

Healing Revelations

Written by: Ceridwyn2

Betas: Kelley, Ren, and Ariestess

ACT I

After a late night spent pouring through police report files that she'd brought home, the early sound of the door ringing was a rude awakening.

"Hang on!" Anna called aloud even though there was no way anyone would have heard her from her bedroom. Rolling out of the bed, her foot caught in some sheets and she nearly tripped. The jarring motion of righting herself as she grabbed the edge of the dresser resulted in a perfunctory curse; her shoulder was still healing from the bullet wound. It had only been two weeks since the shooting, and her shoulder still ached terribly at times. The detective shook her head, hoping her day would improve, though having thought that, she was bound to have jinxed it. Throwing a sweater over the undershirt she slept in, she made her way to the front entrance and looked through the peephole in the door. Not seeing anyone there, she grabbed the nearby softball bat, hefting it as she opened the door and peered around. Shaking her head still at who would have just rang a bell once and left, she started to turn to head back inside when she noticed a bag hanging from the door handle, weighted down inside. She peered around the edging of the bag, trying to ascertain if it held anything hazardous. Not finding anything out of the ordinary, she picked it up, brought it inside and placed it on the center island in the kitchen.

Rummaging around in one of the cupboards, she pulled down a bottle of anti-inflammatory medication the doctor had prescribed her, shook out two of them and popped them into her mouth. She grabbed a glass, running it under the faucet and got enough water to swallow them. Before she even thought about doing anything this morning, including trying to figure out what was in the package, she needed caffeine, and so acting almost on auto-pilot she filled the pot with water and coffee grounds and waited for it to percolate. The scent of her favorite coffee brewing was like manna from the heavens as far as Anna was concerned, as she moved to the sorted folders on her kitchen table, and filed them into her laptop case. When the machine stopped, she pulled a mug from the cabinet and fixed her coffee with two sugars, stirring it with a spoon, and then moved over to the island. From a drawer, she grabbed a pair of gloves and then tentatively she pulled out the brown-paper wrapped small package. There was no note attached or anything to indicate where it might have come from, or from whom. With the sharp knife she pulled from the block on the counter, she slid it through the tape and opened the box. Through the layers of wrap, her breathing froze as she examined the contents. A simple set of hand strengthening grips would probably not have been noteworthy to most people; an odd item to send someone without context, but for Anna, she felt the blood drain from her face. It was a message meant specifically for her, from her father, as a threat or a warning: back off.

Hung Feng Li was a domineering personality, and quite lethal when required. But he didn't require a weapon to fight with; his strength and his skills with his hands were weapon enough.

Her father had been working with the Winslow family her entire life. With his martial arts training, he'd worked his way through the Winslow's security detail as a young man, gaining respect and seniority by his attention to detail and his ability to contain problems before they came to the attention of the family. Sometimes that just meant a threat to another person's liberty and security, and if necessary, physical application of that threat. As the years passed, he'd worked his way up to the head of the Royal Guard and chief of security for the Winslow family. It was a position he'd been in for more than twenty years.

It had been a long time since she'd deliberately gone against her father's wishes and left San Cristobel. Her attempt to help Olivia try to find justice after having been raped had resulted in her own beating by her father, for trying to find justice for Olivia. This little 'gift' that had been left on her door this morning was a warning to lay off investigating the Edmund Winslow case. Despite the heat of the coffee entering her system as she took a sip, Anna shivered at the potential implications of the threat.

Refusing to cower to her father's intimidation, Anna replaced the wrap around the grips. Going over to one of the cabinet drawers, she grabbed a packing tape gun, sealed the box, and placed it back in the bag. While she was quite sure it was delivered from one of her father's messenger's and as such there would likely be no obtainable prints, she knew she had to make the rest of her team aware of the threat. After all, she was not the only one investigating Edmund Winslow, and she felt personally responsible if anyone of the officers on her task force were injured or killed because of information of which they had no knowledge.

Quickly, she jotted down a few notes onto a sheet of paper, before placing it in her case, and then she headed to the bathroom for a shower.

Natalia was getting Emma's lunch ready as Olivia was trying to feed Francesca breakfast, when they heard Emma running down the stairs and they shook their heads. Some things didn't really change. When Emma reached the kitchen, her backpack was slung over her shoulder.

"Woah, Jellybean, where's the fire?" Olivia asked her daughter with a grin.

"Mommy, do you know where my notebooks are?"

Natalia packed the sandwich and fruit into Emma's lunch bag, and then she smiled at her daughter, "Where did you last have them?"

Emma bit at her lower lip as she thought where she had left her notebooks. Her face lit up as she remembered. "In the living room." She quickly headed into the other room and grabbed her things and put them in her bag before returning.

"Hey, Emma," Natalia started, as she pulled the girl in for a hug, "how about when we finish your homework tonight, we put all your stuff in your backpack? That way, you'll know where everything is in the morning."

"Okay." The school bus horn blew and Emma pulled back. "Gotta go!"

"Bean, how about a hug for your old mother?" Olivia chuckled and then got a quick hug from her daughter before the girl resettled the pack on her shoulder and headed out the door. With an amused pout, Olivia turned her glance over to her partner. "I notice she didn't correct me on the 'old' part." She finished feeding the baby and put the empty cereal bowl into the sink.

"You are just fine to me," Natalia said, her voice husky as she moved close to Olivia and grabbed hold of her partner's robe, turning her around. As her eyes slowly scanned down Olivia's body and back up to meet the other woman's face she smiled deeply, "Just fine, indeed."

Olivia's eyebrows rose in playful teasing. "My, my, Natalia, are you flirting with me?"

"Is it working?" Natalia giggled.

"Oh, yeah." She leaned in for a kiss and was rewarded with one that made her toes curl.

"Momma!" Francesca's voice called out, breaking the moment.

The two women moved apart and laughed at the interruption from their youngest daughter. Natalia turned to face Francesca who was holding her hands up in the air.

"I'll take that as my cue to go up and get dressed. I've got a meeting with Greg and two potential new vendors at ten."

Releasing the high chair tray and placing it up on the counter to clean afterwards, Natalia unclipped the seat straps and lifted her daughter up against her chest; the little girl grabbed locks of her hair. "Okay, once I drop Francesca off with Leyla, I'll be in. I've got to meet with accounting and with the kitchen staff. I got an email from Donello about a new menu item he wants to try out. He asked me to come down and check it out."

“Any hints?” Curiosity was getting the better of her.

“He just said ‘sweet and decadent’.”

“Oh, that’s not fair! How come you get to do all the fun stuff?” Olivia pouted. “I’m gonna be stuck in a dull, boring meeting with a bunch of vendors vying for attention and sucking up for all their worth. Greg’s got most of the details, so he’s sitting in on the meeting as well.” Olivia sighed.

“I’ll make it worth your while?” Natalia grinned, saucily. “Meet me for lunch in your office?”

Grinning, Olivia moved closer to her partner, cuddling up behind her. “You say the sweetest things.”

Francesca’s attention switched to Olivia and stretched out a hand to her other mother, and Olivia raised a finger for her daughter to grab hold.

Turning her head to face Olivia, Natalia asked, “When were we going to be meeting with Josh?”

“This evening. He’s going to come over after he and Jonathan finish working on the school project.”

“I’ll take some extra ground beef out to make some spaghetti.”

“Okay, see you in a bit. I’m going to get ready or I’ll be late for my boring meeting.” Olivia leaned in to give Natalia a kiss before she headed upstairs.

“Hey, Sweet Pea. You and Mommy are going to get this kitchen tidied and then we’ll go up and get you cleaned up and dressed.” Natalia gave her daughter a big kiss, and then placed her down in her playpen before moving to start washing the breakfast dishes.

The police department was relatively quiet as Anna entered the building and headed towards her office. She settled her coffee cup on the desk and laid down her briefcase, pulling out the documents she’d worked on at home, along with her laptop. Taking a sip of the hot beverage, she put it down and logged in to the SPD computer to check for messages and to review the night’s police log. Nothing in particular had been red-flagged as a major incident, for which she was grateful.

They'd questioned everybody who was at the wedding about anything they might have seen to give the police department clues about the particular motivation for Edmund opening fire on the crowd. She had been mildly frustrated with Olivia's protection of Natalia, though she could understand it; the other woman's family had long been a target of Edmund's family, and she could empathize with the need to protect one's family as much as you could.

Having developed a pattern to Edmund's activities with Eleni a few weeks before, Anna decided the crime scene investigator was a good source of information and could help review past cases, looking through cold case reports, misplaced or lost evidence, trying to clean up some backlog. The other woman was becoming a friend, and she realized that she had too few of those. She'd burned personal bridges when she came to Springfield, ones that she wasn't sure she'd be able to repair.

The early morning rush at Company had settled to a trickle of customers as Blake sat in one corner of the bar, looking intently at her laptop. She'd been nearly run off her feet with the breakfast run, since Lynn wasn't due in until eleven am. Now that Daisy was no longer in town, and she was focusing some more on her publishing, she had talked with Buzz about hiring a new waitress to take up some of her shifts. She'd noticed Marina had needed some more time to be with Henry so Blake had been picking up extra shifts to cover.

Since her amicable split with Frank, Marina had been not quite abrasive with her, but not exactly overtly pleasant either. Blake wondered if that had still had to do with the younger woman's father still working with and being friends with her mother, or if it was something different all together, but to put it bluntly, the younger woman's passive aggressive stance was growing annoying. Blake tended to give people the benefit of the doubt as more than once she'd been on the end of judgmental attitudes of others.

Looking up, she caught the eye of one of the customers who held up his mug. Picking up the carafe she wandered over and refilled his coffee and checked with the only two other customers to see if there was anything they needed. She returned to the bar and browsed through an email. So concentrating on the screen she didn't noticed Doris Wolfe come up to sit beside her, and when the other woman spoke, it startled her so strongly, she almost fell off the stool. She felt a set of strong arms come up behind her to balance her, and Blake relaxed once she realized whose hands they were.

