

Title: The Beginning of the End
By: Calliopes_Muse
Betas: Cheerful, Jessica, and Ariestess
Artists: Grumpybear1031 and Shaych03

Act 1

The cacophony of screams and sirens barely penetrated Natalia's mind. All she really registered was movement. A man ran past her then slid to his knees next to a woman face-down in the dirt only a few feet in front of her. Then she saw it – the gun, still raised, the glint of sunlight off the metal reflecting brightness and beauty no longer evident in this day.

Her hand shook as another hand slowly lifted towards it from the side. The touch was familiar and gentle, and she saw it shaking as well as it reached for her. Fingers wrapping around her wrist, her chilled skin was enveloped in a warmth that could only belong to one person. Her whole body quivered as realization closed in on her, and she collapsed into comforting arms and understanding green eyes.

"Oh God, Olivia. Oh God! I shot...I shot someone." The words stuttered out of her mouth; her voice was unrecognizable to her own ears.

The scene played back as she huddled against Olivia's body, the weapon forgotten and abandoned on the ground by their knees. Edmund Winslow had ranted at the crowd, people had been crying and screaming in pain and loss, while Anna and Jeffrey approached Edmund from different sides demanding he surrender. Then a horrifying sound – Francesca's cry, loud and resounding over all the other noises. Edmund's reaction was instantaneous and Natalia saw the cold, desperate glint in his eyes as he turned towards her crying child. She imagined that was the last image Jane must have seen before he took her life while she fought to protect Emma.

She didn't recall thinking anything, but she felt everything - the raging fear and livid anger of a mother desperate to protect her young. It was primal and instinctive. Without regard for herself or anyone around her, she reached into her purse and found Olivia's forgotten gun. As she raised the gun, the crying and injured people faded to the background. She caught a glimpse of Olivia reaching for her and begging her to stop, and of Emma clawing at Leyla to get away and get to her. But when she stepped from her safe hiding place with the weapon drawn, the rest of the world disappeared. The only thing she could see was Edmund's cruel glare and the only thing she could hear were Francesca's cries.

She stood between Edmund's gun and her daughter, and that was all that mattered.

Time seemed to stand still. What probably happened in a few seconds felt like it took a lifetime.

Even when she pulled the trigger, there was no noise and for a moment, she wondered if the gun even went off. She only knew that something had happened when she saw Edmund's head snap back and a splash of red spray into the air.

But here, now, her face buried against Olivia's chest, the noise was too much. She heard every word, every plaintive sob, and every movement except the one she really needed. There was one sound missing – their baby's cry. Fear gripped her and she fought to get away from Olivia.

“Francesca! Where is she? Where’s Francesca?” She pushed against Olivia, who was desperately trying to hold her and calm her.

She saw Olivia’s mouth moving, but couldn’t hear the words, so she continued to struggle, assuming the worst. She screamed in panic. “Where’s our baby, Olivia?”

Suddenly Rafe appeared at her side, his eyes red and his hands shaking as he handed his sister over. Natalia sobbed and quickly took Francesca, rocking the small child in her arms and burying her face against the soft skin of the baby’s neck.

“No one will ever hurt you,” she murmured over and over into Francesca’s ear while Olivia held both of them in her arms.

Remy had covered Christina and Clayton with his arms and body as soon as he realized what was happening. He fought to hide his shaken nerves and glanced down at his sobbing wife and frightened son.

He stroked Christina’s hair. “Are you okay?” She nodded quickly, but remained silent. “Hey, little man, how about you?” He ran his hands over his son’s tiny form and let out a deep sigh of relief when he didn’t see so much as a scratch on him.

When a few moments of silence passed, he got to his feet. Looking around he saw that the scene had descended into chaos. It looked like a miniature war zone. Chairs and tables were flipped over and broken. Flowers were scattered haphazardly around the grounds. The smell of panic and gun smoke still lingered in the air. All around him, small groups of people were huddled together crying. Several people were holding bloody, lifeless bodies in their arms. One looked like a nurse he had seen at the hospital, but there was so much blood on her face that it was hard to be sure. He didn’t recognize any of the dead as close friends.

Slowly, people begin to stand and move. He helped Christina and CK up then found his cell phone. He took care of urgent matters first and called 911 for help.

Reaching under the back of his jacket, he found his service weapon. He had no idea if the shooter was still around or had gotten away. Lifting his pants leg, he pulled a smaller gun from a holster and handed it to Christina. Her frightened eyes stared back at him and she shook her head refusing to take the weapon.

“Please, baby. I have to check the injured,” he begged her. Squeezing her eyes shut tight to hold back the tears, she nodded her head. Leaning over, he kissed the top of her head before running to a huddled group to check for injuries, all the while keeping a lookout for the shooter. In the distance, he could hear the sirens of ambulances and police cars drawing closer.

Nearing the stage, he saw a body sprawled out on the stage. Anna ran up to him from the left, holding her shoulder as a small trickle of blood oozed out between her fingers.

“You’ve been shot.” He reached for her.

Anna waved him off as her eyes searched the crowd. "I'm fine. It's just a nick. Have you seen Doris?"

Remy looked around; the faces and images were like a blur in front of him. "Um, no, I haven't seen her."

She pulled a set of handcuffs from her belt. "Do me a favor. Help me with this so I can go look for her."

"And what is this?" He followed Anna as she jumped to the stage. She held her weapon out in one hand, pointing to the body on the stage, while she clutched the cuffs in her other hand.

Anna saw Edmund's gun, inches from his hand, and kicked it out of the way. Kneeling and keeping her gun trained on the figure, she felt for a pulse. "This is Edmund Winslow. Our shooter, and he's still alive. Here, put those on his ankles." She tossed the cuffs to Remy, who promptly attached them to Edmund's ankles.

Remy moved to Edmund's other side, looking for the injury that had him down. When he saw no wounds on Edmund's torso, he lifted him slightly.

A small puddle of blood under the man's head made Remy draw back. "Oh boy."

"Is he dead?" Both Anna and Remy glanced up at the pained voice as Jeffrey collapsed next to them holding his leg, blood gushing out around his hand.

"Jesus!" From the amount of blood, Remy was pretty sure a bullet had hit his femoral artery and Jeffrey could bleed out in minutes. He pulled off his jacket and ripped his shirt off. He made a tourniquet out of it and tied it off tightly around Jeffrey's thigh.

Remy heard the squealing of tires and looked up with relief as several ambulances pulled to the curb of the park. Like an army of ants, medical personnel climbed from the vehicles and ran towards the injured. Right behind them, police cruisers bumped the curb, officers pouring out of the cars and racing towards the scene.

"Hey, you got this?" Anna's voice pulled his attention back to her.

He nodded. "Yeah, got it."

She stood and tucked her gun in the back of her jeans. "Good. I'm going to find Doris."

Frank looked up at Marina when he heard what sounded like the entire police station blaring past Company with their sirens going. He pushed off from his spot on the floor of the kitchen where he had been playing with Henry and ran out through the front door of the restaurant.

Cruisers, ambulances, and even a fire truck flew down Main Street. He looked back at Marina as she exited Company with Henry in her arms. "What the hell's going on?"

Marina shrugged and shifted Henry in her arms as the little boy squealed at the noisy sirens and tried to jump from her grasp in all of the excitement. "I have no idea."

Frank reached for his phone to call the police department when it started ringing. Seeing the station number, he flipped it open to answer. "Yeah."

Marina watched her father as a frightened look came over his face. She stepped closer to him to ask a question, but he raised his hand to ask her to wait while he listened to the person on the other end of the line. He ran his hand through his hair and finally said with a shaky voice, "Do...do we know who was killed yet?"

The answer on the other end wasn't what he wanted to hear, and he shook his head, closing his eyes. "I'm on my way." He flipped the phone closed and turned to his daughter, "There's been a shooting at the park, right in the middle of the wedding...Francesca...I...I have to go."

The frightened look sent a cold chill through Marina, and she put a hand up over her mouth. "A shooting? Oh my God. Is she okay?"

Frank shook his head as he backed away from her to head across the street to his car. "I don't know. I have to go."

She watched as he raced to his car, placed the siren on the roof, and sped away. She pulled her son closer, kissing his soft hair, muttering softly to reassure herself more than Henry. "I'm sure Daddy is fine. Don't worry. Come on, let's go find my phone, and we'll give him a call."

Rick and Phillip took turns doing CPR on Billy. His lips were turning blue and his skin was growing ashen. Vanessa held tightly to his hand, leaning down and whispering to him. She told him all of the things she'd never had the chance to say over the years. She apologized for all of the opportunities that had slipped them by and all of the things she'd done to hurt him over the years. Mindy sat at her side trying to offer a small bit of comfort even as she cried from fear and worry.

"One...two...three." Rick counted out the rhythm and pumped Billy's chest as Phillip administered mouth-to-mouth. "Come on, where are the damn ambulances? One...two...three. You can't do this now, Billy. One...two...three. You have to give Mindy away. One...two...three. It's not your time yet."

Over and over, Rick and Phillip kept the rhythm, hoping to maintain an oxygen flow to keep Billy's brain alive and the blood moving. Sirens were heard in the distance. Bill jumped up from where he was holding Lizzie and ran toward the edge of the park, waving his hands to get the attention of the approaching ambulances.

Blake slowly became aware that the noise and gunfire around them had stopped. She still had her head down, tucked safely into the crook of Doris's shoulder. She felt the other woman beneath her move; it wasn't normal movement, but a shaking.

She pulled back slightly to get a look at Doris. Her friend's eyes were shut tight and Blake could see a line of wet tears running down toward her hairline. Doris's bottom lip quivered and she was mumbling to herself.

Blake gently put a hand to her friend's face. "Hey, are you okay?" When Doris didn't respond, she spoke louder, but still tried not to startle her. "Doris! Talk to me."

Green eye suddenly flew open and captured Blake's. "I'm alive?"

Blake laughed in relief. "Yeah, I think so."

Doris's frightened look turned quickly to worry as she propped herself up on shaky arms. "And you're okay?"

Blake nodded and moved off of her friend. "Yeah."

"Good." Doris let out a relieved sigh. For a moment, they didn't move and simply looked at each other, until the moment became awkward. Doris stood on wobbly legs. She reached down for Blake to take her hand so she could help her up.

They stood and looked around at the chaos they'd just lived through. Blake shook her head and ran her hands through her hair. "Wow!"

"Thanks," Doris said out of the blue.

Blake looked at her and felt a little shiver course through her. It definitely wasn't left-over adrenaline, and she couldn't help but smile. "You're welcome. You know, I was going to see if you wanted to get coffee after the wedding, but seeing as I saved your life, I think that calls for at least dinner...with a nice bottle of wine."

Doris flinched a little. "Maybe we should check on our friends first."

"Oh, of course." Blake wasn't ignoring the significance of the event they'd just experienced, but it was because of that experience that she didn't want to let the chance to spend time with Doris pass her by.

When Doris saw the hurt look in Blake's eyes, she quickly smiled and added, "But I'd love to do that."

"It's a date then." Blake realized how the words sounded, but didn't regret them a bit.

"Yeah, a...a date," Doris stuttered at the thought and quickly covered by gesturing to the madness around them. "I, um...better check on what's happening, assess the damage, talk to the reporters, and all that other mayor-type stuff." She fussed with her hair and attempted to get the leaves and dirt off her suit. "How do I look?"

Blake smiled. "Beautiful, as always." She was enchanted by the light blush that came over Doris's face.

The mayor swallowed hard as her heart raced at the compliment. "Thanks. So, I'll talk to you later."

The redhead nodded. "I'll call you."

Blake watched as Doris walked away, and shook her head at her own behavior. She couldn't believe she was actually flirting with her best friend in the middle of what looked like a shooting spree. She muttered to herself, "Boy, Blake, you really need to work on your timing."

Doris saw Olivia and her family huddled over by a large oak tree. Before she could reach them, though, she was intercepted by Anna.

"Oh, thank God, you're okay." Anna looked Doris over, surprised she didn't even seem to have a scratch. "Are you sure you didn't get hurt? I tried to get to him before he took a shot. I really did."

In spite of her reservations over Anna's deception, Doris couldn't stand to see her ex upset. She calmed her down by taking her hand. "I'm fine, really."

Anna stuttered, "But...I...I saw him come up the path and you were right there, and I was running, but I couldn't get there fast enough, and..."

"Hey, calm down. It's okay. I'm not hurt." Doris put her free hand on Anna's shoulder and felt an unexpected wetness. She pulled her hand away and saw blood. "I can't say the same for you though. Anna, you need to get this looked at."

Anna shook her head. "It's just a scratch. Don't worry about it."

Doris stood up straight then, her eyes burrowing into Anna's. "Oh, so you get to worry about me, but I don't have the right to worry about you. Is that how this works?"

"Hey, I didn't mean it that way. It's just the way I am, okay? I worry about everyone else first and think of myself last." Anna paused, frustrated that her meaning wasn't coming across right. "I'm not used to anyone worrying about me, so I'm not good at accepting it. But, thank you. I'm fine."

Doris felt her belated frustrations with her ex deflate quickly at the repentant look in the younger woman's dark eyes. She rubbed her forehead, trying to forestall the pounding headache that was fast approaching. Looking into Anna's eyes, she really wished she could let her anger and hesitance go, but she needed trust and Anna had blown all of that away with her lies. No matter how much she wanted to go back sometimes, to that time and place of having a wonderful woman to share her life with, she just didn't think she could.

She took a deep breath and moved into safer territory. "So, what do we have here?"

Frank had never driven so frantically and dangerously in his life. He took every shortcut he knew, ran red lights, and even drove on the sidewalk for a short stretch just to get to the park as quickly as possible. No one could tell him who was killed or injured, or even how many victims there were yet. He was panicked to think of so many people he knew and loved being at risk, but most of all, he thought of

Francesca - her sweet innocent face and trusting eyes. He pressed the accelerator a little harder. Jumping the curb, he drove into the park and skidded to a halt outside the scene.

Raised in a close-knit Greek family, there was one thing that Frank understood: family. Nobody hurt his family and got away with it. He may not have the best family in the world and like so many others they were as dysfunctional as the day was long, but they stuck together and stood by each other. And they always, always fought for and protected each other.

So, when he ran from his car and found Natalia and Olivia underneath a large oak tree, he didn't think about their tangled past. He just ran to them – his extended family - and kissed his daughter as tears fell from his eyes.

Doris and Anna saw Frank come up, but gave him a moment alone with his family. Quietly, they approached and Doris rested a gentle hand on Olivia's back.

"Is everyone okay?" Doris reached out and ran the back of her fingers over Francesca's cheek. The little girl smiled and Doris was thankful that she was too young to remember any of this. Unfortunately, looking at Emma clinging tightly to her mother's waist, still visibly shaking, she couldn't say the same thing for the other Spencer child.

Natalia leaned against Olivia, saying nothing, but nodding. Olivia tried to smile at her friend, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Nobody's hurt here. How about you?"

Doris shrugged. "Just some scrapes."

Olivia saw Anna standing to the side, whispering to Frank; the dark stain on Anna's sleeve making her injury apparent. "I see not all of our little group came out unscathed."

Anna turned at Olivia's voice, ready to answer, when Remy jogged up with an EMT bag over his shoulder. "What's the status?"

He caught Ava's eyes, "Are you okay?" She nodded and he tilted his head at her in concern, not entirely convinced she was telling the truth. He wasn't looking forward to telling her the news.

