never lived to see her grown into adulthood. Although she did have Olivia and Jeffrey to turn to now, it really wasn't the same as being with the people who raised her. And the baggage that came with her biological parents was sometimes wearing.

"Emma asked me about Mom and Jeffrey," Ava said quietly, not meeting Leyla's eyes as they snapped up at her admission.

"Jesus, what did you tell her?" Leyla shifted in her seat. She knew Olivia had been upset with Emma's outbursts lately but hadn't realize Emma had figured so much out. The girl was bright, almost too smart for her own good sometimes. Her heart went out to Ava, as she ran a hand through her short hair and sighed.

"Basically that it's complicated, but that we'd figure it out as we go along...as a family," Ava sighed, taking a long sip of her water to collect her thoughts. "To be honest, there have been days I've hated both Olivia and Jeffrey, and then there are days that I don't know what I'd do without either of them."

"Like any parent," Leyla snorted. "My Dad is an asshole, and I have no clue why my Mom has put up and stayed with him all these years and that pisses me off, but y'know what? I still love them. I know Natalia does too, and they treated her like shit." She shook her head.

Their mom hadn't been much help, hiding away at the local church helping 'those less fortunate' while life at home was falling apart. It was all such a mess. Leyla gave herself a mental shake and brought herself back to the here and now. "At least Olivia and Jeffrey are a part of your life now, both of them trying to build a decent relationship with you."

"It's a struggle some days, especially with Dad being a real jerk lately, but I've done nothing wrong in all of this and I refuse to be a victim," Ava said quietly, tears welling in her dark eyes but a thread of pure steel backbone ran through her words.

"Hey, you're not alone in this," Leyla automatically reached out across the table, her fingers wrapping around Ava's thin wrist and squeezing her hand as their eyes met and held. "To hell with what anyone whispers around this dinky little town. Everybody's family is dysfunctional one way or another. Your mom and your dad love you, which is a hell of a lot more than some people have and that's what really counts. Plus you have all this extended family now too. So you just need to remember that your family has your back," Leyla smiled softly as Ava glanced up at her, offering a small lopsided grin.

"And this time, we're not letting you go."

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Natalia quirked her mouth to the side and tapped the top of the pen against her cheek as she looked over the list of names on the page.

"I keep feeling like we're missing someone," she said, continuing to puzzle over the page.

"You've got Sam, right? I know he was with us in New York, but I'd still like to send him one. Though we may have to send it by carrier pigeon," Olivia joked and finished drying the last plate before placing it on the shelf in the cabinet. They'd talked about inviting Natalia's family before, but then Natalia had been kidnapped and her parents could have changed their minds in light of that. She bit her lip and turned to look at her wife who was oblivious to her train of thoughts. "Maybe we should invite your parents again."

Natalia dropped the pen to the paper and sighed, leaning back in the chair before sliding down and pouting. "They didn't come the first time. Why should they come now? Even Rafe won't be here. We have no idea what's going on with him, and I'm worried sick that he's hurt or...worse. You told me how you'd arranged for him to be on the computer so he could be present the last time. Now I can't even have that. I just want this to be a happy day for us."

Resolutely, Olivia tossed the towel in her hand to the counter and walked over to Natalia. She got down on her knees and urged Natalia to turn to look at her. When the younger woman did, Olivia reached up and brushed back the hair from her eyes. "It will be a happy day. Every day that I'm with you is a happy day, even when there are crappy days." She smiled at the hint of a grin on Natalia's beautiful face. "As far as your parents are concerned, how will we know if we never try?"

Natalia tilted her head and regarded the woman she loved. "Is this really THE Olivia Spencer having...faith?"

Olivia smirked and leaned forward to kiss the brunette quickly and playfully. "I learned from the best." She stood and pointed at the paper. "Put 'em down there. We'll keep at them until they cry for mercy."

Smiling, Natalia picked up her discarded pen and wrote down her parent's names. After pausing for a moment, she added Leo and Sophia's names too.

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Detective Anna Li sorted through some more files on her desk and cross-matched them with notes she'd already added to her laptop, hoping to find some indication of where her father might have disappeared following the actual death of Edmund Winslow. Since Chief Thorne had taken on the death of Grady Foley's investigation, it had left her more time to investigate her father's dealings with Edmund, and her own hunches. She'd contacted her father's home on the Winslow estate on San Cristobel but he hadn't returned there, or if he had, they weren't saying. She'd put out feelers with colleagues at Interpol for information on Hung Li, but there hadn't been much. His passport hadn't been flagged, so she was guessing that he was still using Edmund's private jet and underground contacts for the time being. What he was threatening them with, she didn't know, other than the fact that he had killed Edmund. Possibly the threat that they could be next worked more efficiently to get them to hide him.

*But that was just it, really,* Anna thought; her father never used to hide from anything. If nothing else, he was proud of the work he had done for the Winslow family. Security and protection were things he held high. *So, why was he being elusive now?*

She'd been working at her laptop for longer than she'd thought and when she sat back and rolled her neck, she could feel the popping as she stretched in her seat. Fighting the tension in her muscles she stood and stretched, suddenly realizing that she hadn't eaten in a while



when she heard her stomach growl. Putting her laptop in standby mode, she put it into her desk drawer and locked it up along with her notes.

Looking over at her colleague, she tossed a scrunched up paper ball over at Remy. "Hey, Boudreau, I'm headed out for lunch. You want anything?"

"A decent coffee!" he exclaimed, laughing back at her.

"Will do." Anna turned towards Sgt. Keri Stapleton, the new officer that had transferred with the Chief. "You want anything?"

"If you can get me a large chai latte and a chicken salad sandwich, I'd owe you big," Keri said, with a smile.

"Not a problem. I've gotta stretch out anyway. Making a run over to Company. If anyone needs me, I've got my cell phone," Anna said as she headed for the exit, bumping into Eleni coming in.

"Hey, can I talk to you later?" Eleni asked her friend, wanting to check with her on something.

"Sure. Just going for lunch. Give me 45 minutes or so?"

"No problem. See you then," Eleni said, headed down the hall to her office.

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Natalia was busy, lost in dusting off the coffee table for the twentieth time and making sure the magazines on the table were angled exactly the same when a pair of strong but feminine arms snaked around her waist startling her out of her mental meanderings. She was spun around until she gazed into amused but sultry green eyes.

"Stop," Olivia stated sweetly. "It's just Josh. He's been here many times before, and he's definitely seen this house with an occasional speck of dust."

Natalia blew out a frustrated sigh and dropped her head to Olivia's chest as the older woman soothingly ran her hands up and down her back. Gradually, she relaxed and nuzzled into Olivia wrapping her own arms around the other woman.

"I know." Natalia sighed. "Do you think he has any idea what we're going to be asking him? This is kind of a big deal to just spring on someone, especially your ex-husband." Natalia had pulled away as she spoke, her arms flailing in the air at that last statement. She turned and nervously bit at a finger nail. The depth of Olivia's feelings for Josh didn't seem to be helping matters for Natalia. They had a history, a very long, torrid...passionate history. Maybe it would be too awkward to ask this of him.

Olivia tilted her head to the side, practically able to read the reservations written across her love's beautiful face. She walked over and took Natalia's hands into her own, stilling their nervous movement, and brought them to her lips to kiss gently. "Don't do this to yourself. Josh has moved on. He's madly in love with Reva and always has been; even when I didn't want to accept that as true, I knew it was. And don't forget the most important thing..."

Natalia instinctively leaned in closer to her mate as Olivia left her words hanging in the air. Breathlessly, she whispered, "What?"

Olivia dipped her head until her lips caressed Natalia's lightly, teasing the younger woman closer. "I chose you." She closed the barely noticeable gap with a kiss. In mere moments, the clasped hands were dropped as both women lost themselves in the kiss, wrapped up tightly in each other's arms.

A knock at the door broke the moment and Olivia pulled back with a groan. She moved to answer the door, but raised a finger in Natalia's direction as the younger woman got her bearings. "Don't forget where we left off."

Natalia blew out a slow breath and fanned her face. "Don't worry. I won't!" Whatever concerns had lurked in her mind before evaporated with that fierce kiss. She was so gone that she could hardly remember why Josh was coming by the farmhouse.

She walked into the kitchen just as Olivia opened the door to let Josh in. He quickly and smoothly embraced his ex-wife in a hug then turned to Natalia and did the same. Natalia could certainly see why Olivia had been attracted to Josh. He was charming and handsome in a guy-next-door kind of way. He was most definitely the marrying kind; the type you would be proud to introduce to your parents. If there wasn't Olivia and they hadn't been soul mates, Natalia could see Josh being someone that she would have gravitated towards. The fact that he was a spiritual type of person would have been a bonus.

She gestured to the living room and asked Josh if he wanted anything to drink. When he declined, Natalia felt a little awkward for a moment. It would have actually been nice to do

something instead of standing awkwardly in the kitchen looking at each other. After an odd moment of deciding who would go ahead of whom, all three made their way to the living room and sat down – Olivia and Natalia on the sofa, Josh in a chair.