"Sorry," Blake commented out of reflex.

"No need. I was the one who spooked you," Doris said with a smile. "I should be the one to apologize. Sorry. How are you?"

Pressing a hand against her chest to calm herself, Blake smiled. "Let me get my heart rate under control and I'll tell you." Truthfully, Blake wasn't sure if her rapid heart rate was still from the surprise that Doris gave her when she sat next to her without her awareness, or from the fact that Doris still had a hand on her back; the warmth transferred through clothes against her skin. She looked over at the other woman. "I'm okay now, thank you."

When Doris's hand moved from her back up to the bar, Blake felt its loss and she sighed. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she then turned to Doris and asked her if she needed anything.

"Caffeine. And plenty of it. I have a stack of reports to go through and a meeting with the city manager and the police chief later this morning."

"How are things going with the aftermath of the shootings?" Blake was curious. She grabbed the carafe from the table behind her and moved to fill a mug for Doris.

"From a professional level, I can't say anything just yet. But from a personal standpoint, I feel sorry for Olivia and Natalia. As much as I would have loved to pull the trigger to shoot Edmund, I find it hard to believe Natalia even tried. Their family has been through so much. I know that I would do anything to protect Ashlee. I know that Natalia was trying to do the same for her family, but it's hurting them, and I don't like to see my friends hurting." Doris flexed her hands on either side of her mug, glancing down into the dark liquid as if it could provide some answers for her. Looking over at the petite woman, she worried about her. "How are you? Still sore?"

"From tackling you to the ground, you mean?" Blake grinned. Despite the gravity of the situation, it still amused her that she had done that. Taking in Doris's wry grin, she added, "My elbow's still a little bit sore from hitting the dais but I'll live."

"Good to know." Doris looked with curiosity at Blake's laptop screen. "Whatcha working on?"

"Remember that author I mentioned – the one with the lesbian mystery story to be published. I'm going to do it. It's really good." Pensively, she looked at Doris. "I kind of wish Ashlee was here. She did such a good job of working with me on Coop's book. I could use her assistance. And since Natalia's returned to managing the day-to-day stuff at the Beacon, I'm left without a copy editor."

Despite Doris's oft times strained relationship with Ashlee, she was exceptionally proud of her daughter, and she appreciated that Blake thought highly of the young woman. "I'm sure you've had other copy editors before. What about using one of those?"

"I want to do this right. I've got a couple of people in mind."

Tentatively, Doris placed a hand on Blake's arm. "I'm sure you will. Let me know how it goes."

"Thanks." When Doris moved to top up her coffee mug, Blake lifted her head; she didn't want to end their conversation but she knew the other woman had to get back to work. "Hey, Doris?"

"Yes?"

"Do you want to get together for supper?" Blake paused curiously, waiting for the other woman's answer. When Doris hadn't taken long to respond in the affirmative, she grinned. "My place at 7? Clarissa will be there. She probably thinks I'm crazy and controlling. But after the shootings, I really just want to make sure she's safe."

"Children are much more adaptable than adults. We need to be there for them and let them know that it's okay for them to talk to us." Flashing a grin before she moved to leave, Doris added, "I'll bring the wine."

The continuous infant's crying had been keeping Remy awake for most of the night, and he couldn't figure out what the problem was. He'd checked his son's diaper, bottle fed him, burped him, and the baby still hadn't settled. He and Christina had been taking turns getting up with CK, and Remy was at the point of wanting to take the baby into Cedars. Little Clayton had been rubbing his hands at his ears. But there was no sign of redness that he could see. With all the crying, the baby's sinuses were blocking and Remy thought he could hear some wheezing. Maybe it was some instinct left from his days as an EMT and the memories of his first son's illness, that his sensitivity to CK being sick was niggling at his brain.

In the dimmed light of the baby's room, Christina entered, rubbing at her tired eyes. She turned to her husband. "Hey, Remy, it's going to be a long night still. Go get a few hours. I can call Frank in the morning."

"No, that's all right. I don't think I could sleep now anyway. I think we should bring him to the hospital. He sounds wheezy, and he's been rubbing his ear."

"I'll bring him to the doctor in the morning. Really, Remy, I think this is just a cold."

"But, what if it's more?"

“Remy, they’re probably not going to do anything more tonight that they can’t do in the morning. We’ll make sure he gets checked out well.” Christina sighed. “I know this is worrying you. But, I think we just need to wait and see what the doctor says, okay?”

“Sure.” Remy was still hesitant, and it showed in his movements when he moved to stand and transfer the crying infant over to his wife before shuffling back to the bedroom and lay on the bed. It took a while, but he finally managed to get to sleep.

Olivia was sorting through her mail when she had a knock on her office door and she called to whomever to enter. Soon standing before her was Leyla Rivera shifting nervously from one foot to the other, as she pushed Francesca in the stroller. Olivia smiled at her youngest daughter, who was squirming to get out of her confines. She kneeled down and unfastened Francesca before lifting her up, and smiled at her as the young girl moved to grab a lock of hair. Remembering Natalia’s sister was still standing there, Olivia looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. “Can I help you with something?”

Taking a deep breath and gathering her courage, Leyla spoke with conviction. She knew the older woman respected truth and assuredness. “I was thinking about something Natalia had said a little while ago about the possibility of opening up a daycare at the Beacon. I’d been temping in offices in Chicago for jobs when my grandmother got sicker and I had to stop for a while, but my college diploma was in early childhood education. I’ve also applied to the Department of Child & Family Services to write the state licensing board exam, which will be in a few weeks. When I went back to Chicago this past summer, I decided that this was something I could do, and do well, so I started preparations.” Leyla bit down on her lip slightly before she continued. “I was wondering if I could make a business of doing that here. Make the daycare available to both the children of staff and guests.” Leyla paused.

Having a daycare at the Beacon hadn’t been something Olivia thought about much; they had outsourced a service for providing activities for children of guests several years ago. It hadn’t been that long ago that she was representing Galaxy Hotels, and she was reminded of how much she and Natalia had touted the importance of keeping families in mind when promoting the hotel chain. Part of that, Olivia conceded was due to her poor health at the time and concealing the nature of that from Decker, using her need to be close to her family and thus be in Springfield and not gallivant around the globe. But as she thought further on it, and on Natalia’s previous arguments for including a daycare service within the hotel, perhaps it was time.

“How much do you know about running a business?” Olivia asked her.

“I did some office managing as part of my temp jobs. I know it’s not the same, but I’m a fast learner.”

Despite Leyla being Natalia's sister, Olivia really didn't know her well, and how she was as a person could differ greatly from how she could run a business. Olivia had a few conditions to be met before she would agree to this center to be started and run.

Taking a notepad from her desk drawer, Olivia then looked over at her sister-in-law with a serious expression. "That's a great plan, but there are some things I need to review first before we can even get started on a business plan. I need your college transcripts and references, as well as employment references from the temp agencies you worked for. Have you thought about drawing up a business plan for this?"

Leyla had been prepared for most of that. From a folder that she had tucked away in Francesca's stroller, she pulled the necessary documents from the college and her references, and then handed them over to Olivia. "I haven't done an official business plan since I was in college. I do have some ideas that I've worked out for what I would like to see done for a Beacon daycare, though. In the past few weeks, I've spoken with a few of the local daycare businesses to get an idea of what's required, and I've done some research on that. I've also spoken with the owners and managers and some of the employees to get a sense of what I saw working and what I would like to do to change things. I figure we can start out small, just with the children of employees, word of mouth and we can build from there."

Olivia was impressed with the work that Leyla had already done in preparation, and though the younger woman was nervous when she had entered the room earlier, she was much more self-assured now.

"Okay, I need to find out the legal spatial requirements from the licensing board, and find enough space in the hotel. Gather all the information you've compiled and we can go over that later. We'll work on the official business plan. I'll need to run it past my investors but it shouldn't be a problem."

"Thanks, Olivia." Leyla nodded. "See you back at the farmhouse later?"

"I'll be there." Olivia smiled. She placed her daughter back in her stroller and kissed the girl's head.

Although she loved her daughters, a home with her family was one thing she never thought she could have and hold for a long time to come. Olivia looked at her clock. She was expecting Natalia after her meeting with the kitchen staff, and she was looking forward to their lunch.

The busy weekend passenger traffic of Amsterdam's Albert Cuypmarkt open-air market was enough to get lost in, which is exactly what Dinah Marler had been banking on. For the last couple weeks, she'd had the feeling that she and Mallet had been followed. When they had inquired about a hotel room the night before, they had heard the couple asking about looking for two people and giving their descriptions; it had been vague enough at the beginning, until she heard their names mentioned. Up until now, she and Mallett had avoided using their real names. While she was curious to find out why they were being sought out, she wasn't innocent enough to believe that it was for anything good. They ducked out of that hotel and moved to a new hotel; one that most people would not expect her to stay in. Come to think of it, Dinah realized, it was remarkably unremarkable, kind of like the hotel room she and Mallet had stayed in while they were in Bosnia.

She wended her way through the stalls, the aromatic scents of food being cooked wafted through the air, blending into a cacophony, and since she hadn't eaten since the early morning coffee and croissants, she could hear her stomach growling. Picking out some fresh fruit, she paid the vendor before moving on and purchasing some lunch.

Turning to leave the market she was stopped still by a voice she could easily recognize.

"Dinah! Oh my heavens, darling, it is you!" Alexandra Spaulding called out to her from a stall about eight feet behind her.

Dinah turned around and smiled tightly. "Alex! Wow. I never expected to see you here." Dinah brought her hand up to play with the pendant on her necklace.

"Apparently so." Alex beamed at seeing a familiar face. "What has you half way around the world?"

"Oh, a bit of this and that," Dinah said, avoiding any details. "Some shopping and sightseeing. You?"

"The grand tour of Europe and the world. Fletcher and I left shortly after Alan died. I needed to get out of Springfield for a while. But apparently life has been just as chaotic as usual in our dear town, as ever."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Dinah knew a little of the details since her mother had sent her a text message. Mallet had been in occasional contact with Jeffrey regarding Edmund and his dealings, but there had been nothing in the past few weeks.