Everyone turned to Remy and froze at the look on his face. He glanced at Olivia and then focused again on Ava, swallowing hard. "Jeffrey's been hurt...really bad. A bullet hit him in the femoral artery and he's lost a lot of blood."

Ava leaned heavily on Rafe who was beside her. "Is he...?" She couldn't finish her thought.

Her ex shook his head. "I don't know. I...he just left in an ambulance for Cedars. You should get there."

Rafe took Ava's hand. "Come on, let's go." He looked at the rest of his shocked family. He tugged on Ava's hand. "Give me the keys; I'll drive you and Leyla. Olivia, can you drive Ma and Emma over?"

Olivia nodded at the confident young man, who suddenly seemed far too mature for his age. "Yeah, I got it."

Doris watched the shaken family gather together purses and other personal items. When she looked up, she noticed Remy still looked uncomfortable. "There's more, isn't there?" He looked away and she leaned her head to catch his dark eyes with her own. "How bad?"

He fought to keep his bottom lip from quivering. Realizing just how bad it was and how fortunate he was that Christina and CK weren't hurt, the shock was finally settling on him. "Ten are dead, another eight wounded. Three are critical. Jeffrey O'Neill is one of the critical. The shooter, Edmund Winslow, is another. It appears he was shot in the head but he's, surprisingly, still alive."

He paused and looked at Olivia and the others as they waited for him to continue. "And there was one that wasn't directly injured by a gunshot, but is still in grave danger. Billy Lewis had a heart attack. Rick and Phillip were doing CPR, but weren't able to revive him before the medics got here and took over."

"Dear God." Olivia ran her hands through her hair. "Has anyone called Josh?"

Remy shook his head. "I don't know. The ambulance left for Cedars already, so they should be there by now. You may want to check with Vanessa."

She nodded. "Thanks." Guiding the rest of her family from the park, they followed Rafe, Ava, and Leyla towards the parking lot and the cars.

Frank caught Anna's eye and raised a finger asking for one minute. He jogged after Olivia and Natalia and caught up with them at their car. "Hey, if you want, I can take Francesca...at least for tonight, so you don't have to worry about her."

Natalia instinctively pulled her daughter closer, kissing her dark hair. "Thank you, Frank, but...I don't know if I can let her go tonight."

He nodded noticing how she wrapped her arms more possessively around the child. "No, it's...is everything okay, Natalia?"

Olivia opened the back door to help Emma into the car. She waited to see how Natalia was going to respond, ready to jump in and take the blame if needed.

"I shot him." The words were out of Natalia's mouth before Olivia could interject. There was no hesitation on Natalia's part. "I shot Edmund Winslow and I'd do it again. He was aiming a gun at my baby. Nobody hurts my family."

Frank took a deep breath and looked around. It was only the three of them and the two girls. If he had to, he'd help Natalia out of any trouble she might get into. Though truth be told, the town would probably honor her as a hero if Edmund didn't make it.

He squeezed her hand and looked at Olivia. A shared look of understanding and protectiveness passed between them. "Don't worry about that, Natalia. We'll figure it out. It'll be okay."

He helped her get Francesca into her car seat, taking an extra moment to kiss his daughter. Standing up, he barely had a chance to respond before Olivia hugged him. "Thank you."

Stepping back, he watched as they climbed into the white car and it followed the SUV out of the parking lot.

Walking back towards the scene of the crime, he flipped his phone open. "Hey, Eleni, it's me. I need you at the park. Bring your entire team and everything you've got. Yeah...it's bad."

Act 2

The scene in the emergency room lobby looked like something out of a war movie. Hospital personnel hustled in the injured and tried to calm their frightened and worried family members. Olivia, with Rafe's help, guided their group through the chaos until they were out of the way in a secluded corner.

She looked at the dark-haired man. "Rafe, stay here with them. I'm going to see if I can find out Jeffrey's condition."

"Okay." He reached down to pick up Emma, who had come over to him. She curled up against him and sighed deeply.

Ava broke away from the group and followed her mother. "I'm going with you."

The rest of the small family stood and watched as what seemed like an endless stream of gurneys came in, with people attached to breathing machines and all kinds of monitors. Blood streaked the floor and maintenance teams worked fast to clean up the mess before unaware bystanders could get into it.

After a few minutes, the noise in the lobby quieted down to a dull roar. Rafe, seeing a few empty seats near the doors, urged everyone to follow him. Slipping down into the hard plastic chair with Emma still in his arms, he finally let himself relax a little. Nobody in his family was hurt and that was all that mattered. Based on his recent life experiences, it wasn't that bad of a day. But he knew though that his family wasn't used to the complete lack of control and uncertainty that came with this kind of violence.

He adjusted Emma in his lap and looked down at her. The usually happy child was almost non-responsive; her normally joy-filled green eyes were resigned and sad. He felt his heart lurch in his chest. She was far too young to lose her light now.

"Hey, Munchkin, I heard that the cafeteria has this really awesome new sundae called 'The Mega Chocolate Brain Freeze Express'. It's supposed to have like double everything on it. Wanna go get one?"

He smiled when she looked up at him, contemplating the possibility. He teasingly narrowed his eyes, laying down the challenge. "In fact, I double dog dare you to eat the whole thing by yourself. I don't think you can do it."

Emma narrowed her eyes at her big brother. Smiling with determination, she jumped off his lap. "You're on!"

Rafe was pulled to his feet by Emma. He glanced back at his mom and saw a small smile on her face. Chuckling, he followed behind the little girl, thinking, *Well, we've gotta start somewhere.*

Francesca squirmed in her mom's arms, wanting to get down and follow her siblings. Natalia chuckled quietly. "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

The baby fussed at being held against her will. Leyla, who was sitting next to Natalia, saw the weariness on Natalia's face. "Here, let me take her for a bit. We'll play right around here." Leyla motioned to an open area between the chairs.

Natalia handed the baby over and watched as Leyla sat Francesca down in the chair on the row in front of her. Leyla got down on her knees and peeked through a hole in the back of the plastic chair. Francesca turned around and peeked back, giggling at her aunt as they played peek-a-boo over, around, and through the chairs.

Natalia smiled at them and after a minute, she rested her head back against the wall behind her. Closing her eyes, she was quickly in a light slumber.

Olivia tapped her blunt nails on the counter of the nurse's station, waiting for the young woman to return with news on Jeffrey. She pursed her lips and looked around impatiently.

Ava squeezed her arm hoping to calm her, sensing that her mom was close to losing her cool.

As soon as Olivia reached in her pocket for her cell to call someone – though she wasn't sure who, because Rick was probably in surgery right now – the young nurse came back.

The petite blonde nurse looked across the desk at the two women and smiled at them. When they didn't smile back, she cleared her throat and said, "Mr. O'Neill did come in about an hour ago and he's currently in surgery. As soon as the doctors know something, you'll be informed. Do we have your contact information on file?"

Catching movement at the end of the hall, Olivia looked over Ava's shoulder and saw a familiar blonde head. She looked back at the nurse. Motioning to Ava, she stepped away from the desk. "She's his daughter. Make sure you get her information. I'll be right back, baby."

She jogged down the hall to Phillip, who was getting off the phone. She touched his shoulder and he turned around. "Olivia. Hey, how is your family?"

She shrugged and tried to smile. "I was going to ask you the same thing. Emma's fine except for being scared by all of it. We're all fine. I heard about Billy."

Phillip nodded. "Yeah, it was bad. Thank God we were all in the same place. Rick and I were able to do CPR."

Olivia ran a hand through her hair. She knew the fear and panic that Billy must have felt – to feel your body revolt against you. As she knew all too well, it was a terrifying feeling.

He watched Olivia's reaction as her emotions played across her face. He felt bad for her and the way this reminded her of a difficult time in her life. "Anyway, Rick's in surgery with him now."

Olivia felt a hand come to rest on her shoulder and turned her head to see Ava behind her. She reached up and covered her daughter's hand with her own, before looking back at her ex-husband. "We're waiting on news about Jeffrey. When you hear about Billy, can you let me know?"

"You bet. I'll come down and see Emma in a little bit. I need to get back and check with Vanessa and Mindy to see if they've heard anything." He then reached for Ava's hand. "I'm sure Jeffrey's going to be fine."

"Auntie O!" Olivia spun in surprise just in time to be taken into Jonathan's arms. He held onto her tight, "I didn't stay at the wedding. When I heard the news, I was so scared that..."

She pulled back and wiped at her teary eyes. "We're all okay."

He pushed back his long dark hair and nodded, smiling. "Yeah, I saw Natalia when I came in, and the kids. She told me about Billy and Jeffrey. What about the rest?"

Phillip stepped up then. "Everyone else is fine. Billy had a heart attack."

Jonathan rolled his head back and then shook it. "Is he...?"

"Surgery. We should know soon." Phillip added.

Jonathan glanced at Olivia. "And Jeffrey?"

"He was shot and he's in surgery too." Olivia looked at her daughter and shook her head. "We're not sure what's going to happen. It was kind of bad."

Jonathan took her hand and leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. "I'll check on you all later after I go see everyone."

She nodded and urged him down the hall. "Go." She took Ava's hand and turned to head back to their family.

Jonathan started walking in the other direction, leaving Phillip watching the two Spencer women until they turned the corner. Phillip rolled his eyes skyward. "Just a small break would be nice, you know?"

There was little for Vanessa to do except wait. She had paced the seating area until she had counted all of the tiles at least ten times. She knew by now that the small room was, if her math skills were correct, probably about six hundred square feet and held ten tan chairs, five blue ones, and one black one.

She definitely needed to get out of that room.

The walk down to the chapel helped her shake off the worst of the wait-induced numbness, and when she entered the room, tears that she had thought were cried out returned. Kneeling in a pew, she said a soft prayer and waited a moment to let her emotions settle again.

She wasn't sure how long she had been there, but when her knees began to ache, she rose from the pew and exited through the non-descript wooden door to stand in the hallway. She needed to get back, but she had one last task to do and she couldn't do it in front of everyone else.

Leaning against the wall, she pulled her phone from her purse. She scrolled through her contacts and found the D's. Carefully, she typed out a message: FYI, EW is alive. He attacked everyone at R&M's wedding. Ten killed. Billy had a heart attack...in surgery now. Will tell more later. Luv, V.

She slipped her phone back into her purse and pushed off the wall. Rubbing her fingers over her tired eyes, Vanessa headed back down the hall to the waiting area, hoping she hadn't missed Rick giving an update.

By now, halfway around the world, Dinah should have gotten her message. Vanessa didn't want to worry her, but she deserved to know that Edmund was in custody. *Maybe that'll be enough to get her back now.*

Shadowed by the raised towers with their menacing gargoyles that loomed over the entryways surrounding the square, Dinah and Mallet sat in wrought iron chairs at an open-air coffee shop. The locals of the small German village had recommended the quaint shop as having the best coffee in town.

Taking a deep breath, Dinah leaned her head back, the golden rays of the early morning sun warming her face. She rolled her head to the side to glance at Mallet. "This is incredible. Everything we've seen and done has been amazing. I don't think I've ever felt so happy."

Mallet lifted his dark sunglasses onto the top of his head and smiled at the blonde. "In spite of the reasons for doing this, it has been great. We deserved a fresh start."

Reaching to take his hand, Dinah nodded and looked out over the square. A buzzing in her pocket surprised her. It wasn't often that she had anyone contact her and it had been several weeks since she'd last heard from Vanessa. Her mother had mentioned Rick and Mindy's upcoming wedding and had told her bits and pieces about the other happenings in Springfield, like Shayne's team winning the championships. He was so good with Henry and was going to be a great father to him. She felt a wave of sadness pass over her at that last thought, but she kept it to herself.

Glancing down at the phone in her hand, she saw she had a text from Vanessa. She read it several times before she realized that Mallet had leaned over and was looking at her.

He squeezed her hand. "Hey, are you okay?"

He watched as Dinah flipped her phone closed and raised her head to look out over the crowds milling around the square. She never looked at him, but he could see the muscles in her jaw working as they tensed, then relaxed, then tensed again.

When she finally spoke, her voice was raw with emotion, and it was then that he saw the tears slipping down her face. "Edmund's back, and he attacked Springfield."

The uncomfortable chairs in the waiting room did nothing to help Olivia's mood. She had contorted into just about every conceivable position to try and get comfortable. She had even considered settling on the hard linoleum floor with Rafe, Leyla, and Emma as they played Go Fish with a set of cards Rafe and Emma had bought in the hospital gift store. But that would be a worse situation than the one she was currently in.

At least sitting here, bent over with her head in her hands, she had the added benefit of Natalia lovingly rubbing a hand up and down her aching spine.

It had been a little over an hour since she and Ava had come back with the news that Billy and Jeffrey were in surgery. She glanced over at her oldest daughter, who was slumped down in her chair with her head resting back against the seat. Olivia felt bad for her. Ava was so much like her. She put up walls when she hurt and would strike out when attacked, or even preemptively attack before anyone could hurt her. Since losing Max, it seemed like Ava had thrown herself into any endeavor possible just to keep from feeling the pain. Olivia understood that far too well. She had done it so many times in her own life, even recently with Natalia.

Feeling a hand gently squeeze her shoulder, she leaned back in her chair and looked into the tender brown eyes of her partner.

Natalia glanced down at Rafe, Leyla, and Emma just in time to see their youngest yawn loudly. "It's been a long day. Maybe we should get them home."

Olivia looked out a nearby window and saw that it was later than she'd realized, since the sun was on the verge of setting. She nodded at Natalia. "You could take them to The Beacon. I could stay here with Ava until she hears about Jeffrey. At least at the hotel, we'll be close if needed."

Natalia reached out and squeezed Olivia's hand. "Tell you what, let's give it another hour. If we still haven't heard anything by then, I'll take them there for the night."

"Sounds good." Olivia rubbed her thumb over the back of Natalia's hand.

Natalia smiled at the soothing touch. "If it's okay, I think I'll take a short walk. My butt's asleep."

Olivia couldn't help it. The bait was too easy to take. She smiled lasciviously. "I could just rub it until it wakes back up again."

Natalia shook her head and leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. "You're incorrigible, but I love you so much for it."

Olivia smiled and raised an eyebrow. "Lucky me."

Natalia stood and stretched. "I'll be back in a bit."

Olivia watched as the younger woman walked away. Natalia was very good at keeping her emotions hidden, but if this last year had taught her anything, it was how to read her non-demonstrative partner. There was no way that the shooting hadn't affected Natalia. In those moments following the horrific event, where the other woman had broken down and mumbled protectively over Francesca, she had known this was going to be a tough ordeal for the whole family, but mostly for Natalia.

Eventually, Frank would come around with questions about the shooting, and if he didn't behave himself, she'd seriously have to consider having Natalia tie her to the bed to keep her from killing him.

Natalia brushed her hand over the lacquered wood of the pew, kneeling out of habit on the rest in front of her. Since walking in the door, she hadn't been able to look up at the heavy wooden crucifix hanging at the front of the room. Due to the time she'd spent here, first when Gus died and then during Olivia's illness, she knew the hospital chapel by heart. She could see the altar of candles even with her eyes closed and smell the incense permeating the wood and cushions around her. It was quiet and calming on so many occasions, but not today.