"So, how have you beautiful ladies been?" Josh ventured for casual conversation. He had no idea why they asked him to come over. On the phone, he had asked Olivia if she needed some handyman work, but even the flirtatious tone that seemed to come out whenever he was in the woman's presence didn't manage to get details out of her.

Olivia and Natalia looked at each other then at Josh. Olivia spoke first, "Good." Then Natalia at almost the same time, "Okay."



Josh chuckled a little. Whatever they wanted him there for had completely flummoxed both of the women. "Is it 'good' or is it 'okay'?"

Pressing the bridge of her nose with her fingers, Olivia decided to do what she does best and jump in head first. "Good. Everything's great. In fact, Natalia and I got married in New York."

A bright smile took over Josh's handsome face. "So I heard! Congratulations!"

"Thanks," Olivia said, relaxing a little as she got her thoughts together. "But, you know, there's still so much not done, that was missing from the ceremony in New York. There were some things we realized we wanted in our lives, that we wanted to have the experience of. Our friends...our family."

Josh watched as Olivia lovingly took Natalia's hand in her own, his ex turning her head to lock eyes with the woman she had chosen to live the rest of her life with. Then, for some reason, the oddest thought came to mind and he felt a wave of panic mixed with excitement. Certainly, they wouldn't ask him to...

"Marry us, Josh," Natalia finished as she turned to look at him, the look of adoration and awe she had from being in Olivia's presence faded at the ashen expression on Josh's face. She reached out. "Josh, are you okay?"

"What?" Josh jerked back to the present, not really hearing what the two women were saying to him.

Olivia reached over and squeezed his knee. She had seen that freaked out look on his face before. "What did you think we were going to ask you?"

"Ummmm," Josh stalled, unable to look either of them in the eye.

Leaning back into the sofa, working hard to hide her amusement, Olivia chuckled lightly. "Oh my God. Josh!"

Natalia looked back and forth between them. "What?"

Olivia leaned over to her partner and whispered, "I think he thought we were going to ask him to be our baby daddy."

Natalia's mouth rounded into an "o" and she turned to Josh incredulously. "Really?"

His embarrassment mounting with each passing second, he looked down and nodded. Clearing his throat and straightening up, he tried to gain a sense of composure. "So, if it wasn't that, then what did you want to talk about?" He saw Olivia hiding her amusement behind her hand. "Shut up, Olivia," he grouched.

She threw her hands up in the air. "What? I didn't do anything!"

He teasingly glared at her, finding humor in the moment now. "Yet," he deadpanned. He clapped his hands together. "So, seriously, what's up?"

Natalia shook her head and looked at her partner's scruffy ex-husband. "We'd like for you to officiate our ceremony."

Josh smiled broadly. "Really?" Both women nodded. "I'd be honored," he added.

Natalia stood suddenly. "Well, with that out of the way, I think I need some coffee."

When she was out of the room, Olivia scooted over to Josh. She bit her bottom lip nervously. "I need you to do a favor for me. Actually, two. Do you think we could meet soon and talk about it?"

He shrugged. "Sure...as long as it doesn't involve babies."

Olivia teased her ex by laughing heartily before leaning over and slapping him on the shoulder. "Not yet, but you never know."

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## **Act II**

The living room was still spotless as Leyla made her way downstairs quietly the next morning, a bonus they all enjoyed due to Natalia's need to clean when anxious about something. She wandered into the kitchen and opened the fridge, pulling out a carton of orange juice. Pouring it into a large glass, she put the carton back and slid down into one of the wooden chairs around the table and took a big sip of the cold juice.

Leyla sighed tiredly; another dream about Ava had woken her and left her restless during the night. The first time it happened had been a few weeks ago, and it hadn't take Leyla long to realize that despite her self-denials, on some level she was attracted to the other woman. It was the only answer that made any sense but it didn't give her any comfort. She swirled the orange juice in her glass as her thoughts wandered.

All that tension between them had a low level sexual vibe to it, at least, that's what she had been feeling on her side of it anyway. The dreams had been a wake-up call in more ways than one. Leyla had at least figured out what she really was feeling for Ava, which was a good thing and at the same time it made life more difficult. Now that she had admitted to herself that she has attracted to Ava, she found herself tongue-tied and awkward around her. However, their friendship and their family dynamic was what was most important and that's what Leyla was determined to focus on.

Now, if only the dreams weren't so damn hot.

Leyla whimpered slightly and looked up as Natalia entered the kitchen, who flashed her a warm smile complete with dimples before heading towards the stove.

"Hey, you're up early," Natalia said bright and chipper as she pulled out a frying pan from under the stove and opened the freezer door to start hunting for a package of turkey bacon.

"Yeah, haven't been sleeping very well lately," Leyla sighed and ran a hand through her long dark hair. "Funny dreams. Probably just something I ate." Or want to eat.

"Oh," Natalia glanced over, a little frown furrowing her brow. "What about?"

Leyla's shoulders slumped and she shifted in her chair. How was she supposed to tell her sister that she was having erotic dreams about Ava? What did that make her to Leyla, her step-niece? It was all rather tawdry and incestuous, yet oddly titillating at the same time.

"Ava," Leyla blurted out, shocking herself slightly. It was the truth of the matter; however the details could be glossed over. Natalia paused in cracking eggs into a bowl and glanced over at her.

"Are you two fighting again?" Natalia looked at her sister, concerned. They needed to nip this bickering in the bud if it was causing nightmares. She'd had her fair share of them since the kidnapping and knew how it could be draining not getting decent sleep and certainly wouldn't help with the snapping at each other. "Is this about that cop you two are dating?" Leyla squirmed a little, finally deciding to stand and do something to help her sister. It comforted her, reminding her of when she was small and she would help their mom in the kitchen, telling her how her day at school went. She sighed and squirted some dishwashing detergent into the sink and pushed the plug down to stop the drain.

"No, we've been getting along well actually. The dreams aren't really important. I think it's just from the on-again, off-again, weird tension between us," Leyla flipped on the tap and began to run some hot water into the sink for dishes, as Natalia poured the eggs into the frying pan. "I want to be supportive and be there for her, try to have a decent friendship, but just when I think we are getting closer, something happens and it sets us off again, attacking each other."

"Now what happened?" Natalia asked, almost afraid of the answer. She wanted their families to get along, but she knew like anything else there would be some adjustment, personalities that needed to flex around each other. That's what being a family was about,

putting up with each other's stuff and loving each other anyway. Still, outright arguing was always trying for all concerned. She chewed her bottom lip and idly wondered if there was any cleaning product left.

"Nothing, we are actually in a good place right now, considering we're sort of seeing the same guy, but I keep waiting for the shoe to drop, y'know?" Leyla sighed. To be honest, Mike Thorne wasn't really who she was interested in dating. She had just kind of fallen into it, to bug Ava. The guy was nice and all, and his daughter was adorable, but there were no butterflies.

On the other hand, Leyla's dreams about Ava had been rather explicit, but she didn't want to rock that particular boat. Their friendship was fragile enough without laying unwanted affections into the mix. Ava was very definitely into men so her little unrequited crush on the straight girl would die eventually and turn into a good friendship in time. It happened often enough in the past, but it still kind of sucked.

Leyla chewed her lower lip and looked over at Natalia, who was quickly stirring the eggs and adding a touch more milk to the pan, realizing that if anyone could understand her feelings, it just might be her big sister.

"Natalia, there is something I've been meaning to mention to you," Leyla pushed her hands into the hot soapy water, avoiding her sister's eyes. "I think I'm bi."

Natalia froze for an instant. Did her sister just say what she thought she said? She turned to look at the young woman. It hit her, not for the first time, just how much she had missed of Leyla's life. To be able to actually talk about something so big and advise her on it was a huge honor.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm bisexual, maybe. I'm not sure," Leyla sighed and looked over her shoulder at her big sister. "I've suspected for a long time... there were some girls in high school I really liked. And well, I sort of hid it I guess, buried it deep inside, what with Dad being so controlling and Mom practically dragging me to church and introducing me to any breathing male within a quarter mile."

Leyla smiled sadly as Natalia nodded, clearly familiar with the routine of their parents. "And I've had boyfriends, too, but after everything with Jonathan and now dating Mike, I've come

to realize that I'm just not that into guys, at least, not right now. There's been no real chemistry with either of them, and the one person that I do seem to have sparks with..." Leyla let the sentence die, not wanting to admit all her dark secrets and make things more awkward than they already were. "I guess I'm not sure what I want anymore."

Natalia removed the frying pan from the hot element and came over to her sister, wrapping her arms around the girl's narrow shoulders and giving her the biggest hug. Her heart nearly burst open when Leyla turned in her arms and pulled her closer still. She felt Leyla's breath against her skin, as the girl released a long, sad sigh.

"Oh, sweetie, it's going to be okay," Natalia murmured into the girl's thick dark hair; they were more alike than she even realized. She pulled back slightly and ran her fingers through the long dark hair, like she had always wished their mother had done for her, reassuring and loving. "I know how hard that is to say out loud, thank you for sharing that with me. I know this is going to sound clichéd but I know there is someone out there who will be lucky to have you, man or woman. There is no need to figure it all out right now. Heaven knows I took my sweet time to sort things out." Natalia dropped a gentle kiss to her sister's dark head and then moved away again to look into her dark troubled eyes. "So how long have you had a crush on Ava?"