"Did you know Rick and Mindy were getting married?" Alex asked.

"I knew they were engaged." One less person to hit on her and every other single female in town, Dinah smiled.

“Apparently Edmund showed up at the wedding with guns and opened fire. I don’t know the full story; I got some details from Phillip. But Edmund was also shot and is in a coma.”

“Is it safe to go back?” Dinah asked. She knew there was probably still an outstanding arrest warrant out for her, which is why she and Mallet didn’t generally stay anywhere for any given length of time.

“I’m assuming so. But I’ll talk with Phillip tonight. Is there anyway to get hold of you? A cell phone number?” Alex asked her.

Not wanting to give out any contact information, Dinah simply said, “How about you find out from Phillip and meet me here tomorrow, same time.” Plus, Dinah wanted to have Mallet in the general vicinity in case something went wrong; and from her experience, something always went wrong when she least expected it. Karma finding its way back to bite her in the ass.

“That sounds so clandestine. I love it! It’s like being in the movies.” Alex laughed.

“Tomorrow then.” Dinah smiled, gathered her food packages and headed in the opposite direction, occasionally checking over her shoulder. Although she knew the older woman was well-intentioned, she also knew the older woman was a busybody, and loved her gossip as much as the next person, and seeing someone she knew half-way across the world was bound to be gossip-worthy information.

ACT II

A knock on the small apartment’s door alerted Jeffrey to a visitor, and he sighed. Since his release from the hospital, there hadn’t been many visitors these days other than Frank, Anna, Jonathan or Ava. Actually, he thought, that wasn’t entirely true. He recalled a memorable visit from Doris Wolfe, wherein she pretty much reamed him a new one for getting himself shot, for Natalia picking up a gun, for hurting Olivia, and generally anything under the sun that she could think of. And Reva; that conversation was hard. He hadn’t been around for Ava growing up, for many reasons, and now, his mistakes, well-intentioned or not, would result in not being around much for Colin. Intellectually, he knew that Reva and Colin needed a stable presence in their lives, and for the foreseeable future, Jeffrey couldn’t guarantee that. However, knowing that didn’t make it hurt any less.

"Come in," Jeffrey called out. Grabbing his crutches, he attempted to stand, and when he did, the pain from the shooting lanced through his leg. Almost dropping back to the couch, he managed to stabilize himself in time to see Detective Li enter the apartment.

Laying her laptop bag down on a nearby chair, she maneuvered him back to the couch, the movement causing her to wince slightly. "Hey boss, anything I can get you?"

"A new leg would be nice."

"None handy at the moment. Coffee? Tea? Scotch?"

"I should be asking you that," Jeffrey spoke, with a half grin. "There's some coffee in a carafe on the counter. Help yourself. And while you're doing that, you can top me up." Jeffrey shifted on the couch, trying to find a comfortable spot, and resigned himself to the fact that there wasn't much comfort to be found. *Fitting*, he thought. "How's the case going?"

Knowing where the mugs were kept, she grabbed one and filled it with coffee, before heading back into the living room. "Your weapon is definitely the one that shot Edmund. Eleni's team collected all the shell casings from all the weapons fired, and had pictures taken from the scene to get the trajectories. Some of the witness statements are vague once the shooting started. Formally, there'll be a charge of attempted murder placed on you, but given the circumstances, self-defense and protection of unarmed civilians, there will be no jail time."

"Any news on Edmund?"

"Still in a coma. No word on when he might come out of it, if at all. Still, we have a twenty-four hour police guard posted outside his room. All visitors have to register with the officer before they can enter the room." Anna refilled his coffee mug and returned the carafe to the counter.

Jeffrey thought about the others that were shot, and one who wasn't but was still in the hospital. "How's Billy Lewis?"

"You haven't heard?" Anna asked, curiously. She was surprised that Reva hadn't told him.

Worrying slightly, and fearing the worst, Jeffrey asked, "No, what?"

"Bill said it was touch and go for a while after the surgery, but he should make a good recovery." She could see Jeffrey relax. "He had a pretty bad heart attack. He's lucky."

Jeffrey nodded, but he could see that Anna had something else to tell him by the way she shifted uneasily. "What?"

Anna stalled for a moment. She knew she had to bring up the news about the package delivered to her and the threat it represented. "I got something this morning. It was dropped off on my door handle." Anna stopped and pulled the box from her case and handed it over to him.

"What's this?" Grabbing his army knife from his pocket, he sliced open the package and carefully poked around the wrapping to see the item. Not understanding the significance of the item, he asked, "Any note?"

Shaking her head solemnly, Anna responded. "Didn't need to be. It's from my father. It's a warning."

Jeffrey raised an eyebrow.

"Back off investigating Edmund and the Winslow family."

"Have you tried contacting your father?" Jeffrey asked her, as he peered around the edges of the box and again examined the contents.

"To what end?" Anna was frustrated. She needed more information about Edmund and his motives.

Jeffrey shook his head, equally aggravated; Edmund was in a coma, and yet he was still causing trouble, or in this instance, he had someone making trouble for him. "What exactly is your father protecting? Surely, he has to understand that Edmund was unbalanced."

Anna snorted. "That's one word for it. I choose to believe 'homicidal maniac' fits the bill better."

"Yes, I would agree on that. And a few other words." At that, Jeffrey smiled up at Anna. Turning serious for another moment, he looked away and then back at her. "Have you shown this to Frank or Remy yet?"

Anna shook her head.

"Good."

"What?" Anna was surprised. It had been her intention to inform her team of her father's threat.

“Think about it for a second. What would your father expect you to do?”

“I don’t know what he expects from me these days. Probably keep it silent, at least for now, under the assumption that his threats still hold a lot of weight.”

“Let him assume that. The more people know, the more information can be leaked. I would hazard a guess that he’s probably got eyes present locally, especially with Edmund being in a coma. Don’t take anything for granted.”

The first thing Christina heard as she entered the busy pediatrician’s office was the sound of a television playing children’s programming, followed by an occasional child calling out character names. A few parents had children on their laps, reading stories or playing with toys. Pushing Clayton’s stroller through the door, she greeted a couple of other parents as she went and signed in at the receptionist’s desk.

As she and the baby waited to be called in, Clayton had begun to stir and cry, so she quietly turned and breastfed him then settled him against her shoulder; the occasional sneeze or hiccup breaking up his regular breathing pattern. A while later a nurse led her into the inside offices for Clayton to be weighed and to have his measurements taken. She asked her about his sleeping, eating patterns and general health information to find out if anything had changed from his first visit.

As the nurse looking after them was different from their first visit, Christina relayed the information about CK’s cold symptoms and mentioned how worried Remy has been. The nurse asked her if Clayton was their first child, and she let her know it was a first child for her. Christina paused a moment and then continued, informing the other woman that Remy had a son, Max, that had been born prematurely, had gotten sick, and died. The nurse reassured her that Clayton’s symptoms were normal enough, but let her know that if he developed a fever or if the symptoms continued to bring him right in again. She also let Christina know that the doctor would be checking him over when he’d finished with his last patient.

“Thank you,” Christina said as she gathered Clayton’s things.

“We’re also going to give him some vaccinations today, but we’ll do that near the end of the visit. Sometimes they have slight reactions that include some redness and a slightly elevated temperature. Give them some infant acetaminophen and if there’s still a reaction, or if he’s still exhibiting cold symptoms let us know right away. Generally it subsides within twenty-four hours or so.” The nurse guided Christina and Clayton into an exam room. “Dr. Munroe will be in to see you shortly.”

“Thank you.” Christina sat and waited quietly until the doctor appeared.

Most of the morning had been one meeting after the other for Olivia, though perhaps the longest was her meeting with Greg and reviewing the upcoming conferences that had been booked. In the midst of sorting out specific details, Olivia's stomach growled, which resulted in an amused grin from Greg and a glower from Olivia in his direction.

Almost as if on cue, a knock on her door sounded and a familiar head poked around it, causing Olivia's mood to brighten significantly. Greg grinned broadly, using Natalia's entrance as the perfect excuse to make his exit.

"I'll email you all the details when I finalize them this afternoon, Ms. Spencer."

Sending him a pointed look, she replied, "You do that, Greg," and she watched him quickly shuffle out the door.

"Scaring poor Greg again?"

"Nah, I don't think it works with him anymore. Maybe I should work on that." Olivia grinned, raising an eyebrow at her partner. "We were just sorting out the Beacon's conference schedule." Olivia looked down and for the first time, she noticed a picnic basket in Natalia's hand. Looking from the basket and then up to Natalia, Olivia raised an eyebrow. "Whatcha got?"

"Lunch."

"Yes! Right on time." Olivia went to take the basket from her partner, but Natalia held back. "What?"

"It's a surprise," Natalia teased.

Olivia mock pouted. "Oh, that's no fun."

"Uh huh," Natalia said, not buying any of it, knowing Olivia loved her surprises, especially culinary ones.

"So, what did our illustrious chef let you get away with making this time?"

"You'll see." Natalia moved over to the table and pulled out a couple containers of food and some plates, and started dishing out some food for both of them. The heavenly scents of lemon and rosemary permeated the room and sent Olivia's stomach growling even louder. Natalia giggled, and then kept on preparing their lunch setting. From the

mini-bar, Natalia pulled a couple bottles of water, and placed them next to the glasses she procured from the small desk. “¡Buen provecho!”

The salmon and rice dish she had prepared was cooked to perfection and Natalia delighted in seeing the admiration on her partner’s face as she ate. In fact, it wasn’t until Olivia pointed at her with her fork that Natalia even attended to her own meal. Natalia blushed slightly at being caught staring at Olivia, and then dug into her own food as they spoke about their mornings.

“Has Leyla told you of her plans?” Olivia asked after finishing a bite.

“About her daycare center plans? A little.”

“She’s done a lot of work on that. Impressed me actually.” Olivia smiled. “Did you know she was going to be taking her state licensing exam?”