Unlike the space around her, her thoughts were a whirlwind of chaos. Her mind replayed the scenes like a movie loop. She had played out hundreds of scenarios, imagining numerous different paths. But only one kept her family safe. Only one had been an option. It was the one path she had taken.

The only words that echoed in her head were "forgive me." It was the only prayer she had left.

Standing at the back of the chapel, Olivia watched her partner with watery eyes. If she hadn't taken the gun to the service and if she had told Natalia her fears, Natalia might never have pulled the trigger. *And what if she hadn't?* She wanted to consider that scenario even less. Edmund had been pointing the gun at their youngest daughter. His intent had been as clear as the madness in his cold eyes. There had been no other option.

Quietly, she pushed off the frame of the door and walked down the carpeted aisle to stand just behind and to the left of Natalia. She choked up as Natalia reached back for her without looking. She took the offered hand and settled down in the pew. Natalia got up to join her.

"How did you know it was me?" Olivia whispered.

Natalia finally glanced up at the crucifix on the wall, feeling a soft smile playing at the corner of her lips. "I sensed you."

Olivia squeezed her hand. "The kids are ready to go to The Beacon. Poor Emma's about to drop from exhaustion. Are you ready?"

With a nod, Natalia stood, and they left.

The small local barbeque joint was noisy, but a long pull on his beer and a smile from Reva made Josh forget all about it. He'd actually dreamed of moments like this with Reva, simply being together and being happy. He smiled at Colin who was sitting next to his mom and spending more time playing with his food than actually eating it. Watching as Reva laughed at something funny Colin said, Josh felt truly content and happy.

A flash caught his eye and he glanced to the side, towards his mostly forgotten phone, to see the screen lighting up. Seeing the name on the display, he raised it to his ear.

"Hey, Mindy. I would think you'd have better things to do on your honeymoon than call your uncle." His laughter died as he listened to her. "What? Billy?...You'll let me know when you hear something?...And Shayne?...Thank God. Anyone else?" He breathed a sigh of relief to hear that no one else in their immediate family was hurt, but he stopped short and looked at Reva when Mindy told him about Jeffrey.

He ended the call and rubbed the suddenly aching space between his eyes. He was lost in his own head for a moment until Reva spoke up, "What in the world was that all about?"

Glancing into Reva's beautiful blue eyes, filled with worry, he couldn't hold out on telling her. Part of him wanted to wait until they got back to the hotel and put Colin down for bed. Somehow, though, he knew she'd never let him get away with not telling her for that long.

He scrubbed at his goatee and took a deep breath before speaking. "Rick and Mindy never got married. Edmund Winslow showed up and opened fire on the crowd."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh dear God! Shayne?"

Josh reached for her hand. "He's fine."

The tears fell from her eyes then, but they were tears of relief. "Oh thank God!"

"There's more." He hesitated, dreading upsetting her with the news. "Billy had a heart attack. He's in surgery. Mindy will tell me more when he comes out."

"Oh Josh, honey. I'm sure he's going to be fine." She squeezed his hand and watched as Josh looked down, unable to make eye contact. She knew there was more. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Jeffrey was shot."

She tried not to show it, but it felt like she had been kicked in the gut. The air rushed from her lungs, and she felt the world tip upside down for a moment. As angry as she was at Jeffrey, she never wanted him to die. Looking at her son, she was drawn from her thoughts when she realized that Colin had knocked his drink over.

Josh kept talking as he tried to clean up the mess. "He's in surgery too. The bullet hit a major artery so they're not sure of his chances."

Once the spill was cleaned up and Josh was settling back down in his seat, she made eye contact with him, her tone brooking no argument. "We're going back."

The bright lights outside the hospital blinded Doris for a moment and she shielded her eyes with her hand to help her sight adjust before she stepped up on the podium. With Blake's help, she had touched up her makeup and brushed her hair back into some semblance of order before heading over to the press conference she had called. The news of the shooting had spread quickly to the surrounding counties and several news crews, even one from Chicago, had converged at the hospital and were now pointing microphones in her direction.

Doris glanced over her shoulder and smiled when Blake gave her a thumbs-up for encouragement. Clearing her throat, she glanced down at her notes. "Today, the quiet town of Springfield was rocked by tragedy. While details are still coming in, I am happy to report that the attacker was shot and apprehended on sight. His condition is currently critical. It appears he also acted alone. Most recent reports indicate that ten people are dead and eight are wounded. Most of the wounded have already been released with minor injuries. Be assured that I, along with the Springfield Police Department, are working diligently to gather all of the facts and continue to ensure the safety of Springfield. That is all for now. Thank you for your time."

Doris stepped quickly from the podium as questions were lobbed at her. Needing a moment of respite, she caught Blake's eyes, looking for her help.

With a hand on Doris's back, Blake guided her through the hospital doors, closing them quickly before the persistent reporters could follow. She watched Doris walking down the hall, her shoulders slumped with the weight of the day.

Blake looked at the burly security guard a few feet away. "Excuse me."

"Ma'am?" He stepped up to her.

"Don't let any of these vultures in, okay?" She nodded towards the throng of people on the other side of the glass doors. He rocked back on his heels and Blake could tell he was uncertain. She adjusted her tactic. "By order of the mayor."

That got his attention and he gave her a courteous nod. "Yes, ma'am!"

Feeling confident the matter was handled, Blake jogged down the corridor to catch up with Doris, turning where she had seen Doris disappear. Leaning up against the wall, near a water fountain, was her friend.

Walking up, she gave Doris a gentle smile. "You did a great job out there."

Doris looked down and nodded a little, her voice soft when she finally answered, "Thanks."

There was something off in Doris's tone and Blake wasn't sure what it was until her friend's shoulders began to shake – Doris was crying. Blake didn't stop to think about what she did next. She did what felt right; she reached out and wrapped Doris in a hug.

Blake held her as she cried – the sobs coming hard. She pulled Doris closer, whispering softly in her ear. "It's okay. I've got you. It's okay."

After a couple of minutes, the crying subsided into a few sniffles. Blake pulled back and reached out a hand to brush stray strands of hair out of Doris's face. "Better?"

Doris nodded and wiped at what she was sure were the worst raccoon eyes in history. "I'm pathetic."

Blake smiled at her and shook her head. She reached up to brush away a tear dangling precariously from her friend's jaw. "No, you're human. I know you try to pretend you're not, but you are."

Doris rolled her eyes, taking Blake's joking comment as a way out of the seriousness of the moment. "Please! I'm a cast-iron bitch."

"Even iron can melt from enough heat." Blake's voice had dropped a little.

The effect was immediate on Doris. Wondering if Blake was flirting with her, she felt oddly disappointed a second later when Blake patted her arm and quipped, "And you've certainly been under a lot of pressure lately. No one would expect you to be unaffected."

Doris cleared her throat and stood up straight. She moved to the water fountain. "Wow, I sure am thirsty." Taking a moment to gather her wits about her, she leaned over for a quick, cooling drink.

Straightening back up, she turned to Blake. "I need to go over to The Beacon to check on Olivia and Natalia, and..."

The sentence died on her lips when she saw the serious look on the redhead's face. "Come back to my place with me."

"Excuse me?" Doris was sure she didn't hear her right.

Blake shrugged. "This has been a really crazy and frightening day. Come back to my place. You can spend the night in the guest room. We can hang out and drink wine and try to forget what happened today."

Doris smirked at Blake. "A sleepover? You do realize that we're not 13 anymore."

Blake put her hands on her hips. "Tell me the truth, Doris Wolfe; do you really want to go back to your big ol' house and be there all by yourself after today's events? Or would you rather spend some time with a friend, have a drink, eat some bad junk food, and watch movies?"

The mayor smiled at her friend, pretending to consider her options. She tapped a finger against her chin. "Will there be popcorn?"

"Movie theatre style." Blake smiled back.

“That did it. I’m in.” For the first time that day, they laughed.

Blake motioned down the hall. “Come on; let’s go check on the Spencer-Rivera clan and then we’ll swing by your place for your jammies.”

After pushing the room service cart out into the hallway, Olivia made her way over to the sofa where Natalia was sitting, holding Francesca. She settled down next to her partner and pulled her close.

It had been a hell of a day, and her and Natalia wanted to maintain some sense of normalcy in spite of it – dinner, movies, and spending some quality time together seemed a perfect solution.

The idea hadn’t worked for all of them though. Ava had been unusually quiet and didn’t eat very much. Olivia assumed it was because she was worried about Jeffrey, so when her eldest turned down a chance to sit with the family and watch a movie, she didn’t push it. But it didn’t stop her from feeling concerned for her child as she watched her leave to go to her own suite.

Leyla and Rafe stretched out on the floor with a bowl of popcorn between them as they settled in for the movie. From the bathroom, Emma exited, already dressed in her pajamas and ready for bed.

Olivia opened her arms and Emma ran into them, cuddling with her mom a moment before situating herself between her mommies. A few minutes into the movie, Olivia heard soft snoring from her daughter. She caught Natalia’s eye, and they smiled at each other over Emma’s head. Natalia tilted her head towards the floor and Olivia saw that Leyla was also out and Rafe was struggling to keep his eyes open.

Natalia reached out a foot to tap her son’s heel. When he looked back at her with tired eyes, she gestured with her head at Emma and indicated that maybe they should get her to bed. He shook Leyla awake and then stood up to pick Emma up to get her to the bedroom.

When Rafe came over and reached down to pick up his little sister, Emma started kicking and thrashing. Her head swung from side to side and in a scared little voice, she whimpered, “No. Stop.”

“Emma?” Olivia asked worriedly and started to forcibly hold her daughter still.

Rafe reached out a hand and stopped her. “No, not like that. Just talk to her softly; call her name, but not like you’re upset or scared, and tell her she’s okay and that she’s safe.”

All three women looked at him with curiosity and a little concern. He shrugged and shook his head. “It happens to the guys in the field sometimes. That’s how we handle it.”

There wasn’t time to inquire further; Emma’s movements were becoming more erratic and her whimpering was turning to panicked screams. Olivia stroked her face soothingly as Natalia squeezed her hand. Olivia spoke softly. “Wake up, Emma. It’s okay. We’re right here. You’re okay.” Over and over she whispered the words, with Natalia joining in at times.

Gradually, the little girl calmed down. Her eyes remained closed, and when her breathing evened out, Rafe nodded and reached down to scoop her up in his arms. Olivia and Natalia followed him into the bedroom and tucked Emma into bed.

Coming back out to the living area, Rafe turned to them and yawned. "I think that's my sign. I'm hitting the hay." He leaned over and gave Natalia a kiss on the cheek. "Love you, Ma."

She lovingly caressed his stubbled jaw. "Love you too, baby."

He winked at Olivia as he turned, trying to be subtle. "Night, Olivia."

She rolled her eyes and smirked at him. "Night, John Boy."

When the dividing door to Rafe's room closed, Natalia turned back with a sigh to Olivia, who was turning off the TV. "Time to clean up."

Olivia good-naturedly raised a hand to stop her. After the day they'd all had, especially Natalia, the younger woman deserved a chance to sit and do nothing. "It's okay. I've got this."

"No." Natalia's voice was sharper than she intended and she saw Olivia look at her with concern. "Really, it's okay. I...need to clean right now. You know it helps me think."

Realization dawned on Olivia and she smiled sadly at her partner. She stepped back, raising a hand, trying to joke to lighten the moment. "Hey, go for it. Who am I to tell you not to clean? Please...clean."

Natalia smile was genuine and Olivia felt her heart soar. She started to move over to her computer when she noticed Leyla hunched down behind the monitor. The young woman had been so quiet and intent lately that it was easy to forget she was even there sometimes.

Leyla glanced up when Olivia sidled up to her. "I'm sorry. I hope you don't mind that I used your computer for a moment."

Olivia shook her head. "Not at all. You've been really focused lately. Are you working on something?"

The young brunette who looked so much like Natalia, shrugged and smiled, showing off her own set of dimples. "Sort of. But, until I get more information, I'd like to keep it to myself. I promise to tell you and Natalia, though."

"Sure. No pressure." Olivia tried for nonchalance, but couldn't resist the opportunity. "But, you know, if you ever need anything, like advice or help, I might know a thing or two."

Leyla thanked her and Olivia smiled, before moving away from the desk and announcing that she was going to get her shower. There was only one thing she wanted more than to curl up in bed with Natalia wrapped around her, and that was to wash this horrible day off of her.

Looking at the heavy wooden door, Doris hesitated. She glanced down at her watch and then over at Blake, who motioned her head at the door and raised an eyebrow. After the day they'd all had, it was highly likely they were asleep and Doris hated to wake them.

She looked at Blake. "I should have called first."

"Since when have you ever been considerate of Olivia?" Blake was tired and wanted nothing more than to get home, take a hot shower, and put on some clean clothes. If Doris didn't knock soon, Blake was going to do it for her.

"I do know how to have friends, you know." Doris gritted her teeth a little. When Blake raised her hand as if she was going to knock, Doris grabbed it in her own. "I'll do it! Jeez!" She was so tired and really just wanted this day to be over. She raised her hand and tapped softly, but solidly, on the door.

When the lock clicked and the door opened a crack, the two women could see Olivia on the other side rubbing tired eyes and yawning. "Hey, what are you two doing here?"

Doris looked at Blake accusatorily. "I knew we should have called. I'm sorry."

"What?" Blake stared at her friend, incredulous. "Excuse me? Don't act like this was my doing. You said you wanted to check on them. I said okay."

Olivia opened the door all the way and watched the banter like a tennis match. Eventually, she waved her hands in front of her. "Stop. Time out." When they stopped bickering and looked at her, she stepped out of the doorway. "Would you like to come in and fight like an old married couple in here and not in the hallway of my hotel?"

With matching chagrined, but stubborn looks, Doris and Blake entered the room.

Natalia was sitting in the corner with a book in her lap. Setting it aside, she looked up and waved before standing. Walking over, the brunette gave Blake a hug. "What are you two doing here?"

When the hug ended, Blake pulled back and smiled at her. "Seeing how everyone's holding up. You okay?"

Natalia nodded and leaned into Olivia, who automatically wrapped an arm around her.

Doris took in Olivia's worried look, and tilted her head to the side, studying her friend. "And the kids?"

Olivia bit the corner of her bottom lip in what Doris realized was an effort to hold back tears. "Emma had a nightmare earlier, and Ava's worried about Jeffrey. Other than that, they seem okay."

Natalia leaned more into Olivia's embrace and then looked at their friends. "I'm sorry. Do you two want a drink?"

Blake shook her head. "No, we don't want to intrude. We were heading back to my place and thought we'd stop by and check on you all."

“Your place, Blake?” Olivia tried to hide her smirk from Doris, but by the evil look her friend gave her, she’d failed miserably. She felt Natalia bump her with her hip; clearly her partner had caught that, too.

Blake waved her hand and went on as if she didn’t catch the innuendo. “After today, no one should be alone. I couldn’t stand the thought of Doris in that big house all by herself, so…”

“Well, that sounds…nice,” Olivia commented, quirked an eyebrow at Doris, whose only response was to roll her eyes.

Ready for the conversation to be over before Blake caught on to Olivia’s expression, Doris took the redhead by the elbow and urged her out the door under the guise of giving Olivia and Natalia some quality alone time.

Olivia moved away from her partner to lock the door once their friends had left. Turning around and leaning against the door, Olivia chuckled. “Doris will never admit it, but she does like Blake.”