"H-how...?" Leyla's eyes bugged out and her mouth dropped open, looking very much like a fish out of water. She ignored Natalia's bark of laughter. "How did you know?"

"Heh, are you kidding? I'm not blind. Besides, you two remind me of how Olivia and I were with each other at the very beginning," Natalia grinned and moved back towards the stove, pulling the fry pan back onto the burner to finish cooking their eggs. "You are either going to try to kill each other for eternity, like Olivia and Reva, or you are going to kiss each other senseless. Personally, I'm hoping for the kissing." Natalia couldn't resist the naughty wink, enjoying the flush it caused on Leyla's cheeks.

"Ok, well," Leyla pinched the bridge of her nose, embarrassed. This wasn't exactly the conversation she was hoping to have with her sister. "I don't want to mess things up with our various family members, so my little crush is going nowhere, and that tidbit of information stays between the two of us, okay?" Leyla had visions of Olivia finding out and killing her, very slowly.



"Of course," Natalia chuckled, pleased beyond words at this sister bonding moment. "In the meantime, if you want to keep the peace with Ava, then you need to stop antagonizing her by pushing her buttons. If Mike Thorne means nothing to you, then let him go."

"Just step to the side and let Mike have free reign?" Leyla snorted. Her guts churned at the possibility of missing an opportunity with Ava. "But what if he and Ava...?"

"I know," Natalia interrupted and smiled sadly, understanding all too well the fear. She had wanted to kill Matt Reardon once upon a time too for taking Olivia out on a date. "But God works in mysterious ways. If it is meant to be with Ava and Mike, then it will happen. And if not, then so be it. You just need to have a little faith and let nature take its course."

"Just like that?" Leyla cocked an eyebrow, very skeptical.

"I didn't say it would be easy," Natalia said gently, as her heart went out to her little sister. "But if your relationship with Ava is important, then you both need to figure out what you want and deal with it. God will take care of the rest."

They stared at each other a moment longer, Natalia's words sinking in.

A thud sounded over their heads, with Emma's feet hitting the floor practically at a run. And on the stairs they could both hear Olivia shuffling her way down, like a zombie looking for fresh coffee instead of brains.

Leyla nodded as Natalia smiled and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly one last time before moving to greet her wife with a tender morning kiss. Leyla cocked her head and watched them together, living their happily-ever-after.

God certainly took care of Natalia and Olivia in the end. It wasn't perfect, but it was good. Damn good. Maybe she just needed to relax and have a little faith too.

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When Anna returned from Company, her arms were laden down with two bags of food and a tray of drinks. Handing out the orders to Sgt. Stapleton, and one of the office clerks, and a coffee for Remy, she took her own lunch and headed down to Eleni's office. She hadn't had much opportunity lately to talk with her friend and she missed that connection. Knocking on the door, she headed in where she caught Eleni's attention.

"Hey, I didn't know if you'd had a chance to grab a bite to eat, so I picked you up a chicken wrap and an iced coffee," Anna said as she held up the brown paper bag.

"Great, thanks. I didn't have time this morning to grab a bite in between running tests and a meeting with Frank and his therapist. I thought I was going to have to raid the vending machine." She laughed lightly at the wince on Anna's face, and she couldn't help but agree that the police station's vending machines left a lot to be desired.

"You were at a meeting with Frank and his therapist? How's that going?"

"Slowly improving. The medications seem to have been leveling off for him so that he's getting a good therapeutic effect from them. And talking about his issues and mine with regards to Marina have been helpful, I think."

"That's good. Has he given any thought about what he's going to do now?" Anna wondered. Sometimes forced time off was a blessing and other times off it was a curse, depending on one's personality type. She got the feeling that Frank liked to keep busy with working at the station or at Company and he'd been doing neither for a while as he worked towards healing.

"I think we're going to take a few weeks and go to see Harley over in Greece. With Daisy out west in college with Ashlee Wolfe, and things going fairly well for Company at the moment, Frank wants to see his sister. I think this will give both of us a much needed break, figure out what's happening with us."

"What's the therapist's thought on that?" Anna asked as she started to dig in to her own sandwich.

Taking a sip of the iced coffee to clear her mouth, Eleni then smiled. "He seems to think it's a good idea. I've got some reports to clear up on the Foley case, but other than that, things are looking good here. Dr. Kennedy is covering for me in that time that I'm gone. She's good; she was in medical school with me and knows her stuff. Coming over from Boston."

"Sounds good," Anna said. Smiling, she added, "I've never been to Greece. It's kind of on my bucket list of things to do."

"Go. I know you'll love it." Eleni turned back to her computer as a beep had signaled one of her tests had been completed. Pleased with the results, she set the file to save and turned

her attention back to her friend, noticing her distracted state. "Hey. Something bothering you? You just seem a little off."

"That obvious, huh?" Anna commented with a wry grin.

Placing a hand on Anna's arm, Eleni caught the other woman's attention. "For one, I'm a doctor; I notice things like that. And for two, I'd be a pretty shitty friend that I didn't notice that something was wrong."

Sighing, Anna started. "It's my father. I've tried just about every legal method I can think of to try to find him, including placing inquiries with friends at Interpol and contacting various police agencies, but nothing has turned up. US Customs and Border Protection haven't had his passport come up flagged and there's been nothing from the Transport Safety Agency either. Until I have credible evidence of his role in Edmund Winslow's death, I can't go to a judge to order an arrest warrant." Her hands fidgeted with the condensation that was collecting on her ice tea bottle. "There's been no sign of him showing up at the Winslow estate on San Cristobel, either."

"What about checking with Mallett? He might have some off the book contacts that he's used for locating people."

"Mallett?" Anna asked surprised, moreso because she hadn't thought of that. Certainly he'd have contacts within his security work. She had his contact information at her desk and she smiled; the information certainly put her in a better frame of mind. "Thanks. Will do."

Eleni held her arms out. "What else are friends for?"

Anna pointed at her with a finger and a teasing grin. "You. Me. Beer. Later."

"I think something can be arranged." Eleni laughed. The idea sounded great and she was quite looking forward to a bit of relaxation time. "Call me later when you hear something."

"All right. Later," Anna said as she picked up the remainder of her lunch and pitched the empty wrapper into the bin just inside the door.

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Mid-afternoon, the judge's clerk had called Doris to ask them to return to the courtroom as he had a couple of questions regarding her case, so she and Kathryn headed back upstairs

to the small room. Doris watched as her client nervously looked around the courtroom and up to the empty galley above them. She placed a hand on the younger woman's arm and gave her a nod of reassurance, but she noticed it did little to calm Kathryn's anxiety.

As the bailiff announced the judge's presence, they stood and waited for him to be seated before taking a seat. Even then, Doris could see her client's fidgeting with her watch, casting quick glances at the judge and back to her.

"Thank you for your prompt return. I just have a few brief questions for Ms. Howard," Judge Davis commented as he set his paperwork out in front of him. Sorting through the file, he pulled out a sheaf of paper. Acknowledging both the defence and prosecution, he continued, "Ms. Howard, you've been charged with the death of your husband by means of firearms. You've written in your statement to the police that the gun in question belonged to your husband, and as far as you know, it was registered to him?"

Kathryn nodded.

"You'll have to speak up for the record, Ms. Howard," the judge said, though conceded that her nervousness likely accounted for her lack of verbal response.

"Sorry, your honor. Yes, the gun was his," Kathryn said.

"And you knew where it was kept?"

"I did. But that day, I didn't have to go get it from its usual locked cabinet. He had taken it out earlier that day, taunting me, threatening my daughter."

"I see. Now, according to your statement, following the taunting, and after your daughter got off to school, your husband proceeded to drag you into the living room and proceeded to physically and sexually assault you. Correct?"

Kathryn took a heavy sigh, and after a moment, she responded, "Yes, your honor."

"Your medical records are quite extensive, Ms. Howard, going back several years. With that pattern of abuse, was there no other recourse available to you to get out and leave permanently, without resorting to shooting him?"

Doris stood up, prepared to object to the judge's questioning; he had all this information in front of him, but the judge waved her down. Silently she sat back down, but not without giving him a pointed glare that she would object further if he continued to upset her client.

"Your honor, I did try to leave him several times, occasionally with the state's help, and sometimes on my own. I'd get enough saved with whatever work I'd find, after food and shelter were looked after, and I'd move. I'd have to uproot Dani from her day cares, pre-school or school each time. Sometimes we'd only be in one place a few months and he'd find us. He has buddies on the police force so he'd search for us, even though I tried to keep us hidden as much as possible." Kathryn sighed. She knew she was talking quickly, but she wanted to get this ordeal over with as soon as possible, one way or another.