Natalia fidgeted slightly and then grinned. “She wanted it to be a surprise. She’d been studying for a while. When I asked her what for, she asked me not to say anything until she was ready.”

“You’ve been keeping something from me?” Olivia asked, smiling as she teased her partner.

“Sorry.” Natalia returned a smile. “Leyla said she wanted to have as much of her preparation work done before she went to you. I think she’s a bit intimidated by you.”

“Just a bit?” Olivia smirked. “I’m going to have to work on that. People need to be a lot intimidated by me. I am a business *mongrel* after all.”

Looking over at her partner, Natalia giggled. “So what do you think? About her wanting to open the day care here?”

“She’s young and ambitious. I admire that. I told her we’d work on the business plan tonight.” Wanting to talk about something else, Olivia remembered Natalia was going to talk with the chef about some positively sinful dessert that he wanted to add to their menu, and *that* was something that was right up her alley.

Putting their dishes aside to be taken back to the kitchen later, Olivia then moved to assist Natalia into a standing position, and she drew her close. “That was delightful. But I do remember you teasing me this morning about some dessert?” Olivia pressed kisses along Natalia’s jaw.

“Olivia.” Natalia all but moaned her response, as she elongated her neck to one side allowing the other woman to continue her rain of kisses. She pulled Olivia tighter to her

and ran her hands up her partner's back, and then moved back just far enough to capture Olivia's lips with her own.

They continued trading kisses for sometime before Olivia pulled away, her eyes still in a haze of passion. They glinted as she smiled. "Dessert?"

Natalia swatted her partner's arm and laughed.

With the music turned up in the living room so she could hear it over preparing supper, Blake hadn't heard the doorbell ring. It wasn't until Doris plunked down a bottle of wine on the kitchen counter, that she was aware of the other woman's presence.

"Ahhh!" Blake jumped back; the paring knife still in her hand.

Doris smiled but her immediate response was to quickly move back as well. "Whoa! Put the knife down. We don't need a hospital visit tonight."

"Sorry," Blake said as she put the knife back on the counter. Taking a deep breath, she looked back over at Doris. "Don't scare me like that again."

"No problem." Doris tried looking around the other woman to see what she'd been working on. "Can I help you get supper ready?"

"Nope," Blake said, smiling, before heading to the cupboard to pull down two wine glasses. "I'm almost done with the prep." She reached into the drawer for a corkscrew and handed it to Doris to open the wine bottle, and then she went back to chopping some of the bell peppers.

When Doris was quiet for a couple of minutes, Blake looked over at her curiously. "How did your meetings go this morning?"

"Dull and duller. More proposals and bylaws to review. And I've got another meeting with the governor on Friday." Doris looked down pensively and sighed. Quietly, she spoke. "I've been thinking of resigning as Mayor."

Startled by the other woman's quiet proclamation, Blake stopped cutting and turned towards Doris. "What? How?"

"I'm tired of the politics, of all the bullshit." Doris played absently with the stem of her glass, the red wine swirling slightly.

"Not to be blunt, but you were so gung-ho when you ran for mayor a few years ago."

“Things have changed. I’ve changed.” Doris stood up and moved around the kitchen, pacing slightly. “I don’t want to be that person anymore. I lost so many friends – people I thought I should be friends with, anyway. And I’ve hurt people and pushed so many away in the past few years...really for more years than I can count, because I was afraid of letting anyone get too close.”

“And now?” Blake asked as she stopped the other woman, putting a hand on Doris’s forearm.

“Now, I’ve realized that I have friends, good friends that I care about, friends that I hurt. Remember that televised speech I gave last year about Emma’s ‘My Two Mommies’ presentation? I may not have said who it was, but it was inferred enough, and it hurt two people who’ve become very dear to me.”

Blake nodded. “Olivia and Natalia.” Looking up her friend, she sighed and drew her lower lip in with her teeth. “This isn’t like you though, to give up now; especially when things are so crazy after the shootings. I haven’t ever known you to be a quitter.”

“I’m not. This whole shooting has got me all out of sorts and I’m not used to feeling that. I keep thinking what-ifs and it’s got me going around in circles.”

“That’s perfectly understandable.” Blake drew Doris into a hug. “And trust me, I’ve done my share of ‘what-ifs,’ and it never ends in anything good.”

Taking a deep breath, Doris exhaled and relaxed into the hug for several moments. Stepping back she rubbed a hand over her face and then ruffled her fingers through her hair. “I know. I just need to get myself together.”

“Why not focus on what you can do? The police have been working non-stop on investigating Edmund’s case, right? So let them focus on that. Maybe you could work with the hospital to create a memorial scholarship in honor of those that died or work on creating something positive for the town. People won’t soon forget the tragedy, but people will remember it a little better if something good came out of it.”

“You know, you’re good at this,” Doris smiled as she looked at Blake.

Blake shrugged a little shyly.

“No, you are. I was ready to give up, and as you so rightly put it, that’s not me.” Doris stopped for a moment, tilting her head to the side as she thought about something. “You know, you’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

“What?”

“Helping me.” Doris wasn’t completely sure what was developing in their relationship, but she knew that having a friend push you down out of the line of fire to keep you safe generally wasn’t part of any friendship she’d ever been involved with before. *There’ve been people wanting to push me into the line of fire sometimes.* The other woman seemed to be blatantly flirting with her sometimes and then other times she wasn’t sure what was going on. Having recently come out of a relationship that started quickly with Anna and then burned out almost as quickly, she was reticent about starting another relationship. And yet, the kiss that Blake had given her during the ball game a couple months ago still frequently came to mind.

“Thanks.” In an attempt to change the subject, Blake picked up her glass of wine and took a long drink. “Now that that’s settled, since being mayor isn’t a full time job, what else have you been thinking of doing?”

“I’d like to focus on my legal career.”

“In the district attorney’s office?” Blake asked curiously.

“God, no. I think I might actually like to win for a change,” Doris said laughingly. “It’s rather embarrassing, but I lost more cases than I ever won.”

Recalling newspaper reports of the various cases that got a mistrial or hung jury over the years, Blake nodded. “That’s true.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault the police sent cases my way that were incomplete or had technicalities because evidence was compromised, incomplete or lost.” Doris smiled wryly. “I’m good. But I’m not a miracle worker.”

Blake chuckled as she turned and picked up Doris's glass and handed it over to her. She took a sip of her own, before placing it back on the counter as she turned to finish preparing supper. She didn’t cook very much; there were benefits to working in a restaurant, but on special occasions she enjoyed cooking for friends. Tossing the vegetables onto the skillet she lightly sautéed them, seasoning them as she went. She turned slightly, leaning her hip against the oven.

“What kind of law do you like to work with?”

“I like being in the courtroom. It kind of feeds my ego at times. Ideally, I’d like to be able to choose the clients I will work for.”

“Do you want your own practice or would you rather work in a partnership?”

“With the right people, I could work in a partnership. It takes the pressure off a single individual to bring in all the cases and to have an investigative team working for us.” Doris paused, thinking it over in her head, mulling over possibilities. “I’ve got an idea. I need to speak to the individuals in question and see if it would work.”

“Any clues?” Blake asked curiously, and she turned back, stirring the vegetables around, so they wouldn’t burn.

Doris grinned. “Not yet. I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Please?”

“Uh huh.” Doris wasn’t giving an inch.

“Remember I am cooking for you,” Blake teased.

“And I brought the wine,” Doris grinned as she held up her glass. She noted Blake’s pout and shook her head. “I promise I’ll tell you first after I’ve talked with potential partners.”

Realizing she wasn’t going to get any further information out of the other woman, Blake turned her attention back to the stove. “Fine then.” She added the already cooked chicken to the skillet and mixed it in with the vegetables for a few moments before checking the steamed rice on the back burner. Satisfied that all was cooked, she asked Doris to get down a couple plates from the cabinet and then served their meals. She called Clarissa down from her room to join them for supper, and they chatted for a while about what the girl was doing in school and about her friends.

It wasn’t until Clarissa mentioned that she thought Emma was finding it hard to concentrate in class, and that she’d been keeping more to herself, that Doris’s attention was piqued. She knew that Olivia’s daughter was more adaptable than a lot of children, with all she’d had to go through in the past few years, and particularly over the past few months. For the girl to be so withdrawn was setting off alarm bells in Doris’s head. The shootings at the wedding had affected each person differently; she had occasionally woken up with nightmares of being shot and injured and wondering what she would tell Ashlee. It was one thing when you hear about shootings in the news or paper that happen to someone else, but this happened in Springfield, and to people she cared about. She was determined that at her next meeting with the Governor she was to going to push for harder sentences for weapons-related offenses.

Shaking her head out of her mental meanderings, she looked over at Blake and with an unspoken agreement between the two she promised she would look in on their friends. After supper, Clarissa left to return to her room to finish her homework. For the rest of the evening they talked about a myriad of things, and enjoyed each other’s company.

Company was still busy after the supper rush. The Indian summer temperatures lingered, and folks had gathered for a late meal and dessert. So when the remaining customers had mostly trickled out of the restaurant, Buzz, Frank and Lynn had finally breathed out a sigh of relief. Frank was busy drying glasses at the bar and replacing them when the chime above the door rang and Lillian entered.

Lillian headed over to give Buzz a kiss and then sat down on one of the stools at the bar. "You look as tired as I feel," she said to Buzz.

"Busy evening. How was work?"

"Long. Nothing out of the ordinary for most of the shift. But there was a memorial service in the hospital chapel this afternoon for those killed at Rick's wedding." Lillian sighed as she remembered some of her friends that had died, and some from the hospital board. She'd missed the wedding as she hadn't been feeling well, and now she had mixed feelings; she would have liked to have been there for their friends, but she knew it could well have been her or Buzz that had been injured or worse.