Natalia smiled at her partner. Stepping close, she leaned into Olivia’s soft curves and warm arms. “And after all of a year, you know the ways of lesbian romance?”

Olivia brushed the back of her fingers over the younger woman’s cheek, smiling at the dimples that emerged under her touch. “Love is love.”

Natalia sighed and leaned into the hand caressing her face. For the moment, all of the events of the day drifted away. “Maybe. But I’ve never known anything quite like this.”

Turning her head, Natalia kissed the inside of Olivia’s wrist and felt fingers tug gently at her hair. Pressing closer to the familiar body against her, Natalia let her senses get lost in loving Olivia. All that existed were the soft moans coming from her partner. The world could end right then and there, and she’d be perfectly content. Reaching up, Natalia pulled Olivia into a lingering kiss. Slowly and deliberately, she made love to her mouth, conveying every emotion into that small connection.

Olivia felt her lover’s emotions, each one coming across with unmistakable clarity as she tilted her head and deepened the kiss. She intended to take all night if needed to get to each layer of the message being sent to her. For now, though, she knew Natalia needed this and could feel the desire to connect on the most basic level. She gave it freely, letting Natalia set the pace and tell her what she needed.

Act 3

Blake’s townhouse was exactly as Doris imagined it would be. Dark, rich wood graced the entryway and vases of elegant flowers sat atop tables. A classic Oriental runner extended from the doorway to the stairs on the other side of the foyer. The walls of the foyer were decorated in a variety of family pictures. Like the woman herself, the space exuded warmth and home.

Blake paid Clarissa’s babysitter, a teenage girl who never took her earbuds out during their brief conversation. The girl only said enough to let her know that Clarissa was already asleep. After Blake closed the door behind the sitter, she turned back with a smile and took Doris’s purse and overnight bag setting them aside before guiding her to the den to the right of the foyer.

“Have a seat.” Blake motioned to the sofa and walked through the archway in the back of the room. “Would you like a drink?”

“God, yes! That sounds like a piece of heaven right now.” Doris sank into the lush cushions of the overstuffed sofa and pulled a maroon throw pillow to herself. With a deep sigh of exhaustion, she kicked off her heels.

When Blake returned carrying two snifters of scotch, she stopped short in the doorway. Stretched out on the couch with her head lolled back and her bare feet resting on the carpet, Blake spied one very tired Doris Wolfe. She had to hold back the snicker that threatened to come up when Doris snored softly.

Instead, she approached quietly and carefully set the glasses down on the coffee table. She moved to the sound system in the corner and turned on some soft jazz. She hoped the smooth and silky sounds would pull Doris from her sleep without startling or embarrassing her. If she knew anything about the normally strident woman it was that Doris had a lot of pride. She hated to be seen as weak, but Blake knew she wasn't as tough as she appeared. She had seen the strong and fierce leader of their community break down in the hospital. She had held her as she cried. Doris was an enigma and Blake couldn't help but find her utterly fascinating.

Doris slowly stirred from sleep. It took her a second to realize where she was, and then she remembered the events of the day. Looking around, she saw Blake in the corner behind her, adjusting the sound system. “Hey, sorry for passing out on you.”

Blake shrugged as she turned around. “No one can blame you after the day we've had.” Coming back over to the couch, she picked up one of the glasses of amber liquid and handed it to her friend, then sat down on the opposite corner of the couch with her own drink. She watched as Doris stared down into the glass in her hand as she rolled the liquor around. “You can tell me anything, you know.”

Quirking her eyebrow as she looked up, Doris smiled, hoping to lighten the dark mood she was falling into. “Yeah, if I want to tell the rest of the town. I know your reputation, Marler.” Doris tilted the glass at Blake then brought it back to her own lips to take a healthy swallow, enjoying the burn.

Blake propped her elbow on the back of the couch and rested her head against the palm of her hand. “Maybe that's true with others, Doris, but not when it comes to you. I wouldn't do that to you.”

Doris flinched at the words, feeling chastised for thinking such a thing. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be catty.”

“I understand why you'd say that. But I did keep Natalia's secret about her leaving from Olivia, so it is possible. But I just needed to let you know that I wouldn't do that to you. I care about you.” Even if she'd wanted to, which she didn't, Blake couldn't stop the way her voice dropped on that last sentence. She knew she was trying to convey something more than friendship to Doris. It thrilled her and scared her, but more than anything...it excited her.

Doris leaned forward and set her glass on the coffee table, breaking the tenuous connection. It felt almost like Blake was flirting with her, but she wasn't ready for that. In the midst of everything else, she couldn't deal with that too. There was so much going on lately – the shooting, the pressure of her job,

and most of all, her barely healed broken heart from Anna. Deep in her heart, Doris really wanted to move on, yet she wasn't ready to risk getting hurt again either. She wanted to return the sentiment to Blake, but she feared encouraging it, so she deflected.

Shrugging, she looked back at Blake. "I'll probably need all the friends I can get before everything's over."

Blake was confused. "What do you mean?"

Doris let out a sad sigh. "Well, I knowingly let a madman run around this town and didn't insist on better police coverage for events like this wedding. I knew Edmund was out there." She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair, "I should have done more. All of those people hurt and killed...they're on me, Blake."

Doris looked up to see that Blake was already shaking her head in protest. She continued her thought before Blake could speak. "Okay, maybe not literally, I didn't pull the trigger after all, but that won't stop a lot of the families of innocent people from wanting to point a finger at me. Somebody has to be blamed."

"Maybe they should start with Edmund Winslow." Blake's angry tone surprised Doris.

She sat back on the couch and shrugged. "I can't blame them, though. If Ashlee had been there and if she had been caught in the crossfire, you can damn well bet I'd make sure someone would pay for it. You'd do the same thing."

Blake knew it was true. She looked down at her hand, wrapped around the glass in her lap, and knew without a doubt that if it was Clarissa or her boys who had been killed, she'd do the same thing. It was in that split second of thought that she understood Natalia pulling the trigger. She set her glass down and scooted closer to Doris, who eyed her curiously. Blake simply slipped one of her hands between Doris's arm and side, giving her enough room to pull her friend into a hug.

There was a moment of stiffness and hesitation, but slowly, as Blake stroked a hand along Doris's back, she felt her friend relax. Eventually, she sensed Doris letting go, going so far as to turn her head to the side and rest it on her shoulder. They stayed like that for a while, letting the day fade away and giving them a brief respite from the chaos of the day.

After a while, Blake sighed and pulled back. She waited until Doris looked at her. "It's been a tough day. I know I mentioned junk food and movies, but a good night's sleep may be the best medicine."

Doris started to yawn practically on cue and nodded, smiling a little. "That sounds good, actually."

Blake stood up and stretched. "I think I'm going to go check on Clarissa and maybe call the boys at school. The spare bedroom is set up. I'll show you where it is."

Doris nodded and stood to follow Blake into the foyer where she gathered her bags. After Blake got her settled into the room and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek goodnight, Doris looked around the room and suddenly felt more alone than ever. Looking into her purse, she found her phone. When Ashlee answered, she couldn't stop the tears from coming when she heard her voice.

In the early morning hours, as Doris awoke from a nightmare - the feel of warm blood was still sticky on her skin - she fought the urge to race to Blake's room and check on her. It took a long time for her to close her eyes again. Each time she attempted it, she saw the empty look in Blake's eyes staring back at her and the warm blood on her hands.

Once Shayne had flipped his phone closed after talking to his mom, the night at the hospital seemed endless. He rubbed at his tired eyes and glanced around at the sleepy members of his family and their friends in the waiting area. He smiled as Mindy leaned her head on Phillip's shoulder while continuing to hold on tightly to Beth's hand. The couple hadn't left Mindy's side since the shooting. Shayne shook his head, thinking about how horrible it would be to have your wedding day turn into a massacre. As hard as Dinah dumping him had been, at least she hadn't ruined their wedding, and had only left because she was a murder suspect. At least he'd been able to free himself from that situation by filing an annulment.

Shayne stood and stretched. Exiting the waiting area, he saw a familiar red head holding a young child and talking to a nurse. He tried to say her name without being too loud and disturbing anyone. "Marina."

Looking his way, a smile spread across her face and she walked as fast as she could while trying to carry Henry. When the child bucked in her arms to get down and get to his daddy faster, she put him on his feet. The little boy took off and leapt into Shayne's arms. Marina was close behind him.

She hugged Shayne and gave him a quick kiss. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner to make sure you were okay, but Dad was dealing with the crime scene and without Buzz there--"

He cupped her face in one of his hands and kissed her to stop her rambling. Pulling back, he smiled at her. "It's okay. Really."

Marina took a deep breath to calm her nerves. "Is there any news on Billy yet?"

Shayne ran a hand over his face. "Not yet."

He guided her over to a set of chairs so they could talk. Henry reached his arms out to his mom, so Shayne handed him over. He watched as his son rubbed his eyes and leaned against his mom. "You should get him home. Everything's okay now."

"Oh, yeah, about that. What happened with Edmund?" Marina rummaged in her purse for Henry's sippy cup as she asked the question.

Shayne shrugged. "He was shot in the head, but, evidently, it didn't kill him. He's in surgery. That was the last I heard."

He watched her as she raised two thin eyebrows and handed the cup over to her son. "Really? Who shot him?"

“Believe it or not, it looks like it was Natalia.” He smirked a little at the remembered image of the petite woman glaring down Edmund Winslow. It was like something out of a Western with a shootout at high noon. “The woman was badass.”

“Whatever it takes to free this town of Edmund Winslow is fine by me.” She shook her head and then chuckled. “I just didn’t think Miss Goody Two Shoes had it in her, though. Too bad she didn’t kill him outright, you know?” The little boy in her arms yawned loudly and began to fidget. “Oh, it’s definitely past somebody’s bedtime. I’d better get him home. Call me when you hear something about Billy, okay?”

He nodded and gave her another kiss before sending her on her way. After another good stretch, he walked back to the waiting area and settled in again.

Shayne realized he must have fallen asleep in his chair because he was being rudely jostled awake and had a horrible crick in his neck. He rubbed at the sore muscles and sat up straight. The jostling had come from Bill sitting next to him, who pointed at the doorway where Rick was standing.

Rick eventually walked over and knelt in front of Mindy, taking her hand, as everyone else listened. She started to break down, fearing the worst from Rick’s behavior, but he reached a hand up to cup her cheek and smiled. “Your father’s going to be fine.”

Mindy finally let out the breath she had been holding and tears of relief came along with it. She wrapped her arms gratefully around her fiancé’s neck and held onto him for a long minute, not wanting to let him go. Life seemed so fleeting all of a sudden, and every second wasted was one she’d never get back. It really put things into perspective.

Rick waited until she pulled herself together a little before he spoke to the rest of the family. “Billy’s heart had about an 85% blockage. We had to do a triple bypass, but with exercise and a heart-conscious diet, he should have many more years ahead of him.”

“When can we see him?” Vanessa asked as she wiped away the last of her tears.

“Give us a couple of hours to get him out of recovery and settled into his room. I’ll come out and get you when he’s ready.” He smiled as Vanessa came over to hug him.

Turning back to his bride-to-be, sighing at the thought that they still weren’t married, he watched as Phillip and Beth hugged Mindy.

Phillip looked over and nodded at his best friend. “Good job, buddy. You seem to have a good streak going these days.”

Rick rolled his eyes. “Don’t jinx me!”

All of the friends laughed at the inside joke. Phillip looked at Mindy. “I think we need to head home and get Peyton to bed. Are you going to be okay?”

Mindy dabbed at her still watery eyes. "Are you kidding? I'm great now! You all go on home, and thanks for everything."

Rick and Mindy watched as their best friends gathered up Peyton and headed out. They were followed by Shayne, and Bill told them that he was going to take Lizzie home then come back. Rick turned back to Mindy and gestured behind him. "I guess I better get —"

Without warning, Mindy grabbed Rick by his green surgical scrubs and kissed him solidly. The emotion behind it, after all they had been through that day, drew a whimper from him, and it took everything he had not to let his knees buckle under the force. Mindy broke the kiss. "I love you, and I'm not leaving this hospital until you marry me."

Rick was so shocked that his voice squeaked. "What?"

"You heard me. I love you. I've loved you for what seems like my whole life, and we're getting married. I'm not wasting any more time." She kissed him again before he could protest. "Say 'yes'." All he could do was nod in response, and Mindy smiled. "I'll take that as a 'yes.' I'll find someone who can marry us, and when Dad is awake, we'll do it right there in his room."

"Um, okay." Rick finally found his voice, and as quickly as it had happened, it was over.

"Now, get back to work and check on my dad." She patted his chest and turned to Vanessa to talk about their options for a last-minute ceremony.

Rick was so lost in a daze after her determined kisses and whirlwind planning that when he turned around he didn't see the chair behind him and stumbled into it. He quickly recovered and tried to act nonchalant as he headed back through the swinging doors of the surgical wing.

Being focused on the snickers of his family and friends, he didn't notice his phone had rung until he felt the buzz indicating a voice mail. Pulling the phone from his pocket, he saw it was from his father. He knew the call was a congratulatory call from him and Holly, and he dreaded having to tell them what had happened. As long time friends of the Lewises, he knew it would be tough to hear. He'd call back in a few minutes. Right now, he needed to check on Billy, if for no other reason than to reassure himself.

Somewhere in the deep haze of sleep, Olivia could hear a voice calling her, but she couldn't force her tired eyes open. Her mind refused to catch up to the events that had made her so exhausted in the first place, but it was with startling clarity that she jerked up in bed at the words "go to the hospital."

She blinked hard to clear her vision as Natalia shifted next to her. Her eyes landed on Ava's face, hovering close in the darkness of their room in the suite.

Olivia heard a soft moan as her sudden movements in bed jostled her partner, and kept her voice to a whisper, hoping not to wake her. "Ava, what's wrong?"

Ava sniffled softly and whispered back. "It's okay. Dad's out of surgery. I was leaving so I can be there when he wakes up. I just didn't want you to worry when I wasn't here when you woke up."

Olivia started to push back the covers to get up. "I'll come with you. Just give me a minute."

The younger woman gently pushed her back down on the bed. "No, it's fine. Get some sleep. I'll call if I need anything."

"Are you sure?" Olivia reached for her daughter's hand in the darkness and squeezed it.

Ava squeezed back. "I've got this...sleep."

Olivia carefully slid back under the covers to avoid waking Natalia and watched as Ava found her purse by the door and eased out, barely making a sound. Natalia moved in closer to her, and she instinctively smiled and wrapped her partner up in her arms.

In spite of the madness of the previous day, Frank realized that life in Springfield was already getting back to normal, if the early morning traffic outside Company was any indication. Appetites were certainly in high gear, since it looked like every table was taken.

Lynn was hustling from table to table delivering orders and Marina followed behind, filling coffee cups and taking requests for everything from new bottles of ketchup to extra butter for biscuits. Frank went around the bar to get a to-go cup and filled it with coffee.

Marina forced a smile as she blew a strand of hair out of her eyes and found a clean set of silverware for someone who'd dropped theirs earlier. "Hey, Dad. Did you get some sleep?"

He took a sip of coffee and nodded. "Yep. You?"

Marina set a tray on the counter, and talked as she filled cups with juice, coffee, and soda. "Much better once Shayne came home."

Frank stopped his cup in mid-sip. "How's Billy?"