"Businesses want police checks for employment purposes. And most places need proof of identification for banking, lodging, pretty much anything. I didn't have the kind of money to create a new identity for us each time we moved. It's just been me and Dani for the last few years. When he'd find me, he'd beat the shit out of me and try to bring us home. Until he'd go out with his buddies for a drink and I had enough saved up, then Dani and I would disappear again." Kathryn looked down at the table and sighed. Folding her hands together, she looked up at the judge. She could feel the hot tears rolling over her cheeks. "If there was another way out of that mess of my life, that would have also protected my daughter and me, I would have taken it, your honor."

The judge nodded and looked through the report from Dr. Tremain about her psychological progress, and he made a couple notes on a pad in front of him. "Your psychological reports are showing improvements, but you're still having nightmares?"

"Who wouldn't?" Doris muttered under her breath, much to the chagrin of the young prosecutor at the table next to hers.

"Do you have something to add, Ms. Wolfe?" Judge Davis asked.

"Except that that's stating the obvious," Doris said somewhat exasperated. "Anyone in my client's position would have nightmares; that was a horrible situation for her and her daughter to be facing on a continuous basis. Yes, she's having nightmares, and will likely continue to do so, unfortunately. What my client went through was torture for her and unfortunately for her, she took the only method out that was presented to her that afternoon."



"Your honor," the prosecutor said as he stood up for the first time since the session started. "The defendant has killed a man. That needs to be punished."

"She's already being punished, your honor," Doris responded heatedly, glaring at the young man across the aisle from her. "Every time she remembers what happened to her. She will live with that for the rest of her life. On that day there was a gun, lying on the counter, after the deceased placed it there before belting her across the face with his fist. She picked it up and she shot him. It was not premeditated; it was very much in self-defence."

Judge Davis looked over at the young woman in front of him, acknowledging the damage that had already happened to her before returning to his paperwork. "The defence has noted that you have an offer of lodging and employment, is that correct?"

"Yes, your honor," Kathryn said quietly. "At Company, and my daughter and I will be staying at the boarding house until we can afford something more."

"As I have looked over all the statements and medical records, and taking into account your responses today, I am hereby acquitting you of the charge of manslaughter in the first degree based on self-defence. Your life and your daughter's life have been put at risk and threatened multiple times. You have sought recourse in other ways but remained at risk from the deceased. While I am acquitting you on this charge, this court will recommend continued counselling for you and your daughter."

Kathryn remained quiet, stunned until Doris pressed a hand on top of hers.

"The court frees you, Ms. Howard. Go take care of your daughter and yourself," Judge Howard said with a sincere smile. "This court session is now adjourned." He banged his gavel then stood with his clerk and left the room.

"Jeez, everyone should go out and kill someone and have a home and job to return to," the prosecutor mumbled as he packed up his files and put them into his briefcase.

"Tell me you didn't just say that out loud," Doris rounded on the young man. "My client has been through hell and back. You try having the shit beat out of you on a regular basis, facing what she did, and then we can have a little chat. Go on. Tuck your tail between your legs and wander back to Mr. O'Neill and wait for your next case. If there is one." Without any further glance back in his direction, she turned to her client and placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go get your daughter. Company for food, my treat."

"Thank you, Ms. Wolfe," Kathryn said gratefully. "For everything."

Doris simply nodded and guided the younger woman out of the courtroom.

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Natalia cuddled back into Olivia's waiting arms as they snuggled up on the couch. Ava and Leyla were working late at the Beacon, and Emma was talking on the phone in the kitchen with Jodie. In a few minutes, the young girl would be heading to bed but she had to talk to her best friend first.

Natalia sighed and tilted her head up to look at Olivia. "When are Eleni and Frank coming back with Sweet Pea?"

Olivia looked down at the woman in her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Nine o'clock. Why? What are you up to?"

The brunette giggled and gave her wife a quick but sweet kiss. "Just curious."

"Uh huh. I don't believe you." Olivia squinted jokingly in distrust.

Natalia shrugged slightly. "I thought you would want to look over the brochures for planning our honeymoon."

"I guess Paris is out," Olivia grumbled. She really had wanted to take the younger woman there. She would have loved the Eiffel Tower and The Louvre.

"Yep, bad luck. And definitely not San Cristobel. Been there, done that," Natalia added.

Olivia nodded and leaned her head over to rest against the top of Natalia's. "Agreed," she said with a sigh. She loved her home island though, but they'd already made wonderful memories there. "Okay, so should we get out the computer and look up some places?"

"No need." Natalia sat up quickly and leaned down to reach around the end of the couch. She sat back up with a manila envelope and a huge grin. "I stopped by to see Blake the other day and she gave me a bunch of brochures she had from her travel agency work. Tons of amazing honeymoon spots."

Olivia watched in amusement as Natalia opened the envelope and dumped an ungodly amount of brochures on the coffee table. She didn't know one manila envelope could hold so much paper. "Excited much?"

Chuckling lightly, Natalia shrugged. "A little, I guess." She reached down and spread out some of the brochures with her hand. "I feel like God's given me such a wonderful gift, and He's given it to me many times over. First our friendship, then Gus's heart to save you so I wouldn't lose you forever. Then this home and Emma, Francesca, and us...together. I almost lost you, then us, and I almost lost my life. We're still here though. We're still strong, and I just...I want to relish every moment."

The tears threatened to fall from Olivia's eyes, but she swallowed hard and pushed them down. Lightening the mood, she laughed. "You know the vows aren't until the wedding, right?" Natalia playfully slapped her leg and she reached down in mock shock. "Ow! Seriously, though, I completely feel the same way. I want this honeymoon to be unlike anything else we've experienced."

Natalia picked up a handful of brochures then flopped back into her wife's arms again. "You've been all over the world, Olivia. It's going to be hard to outdo all you've experienced."

"But I haven't experienced them with you," Olivia said seriously.

Natalia looked up at the tender green gaze staring unabashedly down at her with adoration. "Smooth talker," she whispered and placed a slow, gentle kiss on Olivia's full lips. The brochures fell from her hand onto the floor as she moaned at the sensation and reached up



to tangle her fingers in Olivia's sunlit tresses. As soon as she tilted her head to deepen the kiss, a knock on the door startled her. She put a hand to her chest as she pulled back from Olivia. "Jeez! That must be Frank and Eleni."

She stood and walked to the door. Behind her, she could hear Olivia telling Emma to hang up and get her bath. Opening the door, she greeted Eleni and Frank then quickly took a sleeping Francesca in her arms. They followed Natalia back into the house where Eleni set the toddler's bag down on the coffee table.

Emma came around the corner with Olivia right behind her. The girl looked a little grumpy but cheered quickly when she saw her sister. She walked over to Natalia and gently gave the sleeping toddler a kiss on the head before giving Natalia a kiss. Emma said her goodnights to everyone and headed upstairs.

Eleni pointed at the table with the brochures, amused at the amount there. "Making honeymoon plans?"

Olivia hitched a thumb at Natalia. "Someone got a little carried away."

"What? Be glad that I'm excited to go," Natalia said nudging her wife lovingly. The two couples fell into an awkward silence, and it gave Natalia time to realize that she had never been excited about going anywhere with Frank. It was so different now. Maybe he and Olivia were remembering that too. She quickly moved to another topic. "So, are you two going to be able to make the wedding?"

Frank shuffled his feet and looked up nervously. "Um, no, actually."

Natalia was surprised. She had hoped that with time, and especially with Eleni being back in his life, that Frank would be over his issues with her and Olivia being together.

Frank could almost read her face and clarified immediately. "I think I'm going back to Greece. I really liked being there with Harley, and I think we need it." He looked over at Eleni who smiled at him with understanding.

Olivia smiled and felt genuinely happy for them. "That sounds like a great idea! Sometimes you have to get away to get perspective." She saw the amused glance Natalia tossed her way. The irony of it wasn't lost on Olivia either.

Looking back at the pair, Natalia asked the obvious, "When do you leave?"

"In two weeks," Frank answered.

"When will you be back?" Olivia followed up with her own question.

He shrugged and looked at the three women, then down at his sleeping daughter with a sigh. He loved his daughter fiercely, but he also knew she was in good hands. The last few months had taken their toll on him, and if he was going to be worth his salt as a father to Francesca, he needed to get his own life together first. "I don't know. I don't have a round trip ticket. I think we're going to play it by ear."

Natalia looked down at the sleeping child in her arms and suddenly felt tears prick her eyes. Obviously, not for Frank leaving but for her daughter who had yet to really know her father. "You'll visit?"

He reached out and brushed his fingers against the curly hair of his child. "Of course."

"And our door will always be open if you want to visit Greece," Eleni added.

Olivia, feeling the emotion of the moment and the wave of sadness coming from Natalia, caught Eleni's eye and mouthed, "Thank you."

Nodding in acknowledgement, Eleni got Frank's attention. "We should go, Frank. I'm sure they want to get to bed." She looked at the two women and added, "I'll get you the details of where we're going to be living in case you need us after we leave."

"Thank you," Olivia said as she walked them to the door and said her goodbyes.

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### **Act III**

"What is taking Olivia so long? Did she have to go kill a model in Milan to find something to wear to the mall?" Leyla muttered under her breath, flipping through the latest entertainment magazine. Bridesmaid dress shopping was not something she was necessarily looking forward to, but she had to admit it would be fun to spend time with the Spencer girls. She felt Emma plop down on the couch beside her, like a big gangly cat, sprawling over her.