When she'd learned that Holly and Ed hadn't been able to make his son's wedding, she breathed a sigh of relief; not that she wanted them to miss out on the otherwise happy occasion, but they also could have been injured or killed during the shooting spree. Ed had been a long time close friend, and at one point, much more. She hated the fact that his wife and her friend, Maureen, had died shortly after her affair with Ed, and she'd blamed herself for that for so many years. Although last year she'd made peace with herself while visiting Maureen's grave, she knew she would have a much harder time adjusting to losing Ed after all these years. She made a note to herself to send a message to Ed when she got home.

Noting his wife's sorrowful expression, Buzz came around the bar and pulled Lillian into a comforting hug.

The rest of the evening passed quietly as they tidied up the restaurant and prepared it for the morning's rush, and then they each left for home, Frank locking up behind everyone.

The mostly darkened storage room for cold case file boxes was illuminated by a single light down one aisle, as Eleni stood on a rolling ladder retrieving a particular box. A name had come up in one of the files she and Anna had been checking out earlier, and she'd jotted down the name. As she'd been waiting for a report to finish compiling on

her computer, she'd decided to come down to get the files. So engrossed in her task, she hadn't heard the intruder in the room until it was almost too late.

ACT III

"Na par i eychi!" Eleni yelled, barely holding on with one hand on the box and the other white knuckle grasping the side of the ladder.

"I don't know what that meant, but it didn't sound very good," Anna responded sheepishly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Can I help?"

Eleni quickly handed her the case file box and climbed down the ladder. "What are you doing down here anyway?" she asked curiously.

"Looking for you. Remy said he saw you come down here. I got to thinking about what we were talking about earlier. I took a look through the computer for cases that had similar links, if the same names popped up, connections with the detectives involved."

"Make any headway?" Eleni asked as she turned and retrieved the box from the detective's arms. They headed out of the storage room and back up to the squad room.

"I'm not sure, but Detective Gus Aitoro's name comes up a few times. The name doesn't ring a bell. Also Harley and Marina Cooper's names, and an A.C. Mallet." She stopped for a minute and realized the relationship Eleni had to two of those she mentioned. "Sorry, this must be hard for you."

"I guess. I haven't been here for many years, and my relationship with Marina was strained even before I left. I thought she had only gone into police work just to please Frank. And Harley's Harley, she kind of did her own thing." Eleni recalled not particularly liking her sister-in-law and at one point set it up to look like the other woman had stolen money from Buzz. "Mallet was married to my daughter for a while."

From the other woman's flat tone, Anna tried to determine what Eleni's perspective on that was. She shook her head. "Wow. Nepotism at its best."

Eleni dropped the box on the large table in the conference room and began digging file folders out, before she sorted them. Picking one of the folders up, and she flipped through it searching for some information.

"What are you looking for?"

"I ran a search this morning after we talked. Something didn't seem right. Mostly it's just small time drug stuff, not usually sufficient to stick out. The police raids recovered

packages of drugs that were smaller than typically used to traffic, but yet still more than one might have for recreational use. The amounts of drugs noted in the police reports differ from what's actually accounted for in evidence logs."

"So, someone within the department was helping themselves to some of the drugs." Anna picked up a file and sifted through it. "Do you think it might have been Desilva?"

"It seems almost too obvious, but it's a place to start. Something tells me it goes beyond that." Eleni put down the folder onto the desk suddenly, and smiled. "If we're going to be working on this all evening, I need some caffeine. And some food. Interested?"

"I had something to eat a little while ago, but I'm good for a caffeine boost," Anna said. The two women walked into the squad room. "Wish we could just speak with the detectives involved."

"Who do you need to talk with?" Remy asked them, having picked up on the last of their conversation.

Anna looked up at the question. "A.C. Mallet and Gus Aitoro."

"Last I heard, Mallet was in Europe on Agency business." He looked down. "As for Detective Aitoro, that won't be possible. He died a few years ago."

"What happened?" Anna asked, as she finished filling her mug from the coffee pot.

"He was trying to get to the hospital to help Olivia when she was sick, and he was hit by a car. He died not long after."

It took a few minutes and Anna's head quickly turned around. "Wait a minute. This was the same Gus whose heart ended up saving Olivia's life? Natalia Rivera's husband that Olivia was going after?" She'd gotten a little bit of information on some of Olivia's recent romantic entanglements from Doris when they were dating, and some other tidbits from Jeffrey, but embarrassingly – at least for herself – she hadn't put the two together.

"The one and the same." Remy nodded, and then curiously looked at the two women. "Why did you want to talk with him, if I might ask?"

"His name had come up on some things we were checking out," Eleni responded.

Thinking for a moment, the crime scene investigator mentally noted that none of the detectives who'd filed the original reports were currently with the department and she sighed. That could make things much easier in some respects, in that their investigations didn't need to be clandestine. However, there was an inherent wariness when cops

were investigating other cops. The fact that one of the people they wanted to talk with was dead, two more were out of the country, and one was the estranged daughter of one of the investigators, meant that getting the answers they needed was going to be a challenge.

“Can I help with anything?” the younger man asked eagerly.

Anna paused a moment, wondering how much she should involve others at the moment. At the moment it was her project. Or rather, it was a joint investigation between herself and Eleni, after they started uncovering police reports surrounding the Edmund Winslow case when he had reappeared in Springfield more than a year and a half ago that had been misfiled, incomplete, or lacking sufficient evidence. It had raised red flags for both of them, and Anna was surprised it hadn't done so for Frank Cooper. That said, it would be helpful to have someone she had started to trust, and someone who had a better local knowledge of the community. The younger man had impressed her when they were investigating Edmund and in retrieving Jeffrey, Jonathan, Olivia and Reva from capture.

“I'll get back to you on that. Thank you,” Anna told him.

When Josh Lewis arrived at the farmhouse, he knocked on the kitchen door, and when there was no response, he knocked harder. The lights were on and he knew they were expecting him, so he pulled out his cell and quickly typed out a message.

JLewis 6:30pm: Hope you're doing something fun that has kept you from answering the door.

It only took a moment to get a response, but it wasn't in the form of a text message. Instead the door opened to Olivia's amused grin. “I was. You interrupted.”

When Josh looked at his ex, and on the scene in the kitchen, he laughed. On her shirt and neck was a splattering of squished green vegetables that from its placement and dispersion could have only come from the messy, outstretched hand of the growing infant in her highchair. Once he regained his composure, he spoke. “Oh, I remember those days.”

“Yeah, Sweet Pea seems to think her broccoli looks better on me than in her.” Olivia shook her head and moved so Josh could enter. She looked over at the sink where Natalia was standing. She could tell from the expression on the other woman's face that Natalia was trying to hide a smirk at the situation as she worked at making the Caesar salad for their supper.

“Hi, Natalia. How are you?”

“Not bad.” And that was true, at least on the surface. Underneath, she was still fighting the guilt. Not the guilt that she figured most people thought she should have – shooting at another person, even if she didn’t take a life, but the guilt for not feeling as bad as she thought she should. Natalia was protecting her family. Normally she abhorred violence of any kind; she tried to protect Emma from violence in television, movies and video games as much as she could. She also recalled talking Olivia down from wanting to go after Phillip with that same gun when he returned to Springfield the previous year, so it surprised no one more than herself that she had picked up Olivia’s gun during the rampage at Rick and Mindy’s wedding and wanted to kill Edmund if it meant keeping her family safe. That she hadn’t actually hit him was something she’d been warring with herself; what did it all mean?

Picking up on the tension in her partner’s posture and expression, Olivia positioned herself beside her and placed a hand on Natalia’s lower back, rubbing slow circles onto the skin. Feeling some of the tension ease, she looked over at Josh, who’d been looking at them. In an effort to change the direction of the mood of the room, she turned and retrieved some glasses from the cupboard. “Can I offer you some wine or something else to drink?”

“Some red wine would be nice,” Josh said with a smile. He realized that if the two women needed someone to talk to, they’d let him know, but for now, he’d let them take the lead.

“Great.” Olivia poured them each a glass of red wine, and a glass of white wine for Natalia, knowing her partner’s preference, then she picked out the plates and cutlery for their supper. After making those preparations, she moved over to Natalia again. “I’m going to head upstairs for a minute to change shirts and clean up from Francesca’s mess. I’ll get Emma to come down.” Pressing a kiss to Natalia’s temple she moved out of the kitchen.

Natalia watched her go, and then moved to clean her youngest daughter’s hands and face, and then she unfastened the tray from the baby’s chair. Unclipping the straps, she picked Francesca up in her arms and smilingly kissed her. Turning to face Josh, she spoke up. “Olivia tells me the school project is going very well.”

“We’re ahead of schedule, so it’s looking promising. With Jonathan and Shayne taking on more responsibility since Billy’s heart attack, it’s working out very well. Bill has also taken on more of the contract management.” Josh smiled at her holding her daughter. “How are the girls?”

“Growing like crazy. Francesca sometimes seems to be growing an inch almost every other day.” Natalia smiled wistfully. “I missed so much of this with Rafe – just enjoying

being with family – because when I wasn't working so hard, I was so exhausted. I did my best for him, as much as I could as a teenager. I'm so happy to have Olivia and Emma with me this time. I dreamed of this kind of family when I was younger." At Josh's raised eyebrow, Natalia smiled and added, "Okay, so maybe not specifically this kind of family, but I can't imagine now what I would do without them." Shaking her head, and then keeping it bowed, Natalia continued softly. "I almost did lose them forever."

Thinking she was referring to the time she'd spent away last year, he placed a finger under her chin, raising her face to meet his. Josh looked directly at the younger woman. "Natalia, she's here. She's the happiest I've ever seen her, and that's saying a lot. Once upon a time I thought I could have done that, but what we had can never be truly compared to what you two have."

Lost in her own thoughts, she flatly spoke. "He started shooting at people. I saw people drop, blood. Everyone was running." She pulled Francesca tighter against her chest, not taking notice as the baby squirmed. "I saw her gun on the grass and I grabbed it."

Olivia stopped as she neared the kitchen entrance. She heard her partner's voice and she felt her heart breaking. They'd been talking a little about what had happened at the wedding, particularly as they'd both been hit with nightmares.