"If a triple bypass can be considered good, then good. He'll probably be in the hospital for a couple of weeks recovering, but the good news is that Rick and Mindy are still going to get married." She smiled and shrugged. "Romantic, huh? They're not letting anything get in the way."

He nodded and stared down into his coffee cup. "Yep."

She hoisted a tray of food and drinks onto her shoulder. "Do you mind getting some coffee for that guy at the end of the bar? I'll be right back."

A few moments later, Frank had refreshed the customer's cup, as well as his own, and watched as Marina weaved around Lynn to get behind the bar.

Marina sighed when she leaned against the counter, finally able to stop moving for a minute. "I haven't seen it this busy in a long time...at least not at breakfast time." She brushed her hands off on a towel at her waist before speaking again. "So what's on the agenda today?"

He lifted the cup up and smiled. "Oh, just getting my battery charged before heading over to the park." He grimaced before saying the next part because he knew it would set Marina off. "I questioned Anna yesterday and she told me that both she and Jeffrey had fired their guns, so I have Eleni down there with the forensics team, seeing what evidence they can find. If it wasn't Natalia who shot Edmund, I want to know who did."

She didn't look at Frank at the mention of her mother's name, but instead found her own coffee cup beside the register and focused her attention on it, wincing at it when she took a sip. She always hated cold coffee. Reaching for the pot, she poured some fresh into it in order to make it bearable. "It all seems pretty cut and dried to me. It's obvious that Edmund went nuts and opened fire. Case closed."

"True, but you know as well as anyone that we have to cover all our bases. There was more than one gun fired yesterday and a lot of people were caught in the crossfire. We need to piece together what happened as thoroughly as we can." He pushed off the counter and started to leave. On the way out from behind the bar, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

Marina pulled him in for a hug and then looked up at him. "By the way, have you heard anything about Edmund's condition? Did he pull through?"

He pulled his cell from his pocket to double-check that he hadn't missed a message. "No, nothing yet. I'd better get going."

She wiped down the bar in front of her and waved as he left. "Okay, let me know if you hear anything and good luck."

Frank was barely to the street corner when his phone rang. He squinted at the reflection of the bright sunlight on his phone, cursing that he had left his sunglasses at home. Raising the phone to his ear, he spoke into it. "Cooper here."

Remy's voice answered, the words hurried. "Hey, Frank. I wanted to let you know that we got word that Edmund's out of surgery. He made it through, but he's not conscious yet. There's more bad news. They weren't able to remove the bullet. They kept trying for it, but his blood pressure kept dropping."

Frank sighed, not bothering to hide his lackluster response to Remy's news. "Great." He knew that without a bullet, Eleni's job would be harder. Even though no one really cared if Edmund lived or died, they did need all of the details covered, including knowing whose bullet was lodged in the man's brain.

Frank crossed the street before he instructed Remy on what to do next. "I'm heading to the park to tell Eleni the news. Do me a favor and organize a security detail around Edmund's room. Also, post security at all the entrances and exits, including loading docks and stairwells to the roof. I don't want to take any chances with that sneaky son of a bitch."

"You got it, boss. I'll call if there's any other news."

“Thanks.” Frank ended the call and jogged the rest of the way to the park.

The dark, heavy fog of the anesthesia made Jeffrey feel like a baby elephant was sitting on his head. He groaned as a wave of nausea hit him. Rolling a little to his side, he vomited over the edge of the bed. Pain at the sudden movement ripped through him and he groaned again. Within seconds, a nurse entered the room. He could hear the muttering of voices, but he was so groggy from the anesthesia that he couldn't make anything out as he passed out completely.

He wasn't sure how long he was unconscious. It could have been seconds or hours, but when he woke this time, he didn't puke. He did feel a stabbing pain all over his body though. With a deep breath, he cleared his mind and refocused on his senses. Someone else was in the room. He could hear the soft, even breathing and smell the faint scent of perfume.

Struggling to open his eyes, it took him a moment before he could focus on the blurry image seated next to his bed, though he couldn't tell who it was. When the image leaned forward, he could make out short dark hair, and when his hand was taken in a soft, gentle grasp, he knew. “Ava.”

Jeffrey rolled his head back and closed his eyes, grateful to see his daughter's face and know she wasn't hurt by Edmund.

For her part, Ava was worried at her father's reaction. “Hey. How do you feel?”

“Like reheated shit.” He chuckled. When he looked back at her, his vision was better and he could make out her smiling face.

“You look like it, too,” she joked.

“Thanks,” he grunted back. “So, what happened?” He didn't remember much that had happened after he rushed the stage, except the agonizing pain flaring up one of his legs.

Ava scooted the chair forward so she could lean back, but continue holding his hand. “You were shot.”

He chuckled again. “I remember that part.”

“In the femoral artery.” She paused and swallowed around the lump in her throat. “You almost didn't make it. The bullet came in at an angle, so it hit your femur and cracked it. That's why the surgery took so long. The orthopedic surgeon said it should heal pretty quickly though, since it was just a crack. But you will have to wear a leg brace for a while.”

He tried to lighten his daughter's spirits. “It takes more than a bullet to kill your old man.”

“Apparently, since I thought you were already dead.” Ava mentally kicked herself the moment the words were out of her mouth. She hadn't talked to him yet for this very reason. She was Olivia's daughter and holding her feelings in was not her strong suit.

He sighed and looked up at the dull white ceiling. “I'm sorry, Ava. I...”

“You should have told me. I came here for your funeral. I mourned you. If you should have trusted anyone, you should have trusted me.” There...she had said it. She voiced the feelings that had been eating at her ever since she had found out he was still alive.

Jeffrey knew he didn't have an excuse. There was nothing he could say to change what had happened. He'd thought by disappearing to chase his nemesis he was doing the right thing and keeping all of his family safe. Little had he known that Edmund had been here in Springfield, right under their noses, the whole time. “I know, baby. You're right. All of the saying 'I'm sorry' in the world won't take away your hurt.”

Ava bowed her head. There was more she wanted to say, but now wasn't the time. She looked up at her father and saw his eyes slowly blinking and knew a release of pain medication was probably kicking in. “Don't worry about it now. Get some sleep. We'll talk more later.”

She moved to stand up and leave the room, but a firm grip on her hand held her still. The words were faint, but she still heard them. “Stay with me.”

A single tear slipped down her cheek as she sank back into the hard plastic chair. She held his hand and waited with him. When she heard him snoring, she leaned over to kiss him on the cheek before leaving.

“I found another one over here, Doc!”

Eleni glanced up from her camera where she'd been flipping through images to ensure she had covered the scene. Tim, a sandy-haired young man, stood on a ladder that was partially hidden by the low-hanging limbs of an oak tree.

She crossed the small staging area where the wedding would have taken place, careful not to step in the marked evidence and blood spatters, to make her way over to Tim and several other members of her team who were looking for evidence in the small grove of trees behind the stage.

Frank had informed her that there was a possibility that several guns had been fired that day, so Eleni had set her team on a mission to find any and all embedded bullets and casings they could. So far, nearly twenty casings had been found, but barely a third as many bullets. Apparently, Edmund had been a good shot because most bullets seemed to have ended up in victims.

“Let me see.” Eleni motioned for Tim to step down. She climbed the ladder, checked the angle of the bullet lodged in the tree, and followed the line of sight back out over the grounds. “Hm. Tim, have Lacey bring me some marker string – a different color than we've used so far.”

She waited as the eager young man ran off to find the tech, and looked out over the sea of colored string, flags, and other markers. The only way she'd be sure where this bullet came from would be to mark it off with the string and follow the line of sight back to the grounds. Her gut instinct told her that it wasn't from the expected directions of Edmund, Anna, or Jeffrey, but she wanted to be absolutely sure first.

A few minutes later, she was on the ground with the string in hand. Looking around, there was only one conclusion she could come to. "Definitely not from the expected locations."

Glancing over at Tim, she smiled. "We have something different here. Dig it out and bag it."

He nodded and grabbed his supplies. "Yes, ma'am!"

Eleni found a chair that had been left behind from the wedding and sat down with her notepad to jot down her thoughts and findings so far. Later tonight, she'd spend time in the lab and put it all in order. On the phone, Frank had expressed that his biggest concern was to figure out who shot Edmund.

"Hey!" The familiar voice came from behind her. She turned slightly to see Frank watching her, squinting slightly in the morning sun.

She smiled up at him. "Hey, yourself. I would say 'good morning' but this isn't exactly a great way to start the day."

"Very true." He stepped a little to the side of her to stand in the shade, and looked at the scene. "I hope you can find some good news for me in all of this."

She glanced back up at him after jotting something down in her notebook. "The good news is that we've recovered quite a few casings and a handful of bullets. That should give us a good idea of who all was shooting - and at whom."

"That's really good news, Eleni. With a civilian firing a gun, we have to be sure where she was in all of this." He rubbed at his furrowed brow, thinking about Natalia's face after the shooting. She had seemed so resolute, but kind of lost, too. The thought of it hurt.

She tilted her head and regarded him closely. "You mean your friend, Natalia?"

He sighed at the use of the word "friend," but he wasn't ready to correct his ex-wife. Though there was really no correcting to be done, just some history that Eleni didn't know about. He and Natalia really were friends. "Yeah. She's a good person. The thought of her shooting someone...anyone...even someone as horrible as Edmund Winslow, just...I can't imagine it."

She reached for his hand, remembering the familiar comfort of it. "I hope I have something good to tell you soon. In fact, I'll work on this tonight, okay?"

Frank ran his thumb across the back of her hand. He had always loved holding her hand. "You work too hard."

She shrugged. "It's what I do now."

He knelt down next to her, letting her hand go and draping his arm across the back of the chair. "I'll tell you what. If you let me bring you dinner tonight, I won't nag you about working too late."

Eleni couldn't help but smile. He had always been so thoughtful of her, and she hadn't exactly been a good steward of his kindness over the years. Maybe it was time to try to make up for that. "Deal."

With Ava getting the good news about Jeffrey, Olivia and Natalia had packed up the few belongings they had at The Beacon and had gotten ready to head back out to the farmhouse, while Rafe and Leyla took the girls downstairs for some ice cream in the restaurant. Ava had taken a short nap, and now was having lunch with her mom and Natalia in their hotel room, telling them about Jeffrey's injuries.

"He's recovering quickly, so he may be released soon." She looked down, contemplating something and unsure if she wanted to bring it up. Eventually, she just said it because her mom always knew when she wasn't completely honest. "When he gets out, I think I want to go help him for a while."

Ava watched her mom's reaction. Olivia nodded sympathetically. "Of course, honey; I don't blame you."

Natalia, on the other hand, twitched in her seat. Ava could see how uncomfortable the other woman was with the idea, no doubt because of what she'd learned about Olivia and Jeffrey's history. But that didn't change the fact that he was still her father. There was just something unbreakable about a parent/child bond. No matter what they did or where they went, they always felt bound to each other. Certainly, Natalia could understand that and couldn't fault her for wanting Jeffrey in her life.

She watched as Natalia closed her eyes tight before standing and gathering their empty plates together to return to the service cart.

Ava sighed and stood. "Thanks for lunch, Mom."

Olivia followed her oldest daughter to the door and hugged her. "Drop by for dinner?"

Ava rolled her eyes and tried to lighten the mood. "It's not like I'm moving back to San Francisco." She spoke in a lower tone, keeping it just between the two of them. "He's alone. No one should be alone."

Olivia nodded and closed the door as Ava smiled and walked off. Turning, she looked at Natalia who was again seated at the table. The dark eyes weren't really focused on anything, and she could tell that her partner was in a world all her own.

She walked up behind Natalia and squeezed her shoulders. Almost immediately, Natalia relaxed into the touch, a soft moan escaping. Olivia smiled at the response. "What's on your mind?"

"Family," Natalia quietly muttered.

Olivia ran her hands down Natalia's upper arms and leaned over, letting her chin rest gently on her partner's head. Natalia lifted her hands until their fingers twined together. Olivia squeezed the fingers held between her own. "When is your mind not on family? I think it's a bit of an obsession for you." Both chuckled because they knew it was true. There was little more important to Natalia than that. "So, what about family?"

Natalia sighed. "I wish Jeffrey wasn't a part of it."

The conviction of the statement brought Olivia up short. She knew she needed to respond to it somehow, but she couldn't seem to find the words.

Sensing Olivia's concern, Natalia continued, "I know that's terrible of me. He's Ava's father, but...he hurt you, Olivia. I've dealt with a lot of things in my life, but I think after yesterday I learned something new about myself."

Olivia was almost afraid to ask. "What's that?"

"No one hurts someone I love." A long moment of silence passed before Natalia continued, "I don't feel guilty about what I did. I'd do it again...a hundred times over."

The implications of Natalia's words momentarily shocked Olivia. It seemed from the moment they had met nearly two years ago that she could see something in the other woman, carefully hidden below the surface. There was a fire and passion, layered in eternal optimism and genuine faith, that Olivia admired so much.

She slipped her arms around Natalia's neck and softly brushed her lips along Natalia's ear, lightly kissing her on the neck. "I know, and I understand. Why do you think that gun was in my purse to begin with? Why do you think you had to stop me from shooting Phillip that time? Because this is our family. These are our children." She reached around to coax Natalia's chin towards her so they were eye to eye. "And you're mine. No one will ever separate us or hurt us."

Tears sprang to Natalia's eyes. She turned in her chair to face Olivia and wrapped a hand possessively in Olivia's hair, pulling her down into a passionate kiss meant to claim her partner and show their love for each other. It was an agreement, a pact.

For a quiet moment, they held each other close, foreheads resting together intimately, light kisses brushing lips. Finally, Olivia pulled back and took Natalia's hand. "Come on, let's take our family home."

Act 4

Anna flashed her badge at Johnson, the rookie officer on duty outside of Edmund's room. An announcement had finally been made on the local news once Rick had informed Doris that Edmund Winslow was in a coma, and they were unsure of when, or if, he'd ever regain consciousness. But that news didn't stop Frank from insisting on a security detail remaining at the hospital, indefinitely if necessary.

When the rookie nodded at her, she pushed open the door to Edmund's room. The beeping of monitors and the over-sanitized smell of the room didn't detract from the sense of menace Edmund projected, still smirking even as he drifted in his mystery limbo.

That expression evoked a primal urge from Anna; the urge to punch, hit, and kick him until he experienced payback for all the pain he had inflicted on others was so strong that it made her dizzy. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply to center herself again. A calm settled over her and she opened her eyes.

A crooked smile curled her mouth. "We got you, you sick bastard. You can't hurt anyone else anymore."

Purposefully, she turned and left the room. She knew the nightmare wouldn't truly be over until he was dead or locked up. For now, though, she would content herself with the knowledge that he wasn't going anywhere.

Billy's hospital room was tight and cramped, filled with the Lewises and even some Spauldings, too. After some begging by Rick, some funding promises for the new pediatric wing by Phillip, and lots of glad-handing and agreements by Doris, the hospital director had reluctantly agreed to allow that many people into one small room after visiting hours.

Doris took her place near the door to the room, with Rick and Mindy in front of her. The rest of the group gathered around Billy's bed to witness the culmination of the event that had been harshly interrupted a couple of days ago.

Over the bed, Shayne caught Bill's eye and mouthed, "Where's Josh?"

Bill shrugged and held up his cell phone, then shook his head, trying to indicate that he hadn't heard from Josh either.