"Hey, what 'cha reading?" Emma asked, looking at the magazine. "Ooh, nice dress."

"Yeah, except for that plunging neckline, it would look good on you, Bean." Leyla said, smiling down at the young girl. She was getting taller, willowy like Ava. She would be quite beautiful one day.

"You think?" Emma asked a little shyly.

"Sure, the boys will go wild," Leyla elbowed her, getting a grin to appear.

"It would be better in black though," Emma sniffed, and Leyla bit her lip. Maybe that gothic phase wasn't so far off after all. Leyla flipped the magazine page, finding pictures of Angelina Jolie's latest tattoo.

Emma scrunched her nose up and leaned in to take a better look, not quite sure she liked what was there.

"Are you still going to get that tattoo you were talking about?" Emma asked, leaning back to blink up at Leyla once again.

"Yes," Leyla smiled, glad to have finally made up her mind about it. "But I'm waiting until after the wedding, since it takes some time to heal."

"Cool!" Emma said wistfully, clearly wishing she could get one too. They both looked up as Olivia came down the stairs, carefully putting the back on an earring as she descended. She was perfectly attired, Leyla had to give her that. Hitting the bottom step, Olivia cocked an eyebrow and stared at the two of them on the couch.

"No." Olivia said almost immediately. Leyla smirked as Emma began to pout.

"I didn't even ask yet," Emma grumped, crossing her arms.

"You don't have to, I know that look," Olivia smiled and grabbed her purse from the side table. "Let's get a move on girls, or Ava will think we've gotten lost." Emma hopped up and followed her mother into the kitchen, heading for the back door and grumbling under her breath the whole way. Leyla tossed the magazine onto the end table and followed behind them with a sigh.

Oh, today was going to be just a ton of fun.

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The ding of the bell over Company's entrance alerted Blake to the new arrivals and she looked up as Doris, her client, Kathryn, and the young woman's daughter arrived. She smiled at them before nudging her step-daughter in their direction. The lunch crowd had just started to arrive and things were picking up.

"I'm going," Dinah responded with a grin. Though looking over at the mayor, she grinned widely before turned back to Blake. "But I'm thinking Doris wants to see you."

Not having seen Doris in a couple of days, Blake caught Doris's happy expression as the taller woman headed in her direction and smiled in response. Shooing Dinah out of the way, she approached Doris, placing a hand on her love's arm. "It went well?"

"Yeah. The judge acquitted her on the charge," Doris said with relief. She'd been sure of her work on the case, but anything could happen in a courtroom. Especially in Springfield. "Today we just had to go down to the courthouse to fill out some additional final paperwork. Then I decided to take them for lunch."

"That's great news," Blake responded happily for her friend, then sighed. "That's one hell of a thing for a person to go through. As much as I loved my father, he did some pretty shitty things to my mother. She was no saint either, but no one deserves to be raped. Shaking her head to clear her memories, she focused on the woman in front of her; something more pleasant to do. "So, what are you doing now?"

"Right now? Taking my now former client and her daughter out for supper. Later? You, me, some chocolate and a bottle of wine at my place, perhaps?" Doris responded with a grin.

"Mmmmm. You're on. I'll see you later." Blake leaned over and placed a kiss on Doris's lips, pleasantly surprising the taller woman. "Now, go back over and celebrate your win."

Doris sighed happily as she returned to her table. Since their return from New York, Blake had been very determined that Doris was who she wanted to be with. And she didn't really care who knew.

Obviously, Blake knew her sons were going to be upset with the change, but they were going to have to get used to the fact that she was not going to be staying with their father. Clarissa, on the other hand, while a little disappointed by the fact her parents weren't

getting back together, was happy for her mom and Doris. She liked seeing her mother happy.

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Dani Howard was a happy little girl. She really didn't understand a lot of what was going on with the court and her mother's trial, but she knew that her mom wasn't going to jail for killing her daddy. He was a bad man and she really didn't feel sorry for him, even though she supposed she should have. Reaching over, she gave her mom a hug.

"Hey, sweetie. What's that for?" Kathryn smiled down at her daughter, thinking she was a very lucky woman for not losing this joy in her life.

"I love you and I'm glad you're not going to jail." Dani rested her head against her mother's shoulder.

"Oh, so am I, sweetie. And I love you, too." As Kathryn looked down, she noticed her daughter eyeing the menu then back at her. "What would you like, Dani?"

"A Buzz Burger Mini and fries?"

"All right," Kathryn responded. "But get some lemonade or some milk. No soft drinks, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy." Dani was looking forward to this. Usually her mom didn't let her eat much in the way of junk food; keeping her eating as healthy as she could. So she appreciated when she got something different. A thought caught in her mind and she turned to her mother, and with a hopeful glint, she asked. "Mom, if you're going to be working here, can we eat here all the time?"

"Not all the time. Though Mr. Cooper does make some good healthy food, too. We'll see what happens." Kathryn looked down at her daughter before looking up, only to see the man in question standing near their table.

"I hear congratulations are in order," Buzz said, then tilted his head. "But I suppose congratulations might be the wrong word. It's kind of hard. They don't make Hallmark cards for this kind of situation." Shaking his head, he continued, "I'm digging myself in further, aren't I? All the best to you. And if you want, you can start work in two days."

"Wow. That soon?" Kathryn asked. She acknowledged the oddness of the situation but let it pass. He was right, there are no good words or platitudes for what she'd been through. Still, it was a surprise that the offer of employment would start this soon after the case.

"Yep," Buzz said, looking over at Dinah who was returning to their table. "The riff raff needs to go back to her full time work, not that I haven't enjoyed your presence there, Ms. Marler."

"Hey, watch who you're calling riff-raff. I earned my reputation," Dinah said with a smirk.

Doris looked at Dinah and Buzz. "No comment."

"Hey, speaking of my regular employment, WSPR is doing a series on domestic violence. I don't suppose you'd like to tell your story?"

"Dinah, too soon," Doris warned.

Dinah put up her hand, in a calming gesture. "It's not going to be for a little while yet. But, let me know if you want to participate. And you can choose to stop at anytime. It's not something you should feel you have to do."

"I'll think about it, okay?" Kathryn responded before looking down at her daughter and sighed.

"Okay, Dinah, back to work," Buzz said happily then turned to Kathryn. "Oh, and none of this Mr. Cooper business. You're working here, you're family. You call me Buzz like everyone else."

"Yes, Mr. Co- -, I mean Buzz." Sighing, she continued. "That's going to take some getting used to."

With a grin, he replied, "You've got two days." He chuckled as he headed back towards the kitchen, hearing Dinah take their orders. Life was starting in an upwards turn again. Kathryn's acquittal, Blake and Doris moving back towards each other again, Olivia and Natalia officially getting married, Frank and Eleni building a relationship again, and he and Lillian were great. About time for Springfield...which generally meant if things were going well, the shit was going to hit the fan sooner rather than later.

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"They're disgustingly cute together, even over the phone," Leyla said, taking a sip of her soda. Ava and Emma followed her gaze from their table in the mall food court and glanced over at their mother.

Olivia stood to the side of the food court at the mall, the only place her phone seemed to have decent signal was right outside the cell phone store. A goofy smile was plastered on her face and she was nodding her head. A quick kiss and the phone was tucked into her back pocket and she was all business again.

"How's Natalia?" Leyla asked.

"Fine. Her meeting with Greg and the team of florists is stressing her out, but I reassured her I had a great hiding spot for the bodies in the wine cellar at the Beacon and you girls have strong muscles, so we're set." Olivia grinned at the girls, who all just shook their heads. "So what's next on the agenda? I think we've hit all the highlights."

The bags at their feet were a good indicator that their shopping spree was a success. Adorable dresses for each young woman had been surprisingly easy to find. Even Emma was thrilled that her outfit wasn't so frilly but more in keeping with the other women's dresses, elegant even. She was going to be a bridesmaid after all, not a flower girl.

"I saw a great pair of shoes for you in that store, Mom," Emma piped up. "On sale, too." Ava and Leyla groaned, not another shoe store. Olivia cocked an eyebrow and smirked at the pair. They were certainly getting along nice for a change.

"You did?" Olivia ran her hand through her daughter's fine dark blonde hair. It had been a good idea and Natalia had been right. A day out with her girls was just what she needed. Retail therapy was something the Spencer girls could wholeheartedly embrace. "You know how I love a good shoe sale, Em."

"I know, right?" Emma's eyes seemed to twinkle as she grabbed her mother's hand and pulled her up from her chair. "Come on, you can try them on and see what you think."

"You girls coming? Or do you want to watch the bags while we check out the sale?" Olivia asked, already knowing the answer as she turned to follow Emma. She grinned as Ava glanced at Leyla and they both leaned back in their chairs and waved good bye. "Wimps."

Olivia could hear their laughter as she let herself be dragged away by an excited Emma.

Yes, today was a good day.