"All I wanted to do was protect my family," Natalia continued. "If it meant shooting him, then that's what I had to do." The tears were falling down her face. "Does that make me a bad person?"

Stepping into the kitchen and easing her partner's arms from around Francesca, Olivia lifted the young girl out of Natalia's arms and placed her in Josh's arms. Then she wrapped her arms around Natalia. "No, querida. That does not make you a bad person. It makes you human." Olivia placed a kiss on her partner's hair and then rested her head against Natalia's, tears rolling down her own cheeks.

Neither of them noticed when Josh moved into the living room, allowing the two women some privacy. Moving over to the couch, he grabbed one of Francesca's soft books and began to read to her, his low tone of voice lulling her into a state of drowsiness. He had just laid her into her playpen when Emma started to come down the stairs. Looking up at her quickly, he placed a finger to his mouth, indicating to the older girl to be quiet coming down the rest of the way.

Emma smiled as she noticed the visitor. With a lowered exclamation, she called out, "Uncle Josh!" Running over, she gave the man a hug, and then she paused, looking at him curiously then looked around the room. "Where's Mom and Ma?"

"In the kitchen." As the girl moved to head in that direction, Josh stopped her. "Em, give them a minute or two." He smiled at Emma. "Tell me what you're doing in school. What

grade are you in now?" He looked over at Francesca, seeing her quietly batting at stuffed toys, and then back up at Emma.

"Grade six!" Emma grinned. "We're learning about the stars in science class. Did you know that there're new planets being found?" Emma asked him excitedly. "We got to see pictures from the telescopes."

Josh smiled at her exuberance. "You know, I think I might have a telescope in storage that I used to have when Shayne was young." He'd check with Reva to see if it was in storage out at the house. "Without all the lights out here, I bet it would be great to see the stars at night."

"Really?"

"I'll let your moms know when I find it and then I can arrange to drop it off."

"That's so cool!" Emma was positively bouncing, wanting to go in and tell her mothers the news.

Josh looked over Emma's shoulder to see Olivia appear around the door frame from the kitchen and saw the grateful expression on her face. Leaning towards Emma, he grinned conspiratorially and whispered into her ear. "I think you can go tell them now."

Emma was up in a flash and darted towards the kitchen, running into her mother in the process.

"Whoa, Jellybean. What's the rush?" Olivia smiled down at her daughter.

"Uncle Josh says he has a telescope that Shayne played with, and now he said he's going to bring it out for me to use."

At Emma's quickly spoken sentence, Olivia laughed gently, as she gave her a hug. Looking up at her ex, Olivia briefly closed her eyes, and mouthed the words, "Thank you." She pulled back from the hug and looked at her daughter. "Hey, Bean? Supper's ready. Why don't you go wash your hands and then see if Natalia needs any help?"

"Okay, Mom," Emma said, still very excited by the possibility of getting to see some stars closer. She quickly disappeared up the steps to the bathroom.

Josh stood from his seated position in one of the chairs and nodded. "You're welcome. Anything I can do to help."

"Anything?" Olivia asked with a smirk.

“Why do I get the feeling that this is something I’m going to regret?”

“Would I do that?” Olivia responded coyly. “Okay, yes, I would. Or at least I have done.” She pursed her lips together. “I have a favor to ask of you. Actually, two, but one I’ll ask now and one Natalia and I want to ask you about.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“I hope so. You remember Natalia’s sister, Leyla?”

“Yes, she came from Chicago not long after you returned from Natalia’s grandmother’s funeral.”

Olivia nodded her head. “Well, she’s got an idea to open a day care center at the Beacon. She gave me some idea of what she’s hoping to do, and we’re going to be talking about it more this evening when she comes back. What I’d like you to do is convert one of the old board rooms into a space for the center. Once I get some more details on her requirements, I’ll let you know.”

“Sure, I can do that. Right now we’re ahead with the school building project, so I can get Shayne to take a look at the space.”

“Thanks, a lot.” An amused, teasing grin crossed her face. “Speaking of Shayne, and Henry, how’s it being a grandfather?”

“Just fine, Ms. Spencer,” he responded, matching her grin. “With Henry and Colin being so close in age, it’s great, in that they’re playing together. It’s kind of odd, but what’s life in Springfield without a bit of oddness?” Though he and Reva hadn’t been keeping Jeffrey from seeing Colin, Josh found it occasionally difficult stepping in, in a parental role to the boy, when he wasn’t his son. Defining his own role in Colin’s life, as essentially a step-father, was a situation he’d rarely found himself in. Even when he was with Olivia, he never considered himself a stepfather to Emma.

Emma ran down the stairs just as Natalia called through to the living room that supper was ready. They all got seated, said grace, and then tucked into their meals, enjoying the conversation. Once most of it was eaten, Olivia looked over at Natalia and silently asked her if she wanted them to ask Josh their favor. She got a nod in response, and putting her cutlery down she reached over and clasped Natalia’s hand again.

“Remember that other favor I mentioned?” Olivia asked. “Natalia and I were wondering if you would preside over our wedding ceremony. It would mean a great deal to us.”

Josh smiled brightly. “It would be my honor.” He noticed both women breathe a sigh of relief. “When were you looking at having the ceremony?”

“New Year’s Eve,” Natalia said, grinning happily.

Josh smiled. “Great time. New year, new beginnings.”

They returned to finishing off their plates of lasagna, and were preparing to get some ice cream for dessert, when Emma spoke up.

“So, Uncle Josh, when can you find the telescope?” Emma grinned as the adults around her laughed at her one track mind once she got focused on something.

Ava was just finishing her supper at Company when Remy and Christina arrived with Clayton. She briefly looked up at them and returned to her meal. Though she wouldn’t admit it to many, probably only to her mother, but seeing Remy with his son brought out a jealousy since she no longer had that with their son, Max. She had loved Remy, but when their son was born and then soon after died, she couldn’t deal with it all and needed to go away to get better. When she’d returned the previous year for Jeffrey’s ‘memorial’ service, she had a chance to talk with Remy and make peace with him and with losing Max at the infant’s gravesite.

Now though, seeing him all happy with his new son, she felt jealous. She finished her dinner and was about to go pay for her meal, when she looked up and saw Remy standing at the side of her table. “Hi,” she said quietly.

Seeing that his presence with the baby and Christina was making Ava uneasy, Remy spoke. “If it’s going to make you uncomfortable, we can go somewhere else.”

“No. No, don’t do that. I’m finished,” Ava said quickly, not wanting to get too attached. “You stay and have your supper. I need to head out to Mom’s anyway.” Ava stood and started past the stroller, but something in her made her turn, and she looked down at the baby. Her heart caught in her throat; she’d only seen Max so briefly, and it had been in a cloud of grief and depression, but Clayton looked so much like Max it took her breath away. “He’s beautiful, Remy.”

Remy looked down briefly, smiling at his son. Quietly, he spoke. “He’s been sick. A lot. And it scares me. Christina took him to the doctor this morning and the doctor said it’s just a little cold.” He paused and then leaned down to pick Clayton up. “I go into his room at night, just to make sure I can hear him breathing and just watch him.”

Ava nodded, not quite sure what to say.

Remy paused and then looked over to where Christina was finishing talking with Lynn at the counter, before turning back to Ava, smiling. "Well, I better go. We just came in to grab some supper."

"Take care, Remy. Look after him." When he left, Ava sighed as she poked her fork around her mostly empty plate. So lost in her own meanderings, she hadn't noticed the person standing next to her table until they sat opposite her.

"What's up?" Leyla asked.

Shaking her head, Ava responded. "What?"

"You just seemed out of it. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just old memories." Ava shrugged, and then looked up at Leyla. "What can I do for you?"

"You've worked for your mom in the hotel industry, off and on for the past few years, right?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I was talking with her this morning about opening up a daycare at the Beacon," Leyla said and smiled. "Natalia had mentioned it a few months ago about the possibility, so I decided to do something about it."

Ava raised her eyebrows in much the same manner as her mother. "Mom's not easy to work for. She expects people to always do their best. And if you're not, she'll let you know."

"I know that. I've done my homework," Leyla grinned. It had been an interesting afternoon tracking down information she needed to get her plan ready, and part of that had been speaking with employees at the Beacon. They had been reticent at first, but upon learning that she was Natalia's sister, they were more forthcoming.

"That's good. Not that I don't mind you stopping by, but did you need something from me?"

"I've got a business plan drawn up, and I was wondering if you can take a look at it before I bring it out to Olivia later this evening."

Looking for something to distract her from her thoughts, Ava held out her hand for the paperwork. "Hand it over."

The next twenty minutes passed as the two women reviewed the business plan. Ava made notes and suggestions that would help.

Leyla smiled at the other woman as she put the papers back in her folder. "You're good at this."

"Learned from the best." Ava looked over at Leyla. "Listen, did you need a ride out to the farmhouse?"

"If you wouldn't mind, that would be great. I came into town this morning with Natalia."

"If you're ready, we can head out now. I've just got to go pay for this," Ava noted, pointing to her near-empty plate.

After Francesca had kept her and Olivia amused for much of the evening, Natalia finally bathed, changed and put the infant into her crib for the night. Walking down the hall, she poked her head into Emma's room, where the girl was reading one of her books on her bed.

"Hey, Jellybean? Have you got your homework all finished?" When Emma just nodded, it set off alarms in Natalia's head. The girl's earlier exuberance had faded. She moved over to sit on the bed with her, and she brushed a few locks from Emma's forehead. "Emma, sweetie, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

Emma bit down on her lower lip lightly before looking back up at Natalia. "Ma, is the bad man going to hurt us again?" Her lip quivered as tears brimmed brightly in her eyes, threatening to spill over onto her cheeks.

"Oh, honey, I don't think so. He's in the hospital and he's hurt very badly. Frank has police keeping guard on him all the time."

"I'm scared."

Natalia felt her heart breaking at her daughter's quiet admission, and she enveloped her into a hug. "I know, baby. He scared me, too." She pressed a kiss onto the girl's head. "So much. But you know your Mom and me; we're going to protect you and your sisters and Rafe as best we can." She felt Emma's head nod as the girl burrowed closer.