As soon as Doris started, though, a knock was heard on the other side of the door. The knob turned, the door opening a crack, allowing Josh to poke his head into the room. "Hi!" he announced in his usually cheery tone. "Did we miss the good stuff yet?"

The ceremony was delayed while everyone hugged Josh and Reva after they entered the room fully. Billy piped up in a rough bellow, "What the hell took you so long? A man could die of a heart attack around here before you show up."

Vanessa swatted him. "That's not funny!"

If it wasn't for the pain that it caused, he would have laughed. Instead, all he could do was smile. "Oh, it is a little bit, sugar." He puckered up for a kiss from his wife, who could only roll her eyes and indulge him.

Josh came closer to the side of the bed, acting a bit anxious. He scrubbed at the stubble on his chin. "Actually, we would have been here sooner, but there was a little bit of trouble with the truck."

If he could have, Billy would have pushed himself up in the bed. At best, all he could do is glare at Josh. "What did you do to my truck?"

Backing up with a laugh, Josh raised his hands. "Oh no, it wasn't me. It seems *somebody* forgot to put the oil cap back on after getting it all ready for me to drive off into the sunset with my girl. So, we had to walk about two miles to the nearest gas station and get a tow."

Billy eyed Josh cautiously. "She's okay then?"

The younger Lewis rocked back on his heels. "Oh, she's fine. I'll just have to remember to check behind you, old man, since you seem to be losing your memory."

He scoffed at Josh. "Eh, at least I'm not losing my good looks, like you."

The joke made everyone in the room laugh uproariously, and after a careful, but heartfelt hug between the brothers, everyone settled down for the ceremony.

While there were many wonderful things about living with Natalia, one of those for Olivia had to be Natalia's ability to maintain a routine. Olivia rolled out of bed and immediately smelled coffee and bacon, and she smiled at the feeling of happiness it gave her. The sense of home and peace seemed to follow Natalia no matter where she was or what she was doing.

In spite of the madness of the last couple of days, life had gone on for the Spencer-Rivera family. Olivia slipped on some comfortable clothes and thought about her family. There were moments where she still found it hard to believe that she had gone from it being just her and Emma against the world to having this big family, with a loving partner and new daughter. It was almost overwhelming, but she wouldn't trade it for anything. The shooting had given her a new perspective. She always knew she'd die inside if something happened to her kids or to Natalia, but she felt the potential reality of it at the park the other day. And one thing she was certain of now, she had been right all along. She wouldn't survive losing any of them.

Brushing her teeth, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. "You'll just have to make sure that never happens, Spencer."

Downstairs, Natalia stood over the stove as she moved bacon around the pan. On another burner she had pancakes cooking, and on a third, some scrambled eggs. Nineteen years as a single mother had made her adept at multitasking, so caring for her partner and their suddenly large family was second nature. She stirred the eggs, flipped the pancakes, and removed the bacon without really thinking about the details.

Natalia glanced over her shoulder to make sure her girls were fine. Emma sat quietly at the table, drawing and picking up Francesca's bottle whenever she dropped it. The little girl, like the rest of them, had been unusually quiet. After coming home from The Beacon, Emma had played on the Wii with Rafe and Leyla for a little while, only half-heartedly joining in the fun; it hadn't taken long for her to crash. Shadow had followed her around, seeming to sense that something was wrong. For the first time, they had allowed the puppy to stay in Emma's room, thinking it would be good for both of them. Natalia was thankful the little girl had slept through the night soundly and hadn't experienced another nightmare. She hoped it was a one-time thing, and that with time and distance, along with plenty of love and support, that Emma wouldn't be so affected.

She couldn't say the same for herself. She had awoken in the wee hours of the morning and hadn't been able to go back to sleep. Images of the look on Edmund's face and the metallic glint of the gun in her hand kept playing through her mind.

A knock at the kitchen door broke her out of her thoughts. Wiping her hands on a towel, she went to the door and looked through the curtain.

With a sigh, she turned off the alarm and opened the door. "Morning, Father Ray."

The priest tilted his head down slightly in a show of humility, but a smirk remained. "Natalia, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Father. Thank you for your concern." She knew proper protocol was to invite him in; however, she really wasn't up for the potential confrontation. She and her family had just returned home. They needed time alone to get back to a normal routine and ensure a sense of safety. So, she stood there defending the entrance to her home by blocking the doorway. She didn't intend to be rude, but she did want to send a message.

"That's good, Natalia. I'm glad. I heard about what happened at Rick and Mindy's wedding." He seemed to pause, as if thinking of other matters. "Such a shame to have a holy union ripped apart by selfish grandstanding and violence."

The comment crawled under Natalia's skin. She wasn't sure if he meant it the way it sounded, but she didn't care to humor him either. "Is there something I can help you with, Father?"

"Considering what's happened, several of us are going around offering our counseling services to those affected by the shooting," he answered with a smile.

"Us?" Natalia inquired.

"Yes, I believe you know Dr. Felicia Boudreau and..." he hesitated, "of course, Sister Anne."

The addition of Sr. Anne seemed like an afterthought to Natalia, and that bothered her. "I appreciate your concern, Father Ray. I'll let you know if I need anything."

"I would be happy to offer a listening ear to you, Natalia, during this trying time." He pushed a little.

She tilted her head to the side. "To me and my family, or just to me?"

He swayed back seemingly caught by surprise at the question, and when he couldn't respond right away, she forced a smile and continued, "Again, thank you for your concern. Olivia and I will contact Sister Anne if our family needs counseling of a spiritual nature. Good day, Father."

When he stiffly nodded his head and stepped back to leave, she closed the door and turned to lean against it, closing her eyes briefly. When she opened her eyes, Olivia was standing in the pass through between the kitchen and living room, a sad but proud smile on her face. Olivia stepped forward, tilting her head to the side. "Are you okay?"

"You heard?" Natalia watched as a freshly bathed Olivia walked closer, her hair still damp.

Olivia nodded. "If you need to talk to him, I understand."

When Olivia was close enough to touch, Natalia put her hands on her partner's shoulders. She ran her hands over them, feeling the strength from Olivia flow into her. "I know you understand, and I love you for it. But, no, I don't need to talk to him. What I need right now is a kiss."

Gently and reverently, Olivia complied. Pulling back she looked into dark eyes. "Now that's a much better way to start the day."

Natalia hummed from the feel of the kiss. "Mmmmm, absolutely."

Moving back to the neglected stove, Natalia rescued the food, catching the pancakes just in time before they got too dark. Within a few minutes, the kitchen was bustling as Rafe had woken up and was making his presence known.

He sat down at the kitchen table and dug into his food with abandon. "This is so good, Ma!"

Olivia saw the proud smile that came over Natalia's face and couldn't help but smile herself. "Better than Army rations, I take it."

"You have no idea!" He talked around a mouthful of food.

"Rafe, don't talk with your mouth full," Emma admonished.

He swallowed before speaking again. "Sorry, Munchkin."

Leyla entered the kitchen and everyone stopped short when they saw her dressed in a nice pair of pumps, slacks, and crisp salmon-colored button down. She noted the silence, but it didn't stop her from pouring herself a cup of coffee. Finally, she turned to her family, laughing at having caught them off guard. "What?"

Natalia waved a hand in her direction. "Why are you so dressed up?"

The younger Rivera woman leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping her coffee. She shrugged nonchalantly. "I need to head into town to take care of something. In fact, when I'm done, I may do a little shopping. What do you say, Emma? Would you like to go with me?"

Emma spun around in her seat and perked up. "Really?"

Leyla smiled at Emma, then looked over at Natalia and seeing her surprised look, she winked at her sister. "Sure. A girl's day out. It'll be fun."

Natalia hesitated, not sure if she was ready to let Emma out of her sight. "Ummm..."

Leyla leaned closer, pretending she was snagging a piece of bacon, so she could whisper to Natalia. "It'll take her mind off things."

Natalia looked at Olivia and shrugged a little, looking for a sign that would tell her whether to acquiesce or not.

Olivia got the message loud and clear. "That sounds like a wonderful idea!" She jokingly poked at Emma's ribs.

"Mom!!!" Emma complained about being picked on, but couldn't stop giggling from being tickled.

Olivia stopped the poking to smile at her daughter. "That reminds me. Your Ma and I have some important planning to do for our wedding, like picking out dresses and stuff. Do you want to help?"

Emma's face lit up like it was Christmas morning. "Really?"

Natalia smiled and nodded as Emma looked between her two mommies. "Yep! And I'd say that's a big step up from flower girl, too."

"Cool! When do we get to go?" Emma asked excitedly.

Olivia looked seriously at her daughter. "I'll tell you what, if you go with Leyla and be good all day, maybe we can go this afternoon. I can leave work early."

Emma enthusiastically agreed. She quickly finished her breakfast and put some food in Shadow's bowl, before scooting upstairs to brush her teeth. In a few minutes, she and Leyla were gone. Olivia helped Natalia wash up the pots and pans from breakfast while Rafe finished eating. He was absorbed in a second helping of pancakes, but he couldn't ignore the hushed conversation and sly looks that passed between his mom and Olivia.

He smiled when he saw his mom lean into Olivia and say something that made the older woman laugh. He didn't need to know what she had said, nor did he really care. All that mattered was that his mom was genuinely happy.

Natalia looked over her shoulder at her son, who appeared to be amused by whatever he was thinking about. "And what are you smirking about, young man?"

Getting up from the table, he picked up his empty plate and took it to the sink where his mom and Olivia stood. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. "Nothing, Ma. Just happy to see you happy."

He pulled away and headed for the backdoor. Natalia turned, following him. "Hey, where are you going?" She had thought that the two of them could have some time alone together since Olivia would be going into work for a little while and his friends were in California.

Rafe found his sunglasses and looked back at her, shrugging. "I thought I'd spend some time with Dad. I think he'd like to hear what I'm doing."

Tears sprang to Natalia's eyes and she was grateful when Olivia reached out and grabbed her hand. "Of course, baby. I'm sorry."

He smiled at her and then went to hug her. Pulling her close, he made her a promise. "Tomorrow. Anything you want to do. What do you say?"

Natalia pulled back and regarded her grown son. It didn't matter how much she reminded herself that he was all grown up, when she looked at him, she still saw a four-year-old who was crying over a skinned knee. She put a hand against his cheek. "It's a date."

After Rafe left, the house was suddenly, eerily quiet, except for Francesca's occasional jabbering. The feeling was strangely unsettling.

It seemed like their lives kept spinning out of their control, swinging between these maddening highs and lows. Olivia felt a wave of guilt come over her at the thought of the latest low. She had wanted so much to protect Natalia. The gun should have been in her hand, and she should have pulled the trigger, not Natalia. She could almost see the weight of the action holding her partner down, and it gripped at her heart.

Moving in behind Natalia, she wrapped her arms around the narrow waist. "I think I'll stay home today."

Natalia leaned to the side and looked back over her shoulder. "No, you need to go into work and get back to a routine. We all do. You don't have to hover over me."

Olivia gasped and pretended to be shocked, raising her hands defensively and took a half-step back. "I do not hover."

Natalia turned and smiled. "Okay, how about sweetly protect?"

Olivia leaned back in and wrapped her arms back around Natalia's waist. "Much better."

Natalia leaned up and kissed her gently. "I love your protectiveness. I really do, but I'm okay." Olivia quirked an eyebrow, and Natalia nodded her head. "Really."

Olivia narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, not sure if she should believe her or not. She knew her partner though. Sometimes she needed space to clear her head. "Okay, fine. I'll take you at your word."

Natalia kissed her again. They were both relaxing into the kiss when a loud clatter made them jump apart. Looking back at the table over Olivia's shoulder, Natalia saw the huge mess Francesca had made with her applesauce. When the baby realized that her favorite food was on the floor, she began to cry in earnest, ending the tender moment. Sighing, Olivia grabbed some paper towels and began to clean up after her daughter.

The morning rush at Company was over. Frank sat quietly at a table, looking over some paperwork to fill out on the shooting. He yawned, feeling his age creep up on him. Hanging out on the job all night wasn't like it used to be. There was still a thrill that kept the adrenaline pumping, but now when the rush wore off, he crashed harder than he remembered from his younger days.

Of course, he'd had good reason to be up late last night. Spending time with Eleni had been like old times, if he'd been able to forget that they were in a forensics lab anyway. He'd certainly never thought he'd be looking at his ex-wife from across the room as she set up a mock-up of the scene at the park.

He had joked with her about it being easier with the computer simulation, but she'd given him a cool stare. She'd explained that she enjoyed the manual data analysis and didn't trust programs to not screw up. She knew she could trust her eyes, but she wasn't so sure about a computer chip.

When he hadn't been running through numbers with her and helping her with the mock-up, they'd sat around her desk eating barely warm burgers and greasy French fries. He hadn't been able to help looking at her last night with a sense of awe. She looked so much the same as when they were married, but she was more self-assured and confident. She wore it well, and he admitted to admiring her tenacity.

"What's that strange look for?" Marina's voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he looked up in time to see her pour him another cup of coffee.

"Strange, how?" He shook his head.

The redhead shrugged. "It wasn't really a smile, but it kind of was. Dare I say, wistful?"

He picked up his mug and leaned back in his chair. "I don't do wistful."

She shrugged again. Teasing him a little, she had a feeling something more was up, but clearly her father wasn't about to divulge it yet. "If you say so." She slid down into the chair across from him. "So, any more news on Edmund?"

Frank put his mug down and ran his hands through his hair. "No, nothing new. He's still in a coma. No one knows how long it'll last or if he'll ever recover. I had a security detail put around the hospital so no one will get in or out of his wing without us knowing. I'm not taking any chances."

She nodded. "That's a good idea."

The bell over the door rang and both Frank and Marina looked over. Anna entered and headed their way. "Hey, boss!"

Frank smiled up at her. "Well, look what the cat dragged in. How's the shoulder?"

The comment caused Anna to rub at it and then wince at the tenderness still there. "That bullet may have barely gotten me, but it sure did leave a mark. I'm just glad it wasn't worse."

He nodded at her. "That's good. So, what has you here at this time of the morning?"

Anna smiled at Marina then looked at Frank. "Aside from the fabulous coffee, I actually came to find you, Frank. I was just down in the lab and Eleni said she needs to see you ASAP."

He quickly stuffed his files into a folder and gathered everything together. "Well, that sounds promising." Marina had taken his coffee and put it in a to-go cup. He waved to her as he left. "Thanks, kiddo."

Eleni leaned over her notepad and rechecked her figures. She was almost one hundred percent positive that she was correct, but that didn't stop her from running the numbers again. A little while ago she'd even had Anna, who had just dropped by, check behind her. She had always relied on her own gut instincts, but for the final analysis, she confirmed her findings on the computer. She tapped away on her keyboard, entering in the formulas, and running it all a final time.

"This has to be right." She clapped her hands together and smiled. If she'd had some music on, she'd dance around the room.

Swinging the doors to the lab open and running down the hall, she smiled brightly when she saw Frank coming from the other end.

He saw the ecstatic look on her face. "I take it you have some good news for me."

"Wonderful news, Frank." She pulled him back into the lab and dragged a chair over for him, sitting it next to her, so he could see the computer screen simulations. "Check it out."

With the press of a button, a series of animated images moved across the screen and data scrolled down both sides. She smiled and paused the play back. "See, right there? This is Edmund. These lines are his bullets."