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Back at her office, Olivia let out a long, frustrated sigh as she deleted the words on the screen again. The scene had been playing on repeat in her Beacon office for the last thirty minutes, and she had lost count of the number of times she'd deleted the words on the computer screen. She and Natalia had agreed to work on writing their vows, but to do them separately so they felt more natural and organic.

Olivia dropped her head to her hands and grumbled, "Come on, Spencer. You're supposed to be a smooth talker."

Standing, she paced in front of her desk recalling the many moments she and Natalia had shared in that space. A smile formed remembering the arguments, kisses, and more that they'd shared in that office. None of it though gave her the feeling needed to put words to paper, or to keyboard as the case was for her. She was uninspired.

Walking around her small office space, she looked at the many pictures on the walls, on bookcase shelves, on the shelf over the bar sink, and on her desk. Faces of family and friends stared back at her – Sam, Ava, Phillip, Emma, Josh, and, of course, Natalia. Her eyes trailed back to Josh and a sudden smile brightened her face.

She'd had a long conversation with Josh the other day over drinks. While getting married in New York City was definitely unique and a once in a lifetime experience, she wanted to make the real ceremony beyond Natalia's wildest dreams. Josh, a bit of an incurable romantic at heart, had some great ideas, and together they'd come up with a plan. At the center of it all though were the vows she'd make to the woman she loves, would always love.

She knew without a doubt where she needed to be for the inspiration she sought.

On the other side of town, Natalia wasn't having any better luck. She sat at the kitchen table with a hot cup of coffee, an empty legal pad, and piles of balled up paper surrounding her. Dropping her pen to the pad, she slumped down in the chair and let out a low, frustrated growl. Of all of the places to be, she'd really thought the farmhouse would inspire her with the right words the best.



Pushing the chair back, Natalia stood and decided to do a load of laundry to clear her head. As she walked from the bathroom to Emma's room then the master bedroom picking up clothes and towels as she went, Natalia thought about all of the pivotal moments she and Olivia had experienced in their home – their first not-kiss kiss, the fight over that God-awful white Christmas tree, the almost confession at the engagement party for her and Frank.

There had been so many big moments she and Olivia had shared in their home. So, why wasn't she able to find the right words for her vows? While saying what was on her mind, especially when it came to her love for Olivia, wasn't always easy, there were moments when she couldn't hold it back, when it all came bubbling to the surface.

As she tossed a pair of Emma's jeans into the wash, an idea came to her. Quickly, she finished prepping the laundry. She'd actually start it when she got back. Right now though, she grabbed her purse, keys, and notepad from the table. There was only one place that held more meaning for her and Olivia than the farmhouse, and that was exactly where she was headed.

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Thursday evening at Farley's offered a Ladies Night and Anna was more than happy to kick back with a couple beers, some pub food and relax. Waiting for her companion to arrive, she ruminated on the information that Mallett had told her, which in reality, wasn't much more than she'd been able to find out herself, but he had promised to put out some feelers for her and she was grateful. Hopefully between the two of them, they'd be able to find out something sooner rather than later. There wasn't much on Edmund's body when he had been dumped on her doorstep. She'd gotten Eleni to run as many tests as possible on skin and fibers, but in the absence of anything out of the ordinary turning up, Anna knew her father had to have had a hand in the man's death. He was good at what he did; it was one of the reasons that Edmund had hired him decades ago. Just when she thought she had something to tie her father to the death, the lead would go nowhere and frankly she felt that banging her head against a wall might be more productive.

"Hey, you look like you were miles away," Eleni said by way of a greeting as she pulled the other chair back from the table and sat down. "Sorry I couldn't make it last night. Frank and I were looking after Francesca and it was late by the time we got back from the farmhouse."

"No problem." Shaking her head, clearing the cobwebs, Anna smiled and continued, "Sorry, thinking of my father. You ready for a couple beers?"

"Definitely. You want to order a basket of wings to share?" Eleni asked. She grabbed a menu to check out the list of dipping sauces and smiled. "You up for some Caribbean Jerk sauce?"

Anna laughed. "Sounds good to me."

"I'll head to the bar. My treat this time." At the bar, Eleni ordered a bottle of Hillas for herself and a bottle of Sam Adams for her friend, and then placed the order for the wings. Heading back to their table, she sat down and handed Anna her beer. "Wings'll be about 10 minutes. So, what's up?"

"Not much more than earlier, only now I have the benefit of Mallett's resources on top of mine. I'll give it another couple of days before I make any more decisions." Anna took a deep swig of her beer. "It's just so damned frustrating."

"Look, I've got all the samples you gave me, and those I got off Edmund's body. I'll run everything again and put it through CODIS, as well as our police databases."

"CODIS? You can access the FBI database?"

"I have my methods," Eleni said with a smile. "Don't worry, they are all legal. Anyway, I'll run the samples again and see if I can get any hits. It may not be anything, I was thorough the first run through."

Anna sighed. "I know. I'm not saying you weren't, but it would certainly help. Thank you." Anna sat back in her chair, her fingers picking at the label that had already loosened with the condensation pooling on the bottle. Looking back at her friend with a hopeful glance, she asked, "Can we talk about anything else, please?"

"What about your love life?" Eleni joked with Anna.

"Oh, please. The only thing more depressing than this case is my love life, or lack thereof."

"No blind dates recently?" Eleni asked, remembering Anna telling her of her horrid bad date, and then of her late evening 'non-date' with Doris after that. "What about Doris?"

"What about her?" Anna asked on a sigh. "She and Blake are starting to get back together again."

"Sorry," Eleni replied, knowing Anna still had strong feelings for the mayor. "Something will come along when you least expect it."

They chatted away about relationships, films, and just about anything else for a while as they waited for the wings to arrive. When they came, they dug in, enjoying them and laughing about things irreverent.

"Hey, did you make your plans for Greece yet?" Anna asked, remembering their earlier conversation.

"We're still working out the bookings of the tickets, but I'm really looking forward to the break. It's been one thing after another since I came back to Springfield. Ready to kick back and relax."

"Yeah, for a medium-sized town, Springfield certainly has its share of criminal activity," Anna said, laughing. "Where is Harley?"

"The island of Aigina, primarily, though she does have a small apartment in Athens. She runs a bed and breakfast on the island."

"When are you thinking of leaving?"

"Next week, I think," Eleni said with a chagrined smile.

"Ouch, I can imagine the cost of the tickets this close."

Eleni laughed. "No kidding. About \$2000, each."

"But I suspect it will be more than worth it once you get there. Harley's place sounds great."

"Definitely. I'll have to email you some pictures from the last time I was over there."

"Great! Email me the details," Anna said before feeling the vibration of her cell phone in her pocket. "Hey, I need to check my phone. I'm expecting a call."

"Mallett?" Eleni asked.

"Uhm, no," Anna said as she looked at the caller id. "Just says Private Number and no message left. That's odd."

"Your father maybe?"

"Doubtful. I don't know. Look, I should get going. I want to check on a few things." Anna was distracted and her thoughts kept going back to the anonymous call, wondering what it was all about.

"Do you want to split a cab?" Eleni asked, concerned for her friend.

"Nah, I think I'll take a run. I want to clear my head for a bit. Thanks, though."

"No problem. I'm heading over to Company. I wanted to let Buzz know about the trip. It'll be a week or so before we head off."

Eleni stood up and gave her friend a hug before she headed out, watching as Anna put on her earbuds, and started running down the road into the town's main area. She hoped the other woman would find out the information to put this case to rest. Edmund Winslow was a pain in the ass to many of Springfield's residents and he certainly had what was coming to him, but when his death was likely caused by a family member of her friend, it got a lot more complicated.

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Leyla sank back down at the table in the food court, sliding a fresh cup of coffee towards Ava. Thankfully, the line up at the coffee counter had been relatively short. She also slid over a chocolate croissant, which she had come to learn not that long ago, was one of Ava's favorite things.

"Ooh, thank you," Ava grinned, pleasantly surprised.

Leyla shook her head when Ava offered half to her, and then proceeded to watch as she dove into the chocolaty goodness. If she had some chocolate on top of the caffeine they would need to peel her off the mall ceiling soon. Besides it was much more fun watching Ava enjoy her treat. Leyla smiled, inhaling the scent of her own dark brew before taking a much needed sip. She flicked her wrist, checking her watch and wondered just how long finding the perfect pair of shoes could possibly take.

"Don't bother; we may need to send out a search party for them later tonight." Ava said over a bite of her croissant, leaning forward. "I think the shoe gene missed me."

"That might not be a bad thing," Leyla snorted.

A comfortable silence fell as they sipped their drinks. They had been talking about everything, from work to the upcoming wedding and everything in between. Leyla shifted in her chair. There was one thing she had wanted to discuss but wasn't sure how to bring it up.

"About the wedding," Ava suddenly began, scratching the back of her neck as she struggled to find the right words. "Have you thought about who you might be bringing to it?"

"Uh, well," Leyla blinked, taken by surprise as that was what she had been just wondering herself. She sighed and ran her hand through her long dark hair. Just let go, Rivera. "Actually, I've been thinking I might just go by myself. I mean, Mike is a nice guy and all, but you know what, our friendship is more important to me. So, if you wanted to ask him to the wedding as your guest, I think that would be great."