Shadow whimpered from the floor at her mistress's sadness and jumped up onto the bed, turning and resting her snout on Emma's thigh.

Normally she and Olivia tried to discourage the dog from getting up on the bed, but in this instance, Natalia let it go, as she knew that the dog was sensitive to Emma's emotions, and Emma found comfort in that. Natalia sat back a moment and looked down at Emma's face, and she brushed the tear tracks from the girl's cheeks. "Emma, do you want to come downstairs with your mom and me for a while?"

Emma shook her head. "I'm just going to read for a little while longer."

Hesitant to leave her upset daughter, Natalia nodded at Emma's need to feel some independence. "Okay. We'll be downstairs if you need us, okay, sweetie?"

"Okay." Just as she felt Natalia stand, Emma wrapped her arms around her ma. Softly, she said, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Bean. So much." Natalia kissed Emma on the head. She stood and headed out of the room, taking a brief glance back as she saw Emma running her fingers through the ruff of Shadow's neck fur as the book lay open on her lap.

Venturing down the stairs, she heard the unmistakable voices of her sister and Ava talking with Olivia about the day care addition to the Beacon. She met a glance with her partner, and with a nod of her head, she indicated she was going into the kitchen.

Trying to think of something to do to occupy her time, she set about getting some coffee made up. Once done, she still found herself at odds, so she laid out the ingredients to make some cookies; it was comfortable and familiar, and didn't require much concentration. The sound of the mixer running had masked the arrival of another person in the room until Olivia was at her side, jolting her in surprise. Once she calmed her heart rate down, she turned the mixer off and turned to wrap Olivia in a tight hug.

After several moments, Olivia moved back slightly from the hug, but still remained in the embrace, and when she looked at her partner's face, she could see the sadness there. Softly, she pressed a kiss against Natalia's lips, and then wrapped her partner snugly against her.

"Olivia?"

"Yeeees?" Olivia responded.

Natalia paused, not sure how to broach the subject again, knowing how Olivia generally felt about medical personnel. Deciding she might as well just say it, she brushed a lock of hair from Olivia's face, in much the same way as she had done with Emma. "I think it might be beneficial to Emma to talk to someone, professionally I mean, about what happened with the attempted kidnapping and the shooting. Probably wouldn't be bad for both of us either."

"I know. Natalia, --"

"I know. But she's been more withdrawn lately. I think she doesn't want to show us just how much she's hurting." Natalia sighed, wondering if she was making any progress. "Maybe if she talks to someone like Remy's mom that she might find it easier. Sometimes it's easier to tell someone you don't know as well." Natalia's voice trailed off, knowing that her last statement could apply to her own state of mind as well. "Maybe Dr. Boudreau could help her, and us, with some coping skills to deal with the fear and guilt."

"You know I don't do well with doctors. And I'm a lousy patient." Olivia sighed.

Though she hadn't meant to, Natalia snorted at the understatement.

"Hey!"

"Sorry," Natalia said gently, smiling all the same.

Olivia looked down at the floor as she started to speak. "I know I don't have the best coping skills. In the past it meant getting drunk or getting laid." She looked up at Natalia and winced at her own wording, but her partner's face showed understanding. "In the long term it never worked, it just temporarily buried the feelings, and every once in a while they'd resurface...Usually when I'd done something stupid, and rather than talk about it, I ended up in the same cycle." Olivia grinned wryly. "And then you came into my life, and that set off a slightly different pattern of the cycle." She sighed, knowing Natalia was looking for an answer. "I'll think about it. Can I let you know tomorrow?"

Realizing that was probably the best response she was going to get at the moment, Natalia nodded and then rested her head on Olivia's shoulder. She heard Olivia sniff a couple times and pulled back to see a questioning look on her partner's face.

"What?" Natalia asked curiously.

"Are you making chocolate chip cookies?" Olivia looked over Natalia's shoulder at the mixing bowl and the bag of chips, and she grinned widely.

Laughing at her partner's expression, Natalia shook her head at Olivia's ability to focus on snacks at any chance. "Yes, I am."

"When will they be ready?" Olivia was getting excited, and despite having eaten a large supper not that long ago, her stomach growled, loudly. "Hear what you do to me?"

Natalia gave her a kiss and then playfully shoved her towards the door to the living room. "They'll be ready when they're ready."

"That's such a mom answer."

"And your point is what, my dear?"

Olivia stuck her tongue out and shrugged as she headed back into the living room with her daughter and sister-in-law.

Olivia was perched on the couch with one leg tucked underneath the other, as she leaned forward reading the business plan and the notes that had been made. She made a couple more notes on the proposal and then took off her glasses. "Okay, this looks good. Very sound and detailed. If you can review the corrections and draw up a final draft, I'll send it out to the board for approval."

Leyla sighed gratefully and smiled. "You won't regret this."

"You succeed at this and I won't regret it." Olivia smiled, and then turned to Ava. "Can you go up and ask Emma if she wants a couple of chocolate chip cookies before bed?"

"Can I get some, too?" Ava added cheekily.

"If you're a good girl."

"No promises."

Ava headed up the stairs and wasn't gone long before Olivia heard the quickened steps of Emma as she descended the staircase, followed by Shadow, and finally Ava.

Emma looked at her mother smiling hopefully. "There's cookies?"

Olivia smiled. "Natalia's making them. Do you want to go see if she needs any help?"

Emma nodded her head and took off into the kitchen.

"Ma? Mom said you were making cookies. Can I help?"

"Well, they're almost done, sweetie. But if you can take Shadow out to do her business before bedtime, I'm sure they'll be ready to take out of the oven when you get back."

“Okay,” Emma hooked the lead onto Shadow’s collar and then pulled on her sneakers and her coat before taking the dog out.

A few minutes later, she and Shadow came back in. After hanging her coat back up, removing her shoes and taking off Shadow’s lead, Emma went over to the sink to wash her hands. When the timer on the oven went off, Natalia directed her to get the cooling racks out of the cupboard to lay them on the counter. Emma waited for her ma to take the cookies out and put the tray on top of the stove, and then she pulled over the little footstool.

“Can I put them onto the cooling racks?” she asked.

“Sure can. Careful though,” Natalia said as she handed her the spatula

With a practiced movement, Emma easily transferred the cookies onto the racks and then put the spatula in the sink.

“Okay, it’s going to take a few minutes to cool. I’m just going to pour the coffee into the carafe. Can you get the cream and sugar for me and bring it into the living room?”

“Okay.” Emma brought out those items and came back. Natalia had poured her a glass of milk which she carried in to the living room. Her final task was to carry in a plate of cookies, and Natalia followed behind carrying the thermos and mugs.

They all enjoyed the drinks, the cookies, and talking and before long it was time for Ava to return to the Beacon, and everyone in the house headed upstairs. Olivia checked in on Francesca and smiled at the infant’s sleeping form, before checking to make sure Emma was in bed. Quietly she knocked on the door and entered when she heard her daughter’s voice tell her to come in. She smiled as it had been a recent mutual agreement between Natalia, Emma and herself to knock on bedroom doors before entering. She had explained to Emma that sometimes parents needed privacy in their bedrooms, and it was polite to knock and wait to receive an answer before entering. As Emma was now at the preteen age years, the girl asked if her moms could do the same for her when her door was closed, and Olivia and Natalia had agreed. But Olivia mentioned that if there was an emergency, they needed to be able to open the door without being asked in.

After a quick story and a kiss goodnight, Emma settled in and quickly fell asleep, and Olivia returned to her room and began to get ready for bed. She smiled as she noticed Natalia had already gotten tucked in and was reading a book. Slipping an old t-shirt and a pair of cotton pajama shorts on, Olivia climbed into bed and curled into Natalia.

“Mmmm. You feel so good,” Olivia murmured lightly.

Putting her book on her nightstand, Natalia turned into Olivia's embrace and kissed her soundly before resting her head against Olivia's shoulder. With the long day, it wasn't long before the two of them fell off to sleep.

A piercing scream woke Natalia from her sleep and it disoriented her for a moment. Checking to make sure that it wasn't Olivia, who had a tendency for nightmares that woke her abruptly, Natalia slipped out of bed and hauled on a robe as she headed down the hall. Poking her head into Francesca's room to see if the scream had woken her youngest, Natalia noted the infant still slept soundly. A second cry out followed by half-murmured words came from Emma's room. Opening the door, Natalia saw that the young girl was twisting about in the bed, the sheets tangled up in her limbs as she fought to get away from them.

"No, no. Stop! Don't hurt her! You can't hurt her!" Emma called out, panicking.

"Emma?" Natalia came closer, quietly, hoping that the girl would hear her voice amidst her nightmare.

"No! I won't let you!"

Natalia sat down on the edge of the bed and attempted to brush a hand against Emma's cheek only to get pushed back.

"No! Stop. You won't get me. I have to protect her." Emma's voice was sounding more desperate as she spoke.

More firmly, Natalia called to her, "Emma. It's Natalia. You're safe here. No one's going to hurt you."

"He's going to hurt Sweet Pea. Have to protect her." Emma's lip quivered.

"No, Bean. He's not going to hurt you or your sisters." Deciding to take a tack that she often took with Olivia when her partner was in the throngs of a nightmare, Natalia went around the other side of the bed and gently pulled Emma against her. She rubbed her back and talked to her gently to reassure her, until the young girl's breathing evened out and she finally fell back into a more relaxed sleep. Natalia stayed with her a little while longer to make sure that the girl didn't slip back into the same nightmare before she gently detached Emma's arms from around her waist and slipped off the bed. Pressing a kiss to Emma's forehead, she whispered gently, "Sweet dreams, Jellybean. Love you."

When she returned to her own bed, she curled back in around Olivia, who shivered as the coolness of the room air hit her skin. She felt Olivia burrow into her embrace as Natalia pulled the duvet back over them.