Frame-by-frame, Frank watched as the events of the shooting unfolded. The display clearly showed that every bullet that had hit a civilian had been fired by Edmund. That was good news because it meant that no innocent bystanders had been hurt by friendly fire. As the simulation played through, a bullet from the crowd and two bullets from either side of Edmund on the stage appeared to fire practically simultaneously.

Frank pointed at the screen. "Is that Natalia?"

Eleni nodded and then pointed to two different spots on the screen. "And this one is Jeffrey O'Neill and the other one's Anna."

Eleni rewound the images by mere seconds, and adjusted the angle so the image showed it as if Frank was in the crowd standing in Natalia's place. A line in bright red moved off to the left and above Edmund's head.

He sat there with his mouth open and a smile on his face. "She didn't shoot him."

Eleni shook her head. "Nope."

"Who did?" Frank looked at her.

Eleni adjusted the image again so Frank could see for himself. "I got a hold of Edmund's head scans and studied the trajectory. The bullet came from his left side and entered his head at a distinct angle. There's no way it could have been from Anna either; the angle was all wrong. The only possibility is that Jeffrey shot him."

“And Edmund got a shot off at Jeffrey. That’s how he got wounded.” Frank shook his head in amazement.

Eleni smiled at him. “Yep!”

He laughed and looked at her. “That’s great work, Eleni. You did it all so fast, too. Very impressive.”

Tilting her head to the side, she looked at him sweetly and it wasn’t lost on him. “I had great help.” Leaning over in her chair, she kissed him quickly, almost shyly. “Thank you.”

Leyla stepped back from her niece, tilting her head to one side and then the next, regarding her handiwork.

Emma was about to jump out of her skin with excitement. Sitting in the chair at the store, she felt all grown up. All around her were brightly colored tubes and containers of makeup. On the counter in front of her, a bunch of them were set out.

Aunt Leyla refused to let her look in the mirror just yet, not until she was finished. The waiting was making Emma giggly and antsy. She hadn’t had this much fun in a long time.

“Come on, when can I look?” Emma whined.

Leyla picked up a tube of lipstick, put it down, and then picked up another one. “I’m almost finished. Here, do your lips like this.” She puckered her lips to show Emma how, then put some lipstick on the girl.

A couple of college boys passed behind Leyla, staring at her; one of them turned and walked backwards like he didn’t want to lose sight of the pretty girl. “Nice...very nice,” he called.

Leyla rolled her eyes and it made Emma giggle. “Boys!”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Emma couldn’t help but ask.

“I have boys who are friends, yes, but no boyfriend,” Leyla deflected and looked at her eye shadow options. Picking one up, she told Emma to close her eyes.

Emma kicked her feet nervously. She wanted to ask an important question, but she was afraid. Her stomach knotted up and she let out a deep breath. She was glad her eyes were closed because if Aunt Leyla got mad at her for asking, she didn’t want to see it. “Have you ever kissed a boy?”

After a long silence, Emma dared to open her eyes. Leyla was half-smiling at her. “Aren’t you a little young to be thinking about things like that?”

Emma quirked a defiant eyebrow that made her look like the spitting image of her mother. “I am wearing makeup, so I’m not that young. Besides, I’m ten years old. I’m not a child anymore.”

The little girl's tough exterior suddenly crumbled into a pout and Leyla couldn't help but feel her heart go out to her. After all she'd been through lately, Emma needed to regain some strength and confidence. If a little makeup did the trick, then so be it.

She hugged Emma to her. "Of course you're not a child anymore. But...you don't have to be a child to love chocolate ice cream. What do you say?"

Emma nodded enthusiastically and jumped off the stool. Leyla bought a tube of lip gloss for Emma, and gave the cashier a little extra money for the makeup she'd used. The lip gloss would be a good starter for the girl. As they were about to leave, Emma grabbed her hand and stopped her. "Wait! I didn't get to see what I look like."

Going back to the mirror, Leyla picked it up and handed it to her niece. Emma's eyes got huge when she saw her face. "Whoa!"

Rafe ran his fingers over the engraved letters on his father's plaque before making the Sign of the Cross and sitting on the step to the side of the grave. He bowed his head and thought about the past year.

In boot camp, he had thrown himself into the routine, pushing his body hard to forget the life he had left behind. Those last few months in Springfield had been a tough time, dealing with the changes of getting out of prison and trying to acclimate to a normal life, then all the fighting with his mom. The average person would have assumed it was exciting to get out of jail, but Rafe had heard the horror stories about how many ended up back in prison after having a chance at freedom. The outside world wasn't exactly conducive to enabling people to get back on their feet. To pay bills or have a place of your own, you had to have money. To have money, you had to have a job. To have a job, you had to have a clean record. It was a vicious cycle he feared falling into.

The Army really had been his only choice, or at least the only choice that his pride could accept. To escape the statistics, he'd had to go. Now, he had a good record in the military. He had achieved some of the best scores among his peers, and he was on track to having a long career.

He sighed and looked at the stone with his father's name. *If I last that long*, he thought worriedly.

One tour, and he had already seen more than he'd wanted. He'd signed up during a war, though, and he'd known the risk he was taking. If he managed to make it out physically unscathed, he knew there would be other scars that couldn't be seen. When the gunfire had started at the wedding, he had realized that cold, hard fact. His experience in the military was going to remain with him whether or not he stayed to make a career out of it. At least if he stayed, he finally had a chance to change the direction of his life and he had honor. He had earned his father's name and made up for all his bad choices.

A honking car horn caught his attention and he looked toward the church parking lot. He smiled when he saw Frank step out of his car and wave. He stood and brushed off his jeans before jogging over to him.

Frank gave the young man a quick hug and a pat on the shoulder. "Hey, buddy. How's it going?"

Rafe shrugged. "Considering everything, it's good." He motioned over his shoulder at the graveyard. "I thought I'd come visit for a bit."

Frank nodded knowingly, hearing a little sadness in his voice. He decided to lift Rafe's spirits by telling him the good news first. "Well, I have some good news. I was actually headed out to the farmhouse to tell you all, but I saw you over here and thought I'd stop. Look, I know your mom was worried because she thought she shot Edmund. Anyway, I just came from the forensics office, and it looks like her bullet didn't damage anything except an oak tree."

"Really?" Rafe felt the relief immediately. He knew his mom would be happy to hear that.

Frank nodded at him, smiling. "Yep!"

Rafe ran a hand through his thick hair. "That's great news, man! I'd better go tell her. That is, unless you want to do the honors."

Frank shook his head, genuinely happy for Rafe's family. "No, that's fine. Go ahead."

He watched as Rafe took off at a jog, taking a shortcut through the woods. Smiling and feeling the need to celebrate the small victories, he climbed back in his car and called Eleni.

Natalia tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with one hand as she adjusted her hold on her squirming daughter with the other one. She tickled Francesca's belly, making the baby giggle, before slipping a clean diaper under her and closing it.

Sitting Francesca up on the table, she slipped the flowery pink dress over her baby's head and struggled to make the flailing arms go through the sleeves. Blowing some hair out of her face, Natalia shook her head. "Did Mommy Liv slip you some of her coffee today, because you are a squirmy mess?"

The little girl made a spitty face at her mother and giggled when she tried to act mad about it. She was pleased to see her mommy smile, so she did it again.

After putting a pair of nice shoes on Francesca's stubby feet, Natalia stood her up and smiled, nuzzling her nose against her daughter's. "You're just the most adorable baby in the whole wide world. Do you know that?"

"Well, she does have the most adorable mother ever! Apples don't fall far from their trees, you know." Natalia turned at the rich and warm sound of her partner's voice. Olivia leaned against the door frame with her arms crossed, smiling as Natalia propped their daughter on her hip.

Walking over, Natalia gave Olivia a quick kiss. Francesca flung her arms out towards Olivia. "Mama!"

Olivia instantly melted at the word and took her baby in her arms. Kissing Francesca on the head, she nuzzled into her daughter's cheek, savoring the sweet, clean baby scent. "Hey, my Sweet Pea. Have you been good for your mother?"

Natalia quirked the side of her mouth up in a half-smile and rolled her eyes. "She's definitely yours because she has been a handful today!"

"Ah, but you love us like that." Olivia playfully arched an eyebrow at her partner.

Natalia opened her mouth to respond when she heard the door open downstairs.

"Hey, Ma, are you here?"

"We're up here!" Natalia called out to her son.

In a few seconds, he was outside the door, slightly out of breath, but obviously happy. "Ma, I just saw Frank and he told me some great news."

Natalia looked at Olivia then back at her son, gesturing expectantly with her hands. "Well?"

He got right to the point. "You didn't shoot Edmund. It seems the bullet from your gun was found in a tree, so you didn't do it."

Olivia smiled in relief, fighting back tears. With her free arm, she pulled Natalia into a hug and kissed the top of her head.

The younger woman leaned into her, the news registering but not really hitting home right away. "I didn't do it?"

Rafe shook his head. He knew if she had shot Edmund and he did die, it would be a tough pill for her to swallow. He was thrilled that she could start to put this behind her. "No, you didn't."

Before Natalia had a chance to respond further, she heard more noise in the house. She pulled back from her partner and smiled a little as Olivia reached over and brushed away a tear from her cheek. Until that moment, Natalia hadn't even realized she had been crying. She dabbed at her eyes and moved towards the door. "That must be Leyla and Emma. We probably should get going if we want to get to the bridal store and still have time to look around."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Sweetie, we know Monica on a first name basis by now. I think we'll be fine."

They all made their way downstairs and into the kitchen, where Leyla was getting herself and Emma some juice. She spun around from the refrigerator and closed the door. "There you all are. Sorry that we're a little later than we expected. We got caught up in the fun."

Olivia stopped dead in her tracks when she saw her daughter sitting at the table. "I see. Emma, what is on your face?"

The icy tone in her mother's voice was always a warning sign to Emma and she stopped in mid-sip of her juice. She bit her lip and looked down. "Makeup."

Olivia handed Francesca over to Natalia without looking at her. Instead, she trained her eyes on her target across the kitchen. "What is my daughter doing wearing makeup? She's only ten years old."

Leyla tried not to let her panic show, but she felt the press of the counter against the small of her back and sweat broke out on her forehead. There was nowhere to escape to, so she had to stand her ground. "It was just for fun, Olivia."

"She's too young to wear makeup," Olivia growled at her. She turned back to Emma and pointed in the general direction of the stairs. "Go to the bathroom right now and take that off."

Rafe decided it was time to leave. He motioned to his mom to hand over Francesca. When she did, he tilted his head towards the doorway. "Come on, Munchkin, I'll help you get cleaned up."

When the three women were the only ones left in the kitchen, Natalia stepped forward and put a hand on Olivia's arm. She could feel the tension in the tight muscles under her fingers. "Olivia, I'm sure she wasn't trying to do anything wrong."

Leyla shook her head. "I wasn't! After what's happened, I thought she needed some fun so she could stop thinking about it. It was my idea anyway. Don't get upset with Emma."

Olivia was in her face. "That's not your decision to make. We're her parents. She's too young. She's just a kid. Now she looks like...she looks...too old!"

Natalia saw the sudden quiver of Olivia's lips and frowned in concern. There was more to her reaction than meets the eye. Natalia slid her hand down Olivia's arm and squeezed her hand. She saw the scared and haunted look in Olivia's green eyes. "Leyla, will you give us a minute?"

Leyla nodded at her sister and went into the living room while they talked.

Natalia waited until she was out of hearing range and gently coaxed Olivia's chin to make eye contact with her. "What's going on, querida?"

Olivia dropped her head back and gazed at the ceiling before taking in a shaky breath. When she spoke, her voice was tinged with sadness. "Emma's just a kid. I don't want her to be in a rush to grow up."

Natalia took in the entire body language of her partner – the clenched jaw, closed eyes, and shoulders hunching together. Olivia was shutting herself off. Natalia recognized the behavior; it was the way Olivia always reacted to fear and pain. The last time Olivia had acted this way was when they vacationed in San Cristobel. With a gasp, realization struck Natalia. "Like you did?"

All of those years ago, Olivia was set on a different path because she was determined to grow up too fast. Olivia fought the sudden lump in her throat as the words brought her memories to the surface. She'd been determined to grow up faster than all the kids around her and she'd set on her own path very early in life. She wanted to break free and have adventures. She hadn't known that it all came with a cost - until it was too late.

Closing her eyes again to fight against the remembered pain and overcome the urge to protect Emma against experiencing it herself, she nodded and crumbled into Natalia's arms. A wave of fear and worry for her daughter overwhelmed her and she buried her face in her partner's neck. Her body shook as she cried.

When Olivia finally pulled out of the embrace, Natalia turned toward the sink and wet a paper towel. Facing Olivia again, she wiped at her mate's tear-streaked cheeks.

After a moment, Olivia took a deep breath and calmed some more. Looking guiltily at Natalia, she sniffled. "I'm sorry for acting like that."

Natalia caressed her face. "You don't need to apologize for the tears or even the anger, at least not to me, but I think you frightened about ten years off of Leyla's life."

Olivia couldn't help but chuckle. "Well, I have to make sure to stay in practice."

Natalia smiled back at Olivia, letting her hands fall to rest on the curves of Olivia's hips. "I don't think you ever have to worry about that. I agree, though, that Emma doesn't need to be wearing makeup yet, but I don't think Leyla meant any harm in it either."

"I know." She grimaced more for effect and humor than for actual meaning. "I'll apologize to her."

When they went into the living room, Leyla was sitting on the couch, nervously biting a nail. She watched Olivia warily as the older woman sat down next to her. She had a sudden urge to grab a pillow and put it between them. Any kind of barrier was better than nothing at all.

Olivia looked up at Natalia, who was sitting on the arm of the couch, before turning back to Leyla. She scratched at the back of her neck before jumping in. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't mean any harm, and I shouldn't have yelled at you, especially not in front of Emma. She's my baby. Well, one of them, and I..."

Leyla was so relieved that she didn't even wait for Olivia to finish. "It's okay. I shouldn't have done it. I just...she needed to forget, and I was trying to help. I kind of have a soft spot for kids, so..."

Natalia smiled and touched Leyla's arm. "We know and that was really sweet of you, but from now on, with anything big like that, pass it by us first."

Leyla smirked at her sister. "So I guess a tattoo is out of the question."

When Olivia's smile fell, Leyla raised her hands. "Just kidding."

Rafe poked his head out of the bathroom, calling downstairs. "Is it safe to come out now?"

"Yes, I'm still alive," Leyla joked back.

In a couple of minutes, Rafe came down with Francesca and a freshly scrubbed Emma, who looked sheepishly at her mommies.

Olivia held her arms out to Emma. "Come here, Bean."

The little girl ran over to her mom and wrapped her arms around her neck. "Are you still mad at me?"

Olivia kissed her head and leaned back to look at her daughter. "Oh, baby, I was never mad at you. I know it seems exciting to grow up and get to do all sorts of new things...but there's plenty of time for that later. Take your time and enjoy the things you can do; don't be in such a rush."

Emma nodded, but with the way she bit her lip, Olivia knew a question was coming. "So, when can I start to wear makeup?"

Natalia sighed at the repeat of the question Emma had posed to her before the wedding. With all the craziness going on, she hadn't had a chance to bring it up to Olivia. "Your mom and I need to talk about that, Emma."

"That's what you said the other day." Emma pouted, her frustration at being kept waiting showing through.

"Emma! Don't take that tone with her," Olivia chastised. She could tell that her daughter was upset because her cheeks flamed red.