Ava stared at her a moment, before letting out a soft laugh and leaning back in her chair.

"I was going to say the same thing to you," Ava shook her head and looked out over the moving mass of people in the food court, the scents and sounds washing over them. Leyla waited, knowing that there was something still coming. Ava met her eyes and smiled softly. "For a long time, I thought that getting the man was the goal. That it was what would fix everything bad in my life and make me happy. I guess I figured it was the point of this whole game we all play. But with Max's death..."

Ava paused, glancing at her hands for a moment, fidgeting with her napkin and tearing little strips from it. Leyla stretched her hand out and stilled her fingers, squeezing her hand lightly, silently offering her strength.

"Well, it kind of messed me up for a bit," Ava shrugged a shoulder nonchalantly, but Leyla knew it was still a tough topic for her. "And then the more I watch Olivia changing these last few years, since knowing Natalia and recovering from her heart transplant and finding love, real love, I've come to realize that friendship and family are more important. I can't wait for a knight in shining armor to come in and fix everything. I have to do it myself, stand on my own with the support of those close to me and be myself, warts and all. And then, when I'm ready, I'll find someone who wants to share it with me, who wants to be my family too. After all, family is everything, in whatever shape or form that might mean."

"Amen," Leyla said softly, as their eyes met and locked, the world seeming to shrink away for an instant.

"Oh, my God, you guys will not believe what shoes Mom got me for the wedding!" Emma bounced into the chair beside Ava, her bag plunked down on the table. When she'd found her friend Jodie and her mother at the store, she'd asked Olivia if she could stay with them at the mall when her mom had to return to the Beacon. Jodie's mother had offered to drive her home, but Emma had spotted her sister and Leyla still in the foodcourt and she had said she'd get home with them. Their intense moment broken, Leyla shifted slowly moving her hand from Ava's and leaning back in her chair.

"They aren't God awful Barbie pink, are they?" Ava asked, finally pulling her attention away from Leyla's dark eyes and glancing over at her little sister with a smirk.

"No!" Emma glared at her sister. "They're off white. But they have a two inch heel."

"Dear Lord, girl, you won't be able to walk in those kick ass shoes." Ava teased, laughing as Emma frowned at her.

"Ah, you might be surprised. After all Emma here is a Spencer; it was time she had a pair of power heels," Ava said, looking over at Leyla, looking back and forth then back at her sister. "Well, as much fun as it's been to empty out mom's bank account, I think it's time for us campers to head home. Who wants to drive?" she grinned, pulling out her car keys and dangling them. Her feet were tired after a good shop and it was time to be chauffeured home.

Emma's eyes widened excitedly, her hand just starting to move towards the keys.

"Not you!" Ava and Leyla said at once, laughing together as Leyla snatched the keys and they all stood, gathering their purchases. Emma shook her head, taking her shoe bag and moving to her sister's side, looking up at her forlornly as Ava slid a comforting arm around her thin shoulders.

"Aw, I never get to do anything fun."

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## **Act IV**

In a corner booth, Doris and Blake sat side by side as they poured through photographs that they'd taken of Olivia and Natalia's wedding in New York. Blake sighed as she looked at the happy couple as they'd arrived by horse drawn carriage and the absolute surprise that radiated from Natalia's face at the surprise that awaited her.

"They look so happy," Blake said, smiling. "I can't believe you and Olivia pulled this off so quickly, and without anyone knowing." She mock slapped Doris on the arm. "I thought you had to wait a while to get the marriage license certificate at the courthouse. How did you manage to get around that?"

"That's me, stealth ninja wedding planner at your service," Doris grinned broadly. With a saucy expression on her face, Blake fired back, "I'll have to keep that in mind for future reference."

Doris grinned. "Everything actually went better than planned as we didn't know Olivia's brother was in town. That was a bonus. I know their girls wished they could have been there, but really, Olivia and Natalia needed this time together on their own this time, and they do have the wedding here soon that both girls will be there for."

"Has anyone heard from Rafe yet? I know Natalia would want him there for their wedding." "Nothing yet." Doris sighed; she knew the lack of any information from Rafe or about him was making his mother and Olivia constantly worry about his safety. She'd fired off another email to the governor the previous morning but as of yet hadn't received a response. "Keep your fingers crossed and pray for the best."

"So, Ms. Wedding Planner, what's on the go for this upcoming wedding?"

"I get to enjoy this one from a spectator guest perspective as I'm not officiating the ceremony. Olivia and Natalia have asked Josh to perform that duty."

"Then you'll be my date," Blake responded assuredly as she rested her head on Doris's shoulder. When the door bell rang, Blake looked up to see Eleni enter and head to the bar and she nodded a greeting to the other woman. She smiled, realizing that Eleni and Frank made each other happy, which in turn made her happy; they both deserved some good in their lives.

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"Maybe we could get them matching bracelets, or necklaces," Ava said, taking a sip of her soda as they continued wandering down the mall hallway. Twice in one week was almost her shopping limit, but this was important and she was having fun hanging out with Leyla and Emma, instead of working all hours. "We could have the various stones set into them for all our birthdays."

"It needs to be something special," Emma said, slowing down to look at some shoes in a store window. "The wedding is the joining of our families, too, after all."

"Sam sent some money, and I can put in for Francesca," Ava said as she subtly herded Emma from the store.

"And I can cover Rafe and my brother Leo, for our side of the family," Leyla offered, liking the idea. "Did we want to do parents, too?" She chewed her lower lip, knowing that a call to her mom might be in order if that was the case.

"Whatever," Ava shrugged. "It might be a nice gesture. I know when Mom's parents were born, I can double check with Sam and we would just include their birthstones too."

"Hey, is that the tattoo design you're thinking of getting, Leyla?" Emma asked, her finger pointing into the display window of a small hole in the wall tattoo parlor. They all stopped to look at the intricately swirling design of a cross advertised on the glass window.

"Yep, Bean, that's the one," Leyla grinned, as Ava moved closer to get a better look at it.

"It's so awesome," Emma smiled back. "I wish I could get one, too."

"Over your mom's dead body, although with that ticker of hers you never know..." Leyla sasssed, not surprised as she was suddenly whacked on both shoulders by the sisters. "OW!"

"Leyla!" Ava gasped, although somewhat amused by the bad joke. Emma just crossed her arms across her chest and glared.

"Kidding! I was kidding!" Leyla laughed as the two continued to gawk at her in shock. "You know I love Olivia. Come on!"

"Not funny," Emma grumped, frowning at Leyla. "I never want one in that case." Ava smiled and wrapped an arm around Emma's shoulder in sisterly solidarity.



"So, where is the tattoo going to go?" Ava asked, trying to change the subject before Emma blew a gasket. "Or don't I want to know?"

"Her lower back," Emma supplied before Leyla could even open her mouth.

"Really?" Ava glanced down at her sister, who nodded.

"Hello, standing right here, people..." Leyla muttered under her breath. She was shocked into silence as Ava reached out and tugged her black tank top up, to expose the soft skin of her lower back and the waist band of her low rider jeans.

"Hm, yeah, it would look good there," Ava said, their eyes meeting as her thumb drew a small circle across the exposed skin. "I'm a little surprised you're going with a cross though." Leyla swallowed hard as Ava released her tank top and the material slid back down, covering her back. The skin still tingled from her touch, as the three of them started wandering off deeper into the mall.

"Well, like Natalia says," Leyla said softly, her eyes once again meeting Ava's over Emma's head. "Sometimes you just gotta have a little faith."

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Walking behind the bar, Eleni poured herself a cup of coffee. As she wanted to head back to her office for a little while before retiring for the evening, she figured the extra bit of caffeine wouldn't keep her awake too much that evening. And she figured the alcohol from the earlier beer and the current caffeine infusion could battle themselves out in her system. And both perhaps dimmed her slight nervousness about broaching the topic of taking Frank off to Greece for a few weeks to Buzz.

The man in question came through the kitchen door carrying a serving plate of food and headed over to Blake and Doris's table. After sharing a few words with the women, he returned to the bar.

"Hey, Eleni, how are things going?" Buzz asked as he gave his former daughter-in-law a hug.

"Pretty good. Keeping busy." Eleni sighed before continuing, "Listen, I just wanted to say that Frank and I are heading over to Greece to see Harley for a few weeks. We started talking about it now that his therapy sessions are going well, and his medications are at a

good level. I think seeing his sister and the kids would do him a world of good and Frank's psychiatrist agrees."

"Wow. How come Frank didn't say anything before this?" Buzz asked, quite surprised.

"Truthfully, I think he was nervous. He didn't know what you'd think." Eleni shrugged her shoulders.

"It sounds like a great idea, for both of you." Buzz smiled and wrapped her in another hug. "When are you leaving?"

"Probably end of next week. We just need to clarify some dates with Harley."

"That is soon," Buzz said laughing. "All the best. Now, can I get you something to eat with that caffeine source?"

Joining Buzz in laughter, Eleni said she'd have a bowl of the chili to take back to the office. With Frank taking an evening out with Rick, Josh, and Matt, there wasn't going to be anyone home for a while, and she'd have some time to rerun the tests on Edmund Winslow's clothing and blood samples. Perhaps she could find something to give Anna some lead in her investigation. Maybe there was something she missed first time round, though she didn't hold out a lot of hope in that regard. Lost in her thoughts, she missed Detective Li coming in the door looking like she hadn't run the three and a half miles from Farley's to Company in the early evening summer heat and she didn't even look like she'd broken much of a sweat.

"Can I get you a bottle of water?" Eleni offered.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Anna nodded. "That sounds great."

"Did you get your head cleared?" Eleni asked as she grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge under the bar, handing it to her friend.

"Thanks," Anna said as she shook her head. "Still no idea what that phone call was about, but the run did help. I think I'm going to head into the office and see what I can come up with."

"Well, if you want to hold on a few more minutes, I can go over with you."

"Sounds good." Anna looked around the bar, finding Doris and Blake sharing a plate of nachos. With a sigh, she turned back to Eleni. "Do you mind? I want to talk to Doris for a minute; let her know what's going on."

"Not a problem," Eleni said. "See you in a few."

While she waited for Anna to return, Kathryn Howard returned to the restaurant.

"Is Mr. Cooper...," Kathryn started and sighed. "Sorry, is Buzz available?"

"Sure, Ms. Howard," Eleni responded. "I'll get him."

Before Eleni could head back to the kitchen, Kathryn responded with a smile, "Since I'm going to be working here, you might as well call me by my name. Kathryn mostly, but sometimes I get called Katie, too."

"Which do you prefer?" Eleni asked.

"Kathryn."

Extending a hand to the younger woman, Eleni smiled. "Well, Kathryn it is, then. Welcome to the family."

Tilting her head to the side, Kathryn was surprised by the response. "Family?"

"I'm Eleni Andros. I was married to Buzz's son, Frank. Plus, Buzz tends to think of his employees, related or not, as family. I'll go get him."

"Thank you." Kathryn turned around and watched the atmosphere of the small family-run restaurant. She liked it, a lot. Now that she was no longer under the threat of a conviction, she thought things were finally looking up for her and her daughter. When Buzz came out, she smiled at him. "I can start tomorrow, if you like."

Extending a hand, Buzz grinned. "Come in at 9:30am and we'll walk you through the routine."

"Thank you, Buzz," Kathryn grinned. "I won't forget this."

"Go on, I'll see you in the morning. Have a good sleep."

"Thanks." Kathryn headed out the door and up the stairs to the boarding house rooms that she and her daughter were living in. She couldn't believe her fortune and she was determined to make a difference with her life.

Inside, Anna returned to the front of the restaurant, meeting up with Eleni.

"Everything go okay?" the forensic pathologist asked, noticing her friend's tired expression.

"Yeah, I guess," Anna responded. Rotating her neck, stretching the muscles, she sighed. "I think I'm just going to head home. I'm whipped and I don't think that at this point I'm going to get any further. Maybe just kick my feet back and watch a movie...or tv series on Netflix." "No problem. Come on, I'll walk out with you." Eleni extended her arm towards the door, gesturing for Anna to go ahead. "Anything particular that you're interested in watching?" "Yeah, a friend of mine got me hooked on this British series, *"Wire in the Blood"*. It's really good." The evening air was still pretty muggy but the heat of the day had passed as the sun went down. "I think I'll just walk home. It's a nice evening." Eleni reached over and gave her friend a hug. "That it is. I'll see you tomorrow." "Night."

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When Natalia exited the bathroom, she came up short at the end of the bed, her breath stopping in her chest. The lovely view of Olivia stretched out naked across the bed greeted her. Olivia's glorious and firm ass peaked out from the sheet as the older woman dozed on her stomach, her hair splayed out over her arm and pillow.

Natalia sighed and smiled mischievously before biting her lip, feeling the rush of emotion their earlier lovemaking and pillow talk had caused.

*Natalia curled into Olivia's arms as they faced each other, lightly touching and kissing while their bodies calmed from the overwhelming power of making love. Breathing deeply, Natalia nuzzled along her partner's jaw, enjoying the contented sigh in her ear. The utter hopeless romantic in her loved these intimate moments where they simply enjoyed being close and connected.*

*She was lost in the salty taste and sensual heat when Olivia spoke above her. "I wish I could get you pregnant."*

*Natalia stopped her ministrations, not sure she heard correctly, and pulled back to look at Olivia, who was pressing her lips together and unable to make eye contact. She raised her hand to Olivia's cheek and made her look up. "Where did that come from?"*

*Olivia shrugged. "I know it's crazy and obviously impossible. I just wish I could give that to you sometimes. Share that experience with you."*



*The raw and open look in Olivia's beautiful eyes pulled at Natalia's heart. She closed her own eyes against it and shook her head. "You already have, querida. I've told you that. Francesca was created because I was so in love with you and you were there...in my heart."*

*Olivia became choked up but pushed it down to say what she had been feeling for a while now. It had been sitting there in the back of her mind from the moment Natalia came back pregnant after leaving town, and then got stronger when she showed up at Natalia's ultrasound. Ever since the other day though when Josh had mistakenly thought they wanted him to come over to talk about having a baby with them, the thoughts and images had been constantly playing her head.*

*"That's not what I mean. This isn't about Francesca. I love her. God knows I do. I just..." Olivia let out a long breath getting her thoughts together. "I wasn't there though. We weren't making plans about who the donor would be and how we'd do it. I just...God, Natalia, I just want to know what it feels like to be with you in that moment when our baby is created, to stress over waiting for the pregnancy test to show that silly smiley face."*

*Both of them giggled at that thought.*

*Natalia sobered quickly. "I had no idea you were thinking about this."*

*"I know. I sprung it on you. But I guess with all that's happened to us in the last two to three years and all the emotions of getting married, I couldn't hold it in anymore." Olivia chuckled, feeling a little silly about it all.*

*Natalia brushed Olivia's hair back. She knew that self-conscious laugh and quickly kissed her wife before easing her worries. "Yes, it's sudden, but it's not like the thought hasn't occurred to me too."*

*"Really?" Olivia asked with surprise but clearly pleased that Natalia had thought of having a child with her.*

*Natalia smiled tenderly and confirmed, "Really." A quick sigh followed before she continued, "I still want to take some time to think about it though. No rash decisions."*

*Olivia couldn't help but chuckle a little at the very typical approach from Natalia. Her partner wasn't known for being rash. "Of course not."*

Walking around the end of the bed until she was standing to the side, closest to Olivia, Natalia shook slightly as a wave of awe and gratitude came over her. She had struggled with writing her vows, trying to find the right words, but all of it suddenly became so clear. It was as obvious as their love. Climbing into bed next to her naked lover, she wrapped the sleeping woman in her arms, knowing exactly the right thing to do. Their wedding day couldn't come soon enough.

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In the dimly lit apartment, Anna sat on her couch, a glass of Mountain Dew and a semi-empty bowl of popcorn sat on the table as Anna searched her laptop for new emails. On the tv screen was the most recent episode in her viewing list. She'd only partially been paying attention though to the tv. There were a few work related emails that were in her box, which didn't require immediate answers, so she closed up the laptop and started to watch the episode with more focus.

The sudden beeping of her cell phone startled her just as she was getting to a particularly intense scene. But this time it wasn't a call, but rather a text message: *'The Forbidden City is no longer forbidden territory as it secures the man of the hour. Trust in your instincts and they will take you far.'*

"What the hell?" Anna asked aloud as she searched the text messages to see the origin, but only a few numbers of the originating user data header appeared but with no obvious identification of user. Picking up her laptop, she opened her cell phone provider's website to get a list of text messages to her phone and copied them down, then she opened her email and started a message to Eleni.

*To: Eleni Andros*

*Fr: Det. Anna Li*

*Re: Strange message*

*Got a really strange text message tonight. Sending you the relevant information.*

*Message read: 'The Forbidden City is no longer forbidden territory as it secures the man of the hour. Trust in your instincts and they will take you far.'*

*I'm assuming it's about my father but who sent it? Any ideas? I can't discern much from the origins. Any suggestions?*

*Anna*

Anna sighed; finally there looked like there might be some kind of break in the search for her father. Now distracted from her viewing she shut off the TV; the rest of the episode would have to wait for another day. She grabbed her half-empty soda glass and the remains of the popcorn and tossed them out. She was just about done when she had a ping from her phone. Picking it up, she read the message and smiled.

*A, not sure about origins myself, but I know someone at Quantico who owes me a favor. She's a genius at that kind of thing. Will send on, ok? E.*

Anna smiled. Some things were looking up. Snagging her laptop from the coffee table, she brought it up to the kitchen counter and typed out a Request for Leave letter, ready to bring in to Chief Thorne. Hopefully she'd get some more information in the next day or so from Eleni's contact. Checking that all the locks were bolted, she turned off the remaining lights and headed into her bedroom. Before crawling into bed, she quickly fired off a response on her phone.

*E, Thanks for that. See you tomorrow. - A*