Just as quickly, the anger was gone and Emma's bottom lip started to quiver. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"Wrong person." She pointed up to Natalia.

Emma hung her head. "I'm sorry, Ma."

Natalia reached out and pulled Emma into a hug. "It's okay, baby. Do you still want to go dress shopping with us? We could really use your expert opinion." Emma smiled and nodded against Natalia's side. "Let's get going then."

The freshly washed clothes were stacked neatly on the chair next to the couch where Rafe had been sleeping the last few days. After dinner last night, his mom had busied herself with washing his clothes so he'd be ready to pack up this morning. He hated to go, but his leave was over and he had to get back to the base. His plane headed out at 18:00 and he had been instructed to arrive at the base a little early. That gave him enough time to have a good breakfast and go to church with his mom.

Stretching out on the couch, he finally sat up and rubbed his eyes, yawning. Through the open curtains, pale swaths of yellows and reds let him know that the sun was starting to rise. A new day had begun. Life always went on. It had no regard for individual chaos or death. The sun rising every morning was a certainty, even when nothing else was.

Standing, he found his duffel bag next to the couch and set it on the cushions where he had slept. Carefully, he took his civilian clothes and began to roll them tightly and placed them in his bag. Aside from his dress uniform, which he'd worn to the wedding, everything he'd brought was civilian. Even if just for a little while, he'd been able to forget about shipping out again.

A soft creak on the stairs above him drew his attention up. Emma stood there, already dressed in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. He motioned for her to be quiet by putting a finger to his lips and then waved her to come down the stairs.

Smiling, she took the last few steps and came around the couch to give him a hug.

He pulled her close and then acted like he was going to tickle her, making her jump back and giggle softly. "What are you doing up so early, Munchkin?"

Emma shrugged. "Couldn't sleep."

Rafe tilted his head. "Are you still having those bad dreams?"

She shrugged again, not looking at him but paying a lot of attention to one of the shiny brass buttons of his dress uniform, which was draped across the back of the chair. He didn't push her. Instead, he waited for her to be ready to say it. Eventually, a slight nod answered his question.

Sighing, he tossed the pair of shorts in his hand back down on the pile and sat on the couch. He opened his arms to her. "Come here."

Emma went over and slumped down next to him on the couch, curling against his side. "Do you have bad dreams, Rafe?"

He wrapped his arm around her. "Yes, I do."

"What about?" She looked up at him, surprised that he had bad dreams. He was so brave that she didn't think anything could scare him.

He looked down into Emma's unabashedly curious gaze. "The bad things that I've seen in Iraq."

"Like what?" Emma was practically whispering, as if she and Rafe were in the middle of the most important and secretive conversation ever.

"Well, kiddo, it's hard to explain. I mean, it's war and people get shot and hurt. There's a lot of sadness." He looked down, concerned how much he should tell her. But after all she's been through, certainly she could handle a little truth.

She tucked her head back against his shoulder, listening to his steady heartbeat for a moment and realizing that it made her feel safe to hear the strong, true beat. "Then why do you do it?"

The question rocked him for a moment. It wasn't as easy to answer as he thought it would be. The immediate response he wanted to give was because it was the right thing to do - that he wanted to help people who needed it or to bring freedom to those who didn't have it. But he also knew Emma was smart and would probably see through a canned response.

He decided that with a kid like Emma it was always better to go with the truth. "Honestly, I wanted you and my mom to be proud of me. I wanted to be a good son and brother and make Grandpa Alan proud."

Emma looked up at him. "But I am proud of you and you're the best brother ever."

He smiled and hugged her tightly. "And you're the best Munchkin ever!"

She giggled as he poked at her sides and tickled her. Emma wriggled around and grabbed at him, but stopped when she saw his dog tags fall out of his shirt. She reached out her hand to get a closer look. Next to the tags was the coin that matched the one she wore on a chain around her neck.

Rafe watched as she rubbed her small thumb over it. He swallowed down the lump in his throat and put his hand over hers. "You're not alone, Emma."

A long moment passed between them as she gently rubbed the pendant. His heart ached and he almost started to cry when Emma's bottom lip started to quiver. Then she curled up in his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck where he could feel the wetness of her tears against his neck. Slowly he rocked her, letting his own tears finally come.

Rafe felt an almost instant calm settle over him as he entered the sanctuary of the church. All around, he heard the soft, respectful murmurs of parishioners praying or talking quietly amongst themselves. Looking up at the large crucifix in the front of the church, he was overwhelmed all over again. The emotions of his morning with Emma came back full force. Kneeling, just inside the doorway of the sanctuary, in the aisle, he made the Sign of the Cross. Next to him, his mom did the same and then they rose together and found a pew.

When he'd told her that he wanted to go to church this morning and she'd asked if she could go with him, he'd admitted to being surprised. Not so much that she'd go in general, but that she'd want to attend one of Father Ray's services. In her emails to him, she had told him more details about the priest's disapproval of her life and his constant attempts to exert his influence on her in the months before Olivia moved back into the farmhouse. Gradually, he'd put together a picture of the doubts and fears his mother had gone through during that time. At the time, he'd been too self-absorbed to notice her struggle, but he was beginning to understand her in a whole new way. He'd also begun to understand her distinction between religion and faith.

On the drive to church this morning, Rafe had asked her why she'd want to come to one of Father Ray's services. A mischievous smile had ghosted across her face even though she hadn't taken her eyes off the road. "You did notice that I wasn't in a rush this morning."

He'd nodded. "Yeah, I did actually."

Her smile had grown larger. "That's because Father Ray has the early Mass."

For a moment, he hadn't believed that his own mother could be so amused by her actions. Then he'd leaned his head against the head rest and laughed.

The mass was standard fare, so after about an hour it was over and they filed out of the church, greeting the priest on their way outside. Natalia sauntered towards the car, not in a hurry to end her time with her son. Besides, they still had plenty of time to get to the bus station. She glanced over at her Rafe. "Are you hungry?"

"Always!" he joked and grabbed at his grumbling belly.

She tilted her head to the side. "Then let's go get something."

He touched her arm as she started to walk away. "Okay, as long as it's not Company."

"Why not? I thought you liked Company's food." She was confused because he always seemed to like spending time with the Coopers. She was about to ask that very question when Rafe explained.

"I do like Company...a lot. But I want to spend time with you, not share you with the Coopers." He shrugged and scratched at his chin.

Understanding what Rafe meant by the comment, and knowing all too well how intrusive and overbearing the Coopers could be, she smiled. "No need to explain. I'll tell you what, let's swing by Towers and get something to go. We can sit in the park and eat."

"Now that's the perfect way to spend my last day." He smiled and climbed in the car.

Natalia fought down the lump in her throat at the words "last day." She knew he didn't mean it in the literal sense, just that it was his last day in Springfield, but it still hit her hard. She sent up a quick prayer hoping that he had many, many more days ahead of him.

Within half an hour, they were seated on a bench under a tree, making the warm summer day almost bearable. Natalia found Rafe's sandwich and chips in the bag and handed them over to him, then opened her own container of salad.

For a few minutes, they silently ate their food and watched people walking by. As she looked around, Natalia realized the folly of thinking the park would be a place to relax. Had it only been a few days since Edmund had opened fire on everyone? At least the scene of the shooting was on the other side of the park so she didn't have to be reminded of it. It was odd though. Since finding out that she hadn't shot Edmund, it was like everything changed. Knowing that Edmund was incapacitated and in custody put her mind at ease, and she felt like she could finally relax a little.

At least for her, things had changed. She was still concerned about Emma. She was too young to have experienced something so traumatic. Remembering the terrified look on her daughter's face when she was soothed during her nightmare sent a shiver through Natalia. It was like Emma hadn't even been herself. Like she wasn't even there.

She watched as Rafe tried to drain every last drop of soda from the cup in his hand and wondered what they would have done if he hadn't been there. He'd known exactly what to do.

"I'm so proud of you." The words were out of her mouth before she realized it. Rafe looked up at her, surprised to be told that out of the blue, but then he just smiled and balled up the empty wrapper his sandwich had been in.

She set her salad down and turned to face him. "I'm proud of everything you're doing, the man you're becoming. You're brave and confident and so handsome, just like your father."

He blushed at the compliments and nervously digging the toe of his shoe in the dirt. "Ma, come on."

She shook her head. “No, I’m serious. The other night when Emma had that nightmare, you knew exactly what to do.”

Rafe swallowed and looked down. Shrugging, he tried to blow it off. “It was nothing, Ma.”

Natalia reached for his hand. “It wasn’t nothing.” She felt tears well up in her eyes and she couldn’t stop them from falling as she imagined what he’d seen overseas that made him so aware of how to deal with nightmares. “If it’s too much, you don’t have to stay in, you know. You can come home. I’m sure Olivia would give you a job at The Beacon.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Don’t cry, okay? I’m fine...really. I knew what I was getting into when I signed up. This is what I’m meant to do. I feel right doing this.”

Taking a deep breath, she blew it out and brushed the tears away from her cheeks, trying to pull herself together. “I know. That’s why I’m so proud of you.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “What’s right isn’t always what’s easy.”

She laughed and put her hands on each side of his face, squeezing it like she had when he was a toddler. “Oh, handsome and smart!”

Leaning back, he scrubbed a hand nervously through his hair and looked out over the park. “Do you mind if I give you a little unsolicited advice?”

She draped her arm over the back of the bench and watched him as he seemed to wrestle with finding the right words.

He bit at his bottom lip before bending over and resting his elbows on his knees. He looked over at her. “I think you and Olivia should get Emma some counseling. It might not be a bad idea for all of you, actually.”

“Funny, I was thinking of talking to Olivia about getting Emma some help. And, ironically enough, Father Ray came by yesterday morning, letting me know that he’d counsel me.” She shrugged and continued, “I guess considering since it appeared that I’d shot a man and put him in a coma that it was the logical thing to do.”

Rafe sat back, glad that she hadn’t rejected his idea outright. “Are you guys going to see him?”

She grimaced. “Well, see, you have to pay attention to the way I phrased that statement. Father Ray said he’d counsel me, not the rest of my family or us as a family.”

“Oh, I see.” She could see the muscles working in Rafe’s jaw. He obviously wasn’t happy about the priest’s restrictions.

She waved her hand in the air. “It doesn’t matter though. There are others doing the grief counseling, even Sister Anne, so I have options. There are always options.”

Reva had told herself to not do this; that this wasn't necessary. She had tried to escape the madness of this past year with a semblance of a life and of sanity. She had made the decision to leave with Josh, to start over, and to break free of the tortured past she'd had with Jeffrey. Not that she hadn't had a tortured past with Josh, but this...thing, with Jeffrey was different. But here she stood at Jeffrey's door with her hand rising and falling as she started to knock and then stopped. Over and over again, like so many other times in her life, she fluctuated between passion, love, and fate.

She had made her choice in Josh; he'd seen her at her worst more often than not, but still believed in her, and in them, and never gave up. It was her turn now to believe in them. This had to stop. She had to draw a line in the sand and not look back. The chaos that never seemed to stop chasing her, nipping at her heels, had always been present with Jeffrey in her life. The last few days with Josh had been the first bits of calm and peace she had experienced in a very long time. She wanted to have a lifetime of that. She deserved it and so did Colin.

Taking a deep breath, she tapped sharply on the door of Jeffrey's apartment. She heard movement on the other side, along with, muffled curses. Against her will, her hands started to shake, and when the door opened and she finally saw him, she hated herself for feeling a hint of remorse over what she had to do.

"We need to talk." She got right to the point so she could end this as quickly as possible.

Jeffrey hobbled backwards on his crutches to make room for her to enter. "Come in."

Reva shook her head. "No, there's no need. What I have to say is simple." He looked at her expectantly, and she closed her eyes against the tide of emotions merely being in his presence caused – a rush of memories and intimate moments that took her breath away. Looking at him again, she steeled herself to speak. "Leave, Jeffrey. Your lies and secrets have caused me and this town too much pain. What you kept from me is unforgivable...so many lies. I could never trust you again and I don't want to."

He shook his head and tried to move forward to take her hand. "Reva..."

She pulled back from him, tears beginning to trek down her face, against her will. She had sworn she wouldn't cry. This might be hard, but she knew it was the right thing to do. She had to make him understand that she was serious. "No! You don't get to say anything here. Leave this town. Get out of our lives so we can stop living in the past. I don't want you here."

As she turned to walk back down the steps to the parking lot, Jeffrey hobbled out, just past the door. He knew with the crutches and the pain there was no way he could catch her. All he could do was lean over the banister and call out, "I'm sorry, Reva!" She didn't look back up as she climbed in her car and slammed the door. He stared mournfully after her. "I still love you."

Rolling to her side when she heard Natalia exit the bathroom, Olivia stretched like a cat and admired her partner, who was running her fingers through slightly damp hair. Her sleep shorts and white tank top

clung invitingly to gentle curves. Olivia flipped back the covers so Natalia could crawl under the inviting warmth of the sheets and blue blanket.

With a long sigh, Natalia slid down into a comfortable position spooning against Olivia's stomach. She relaxed into Olivia's arms before gentle fingers came up to tuck some of her hair behind her ear. The motion tickled Natalia and she couldn't help but smile.

"That's good to see," Olivia murmured.

"Mmmm, it feels good to do." Natalia sighed softly in contentment as sleep was already beginning to take her. "It feels like it's been so long since we've had a quiet, calm moment."

Olivia brushed her fingers over Natalia's cheek, knowing her partner was close to falling asleep. "It is calm right now, but I don't think the chaos is over yet. I have a feeling this is just the beginning." Natalia drew her eyebrows together in confusion, so she continued, "I'm worried about Emma. I know she only had one nightmare but...maybe it wouldn't hurt for her, and all of us, to talk to someone. I heard Father Ray make the offer..."

Natalia reached up and stilled the hand on her cheek, rolling over to look into worried green eyes. "He won't see us as a family." She noted the angry expression that flitted across Olivia's face and felt a surge of protectiveness towards her partner. "And I wouldn't want us to see him even if he would."

Olivia squeezed the hand holding hers and moved in closer. She loved Natalia so completely that it was almost frightening. The emotion was so strong that all she could do was lean forward and kiss the warm and inviting lips so close to her.

Natalia melted into the caress and suddenly didn't feel sleepy at all anymore. Breaking the kiss, she looked steadily into Olivia's eyes. "We'll do whatever we need to for Emma. I promise."

Olivia rested her forehead against Natalia's, feeling the depth of their bond. "I love you."

In the waning darkness of the early morning, a man walked slowly up the path leading to the small two-story wood building. It might serve as an apartment, but it looked decrepit to him. It was certainly well below the acceptable standards he had become accustomed to over his lifetime.

His last steps were deliberate and measured as he savored his proximity to the woman inside. With satisfaction, he had watched as unsuspecting community leaders and police details eased back to a normal routine in recent days.

He smiled as he placed the small rectangular box wrapped in plain, light brown paper in front of the door. Lifting his hand, he knocked hard on the door.

Anna was jerked awake from a dream by a dull, thudding sound. The last image she remembered from the dream was running through the woods with a bear hot on her heels. Blinking hard, the sense of fear still flooding through her veins, she struggled to wake up enough to make sense of the noise.

After a final knock on the door, the man turned and walked slowly away, slipping back into the cover of the pre-dawn darkness. "This is far from over, my beautiful dragon."

The End