The morning routine was thrown off as they'd all over slept the alarms. When Olivia finally stirred to her Blackberry ringing, she picked it up. "Hullo?" Olivia answered groggily.

"This is your friendly wake-up call, Olivia," Doris's voice chuckled through the phone.

Her brain still in a fog, Olivia asked, "Uh? What time is it?"

"Nine o'clock."

Quickly jerking herself into an upright position, Olivia panicked. "Oh shit! How did-?"

"I called your office and when there wasn't an answer, I called down to the desk. Greg said you hadn't come in yet."

Olivia looked down at a still sleeping Natalia and frowned. Usually Natalia was the early morning riser but the younger woman was still dead to the world. Hearing Doris's prodding voice on the line she asked the other woman if they were supposed to be meeting for something that she'd forgotten about.

"No. I just thought I should tell you something that I thought you should hear from me first."

Curiosity getting the better of her, Olivia asked, "And what might that be, Madame Mayor."

"Just that. I'm stepping down as Mayor."

The news completely taking her by surprise, Olivia blurted out, "What?"

"Not right now, I mean," Doris clarified, realizing her wording was off. "When my term is up next year, I won't be putting my name forward."

"No shit?" Olivia was curious what was going on with her friend. "Um, can I meet with you a bit later? I have to get us all moving and get Emma off to school before I get into the office."

"I have a meeting in a few minutes anyway with my deputy mayor, and then another meeting after that. How about we meet for lunch and I can fill you in?"

"Sure. That sounds good. Where?"

“Towers?”

“All right. See you then.”

“Tell Natalia I said hello. Later.”

Olivia disconnected the call and put her phone back on the bedside table and then reached over to Natalia, pressing a kiss onto her forehead. When that didn't stir the other woman, she kissed down her nose and onto her lips. Finally, Olivia got a response as she felt Natalia's arm reach around her neck as she deepened the kiss.

“Mmmm. Not that I don't want to continue this, but we need to get moving. We're late.” Olivia pulled back from the kiss.

“Ugh, how late?” Natalia tried to burrow back into Olivia's arms.

“Nine o'clock late. Actually now 9:15. We overslept.”

“Damn it!” Natalia called out as she quickly climbed out of bed, realizing that she hadn't taken her robe off when she'd gotten in earlier after attending to Emma's nightmare. “We need to go get Emma up and ready for school.” She moved in a rush around the room to get her things ready.

“Whoa, slow down, love. I'll give the school a call and explain things and let them know Emma will be in as soon as we can.” Olivia pulled on her own robe and headed out of the room and down to her daughter's room. Knocking on the door, there was no response. She knocked harder, and still receiving no answer she opened the door to find an empty bed. Panicking she headed downstairs, looking around the living room and into the kitchen where Leyla was sitting drinking some coffee and reading the newspaper.

“Um. Have you seen Emma?” Olivia asked, slightly frantic.

Looking up at her sister-in-law, she could almost feel the anxiety rolling off her. Smiling, she nodded. “Yeah. I just got back from taking her to school. She missed the bus, but I was able to get her there on time for classes.”

Olivia tilted her head back and took a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Thank God!”

“She was going to wake you, but I was already awake and ready. Got her lunch all packed and took her over.”

“Thank you. I'll go let Natalia know so she can calm down a little.”

“Oh, you mean like you?” Leyla grinned, teasing.

“Oh shut up.” Olivia took a second to smell the coffee Leyla had. “Please tell me there’s more coffee in the carafe?”

“Yep. There are a couple mugs on the counter,” Leyla said pointing her thumb in said direction.

“Good. Because I’d have to kill you otherwise.”

“Hah.” Leyla went back to her newspaper.

Olivia poured two cups of coffee and fixed them up the way she and Natalia liked them and brought them upstairs. Entering their room, she saw Natalia emerging from the bathroom, and she handed her partner her cup. “Emma’s at school. Leyla brought her over.”

“Oh, thank God.” Natalia breathed out before taking a sip of her coffee.

“That’s what I said.”

“Did you have meetings this morning?”

“No, just some stuff that I need to clear up in the office. I need to get some budgets approved.” Olivia took a sip. “Oh, I’m meeting with Doris for lunch. Apparently she’s decided she’s not going to run for mayor again when her term is up next year.”

“What? Why?” Natalia was puzzled at Doris’s intentions; she’d been under the impression that the other woman loved her work.

“She didn’t say much; just that she’d give me the details later.”

“Well, let me know.” She leaned over to kiss Olivia. “Now go get showered and dressed and I’ll see you downstairs.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mid-morning had come and gone and Doris blew out a frustrated sigh. She was on her third cup of coffee for the morning, and the caffeine was already making her a little jittery. She briefly considered switching to decaffeinated, but that hadn’t lasted long;

the drawn-out meeting with her deputy mayor was tedious, but necessary. The ringing on her office phone caught her attention and she picked up the receiver.

“Yes, Brandon?” She asked her administrative assistant.

“There are two women here to see you: Beth Spaulding and Mel Boudreau.”

“Send them in. And can you bring up some fresh coffee.”

“All right, Madame Mayor.”

Doris took a deep breath as she awaited the women’s arrival and pursed her lips. Though it was getting easier to tell people that she was resigning, she was a little apprehensive about asking Mel and Beth to join her in a law partnership. Well, Beth in particular, since their history, at least where Alan Spaulding had been concerned, was adversarial. She only hoped that enough time had passed to allow the other woman to see this potential venture as moving forward than remaining in the past. She removed her soft blue blazer and folded it over the back of her chair and smiled as Beth and Mel entered.

“Now, I know you’re probably curious as hell as to why I called you here.”

Beth chuckled. “Well, that would be an understatement.” She looked over and saw a matching expression on Mel’s face.

Doris directed the two of them to sit down and then sat back against her desk, preferring that than to her chair for this meeting, not wanting to put any indication of any barriers between them. “I’ve decided when my term of office is up next year I won’t run again.

“Excuse me?” Beth asked, baffled at the other woman’s statement.

“Suffice to say, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. And I’ve changed over the past couple years.” Doris sighed, unsure of their response.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Mel asked her gently, understanding the need to change career directions.

“I’m sure. I’ve thought about this for a while. Right now, there’s seven people who know; both of you, my deputy, my admin assistant, Olivia and Natalia, and Blake.” Taking a deep breath, Doris pressed on. “The reason I’ve asked you here is that I am interested in starting a law firm, and I would like both of you to consider being my partners.”

There was a stunned silence that hung in the air as Beth and Mel absorbed the announcement, and as Doris realized that she'd made said statement. The silence was interrupted by a knock on the door as the administrative assistant brought the coffee, along with some cream and sugar. They each doctored their drinks to their taste and sat back in their places.

"I know it's a huge thing to ask and not a light undertaking. Mel, I know you've been an associate with legal aid in addition to your medical practice. So, however much you want to put into the firm is up to you. We can work that out afterwards if you're interested."

"It certainly sounds promising," Mel nodded. "Can I think it over?"

"Yes. Like I said, it's a big undertaking."

"I want to talk this over with my family, if you don't mind?" Mel asked.

"Go ahead." Biting down on her lip slightly she turned to Beth, and then she smiled. "I know we haven't always been on the best of terms, and that's just covering the surface, but I'm offering a clean slate here. New chances and new opportunities." Doris paused a moment. "And I'm quite certain that you probably have no desire to go to work for Alan's former attorneys."

"Ya think?" Beth smiled in response. "Not saying that they haven't offered, they have, but I don't think that's the kind of law I want to be practicing."

"What focus did you like in law school?" Doris asked curiously.

"Child protection and advocating for minors; it struck a chord with me."

"Interesting." Doris smiled. "That's good. Look talk with your family if you need to. New beginnings are a big change. But I think if we go ahead with this firm, it will be something that can make positive changes."

"Wow. This is something I didn't really expect from you," Beth commented softly.

"What prompted the change?"

Doris paused, debating on how much to tell, but she realized that if they were all going to be partners in this firm, she needed to tell them some things. "I started thinking I needed something different when I realized that I was hurting people unintentionally, and really I was only hurting myself by not being true to who I am." Taking a deep breath, Doris continued. "I really didn't like myself for a long while, and it showed in my relationships with others, including with my daughter Ashlee and close friends."

Both women nodded, understanding the situation.

“So, now I’m looking at starting over, doing something I’m proud of.” Doris smiled. “If you’ve got any questions, don’t hesitate to give me a call or send me an email.”

“Thank you, Doris.” Mel stood and held out her hand which was met by a strong handshake. “I’ll let you know tomorrow what my decision is.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thank you, as well,” Beth added. She smiled as she added, “You were the one to help me relax before I took the bar exam.”

“Well, you were also trying to get married at the same time. I think both things would have been nerve-wracking, just on their own.” Doris chuckled. “But you passed, and from what I’ve heard, quite highly, so a belated congratulations.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know tomorrow.” Beth stood and joined Mel at the door. “Have a good day.”

“You, too. Bye.”

Once Doris closed the door to her office, she leaned against the back of it and breathed out a sigh of relief; the meeting had gone better than she had anticipated. Next on her list of things to do was to meet with Olivia for lunch. Shaking her head at the potential comments she’d get from one of her best friends, she laughed. Well, she thought to herself, at least I have good friends now that I can tease with easily. And really, she needed to give a good teasing to Olivia for waking her up on a weekday.

ACT IV

The noise of the crowd during the lunch hour rush in Towers was something Olivia was rather familiar with as she approached the bar where Doris was perched on a stool.

“Have you been waiting long?” Olivia asked. She’d been delayed at her office and she’d cut it close to get there on time.

“About five minutes.” Doris turned to the Maitre’d and alerted him that she was ready. When he came over and escorted them to their table, she thanked him and turned back to her guest.

Olivia waited until their server had filled their glasses and given them some menus before she looked over at Doris. Curiously she asked, "So, what's this about you deciding to step down from politics?"

"Next year. I've just decided not to run again." Doris took a drink of her water.

"Any particular reason?"

"Just getting frustrated with the backstabbing and maneuvering inherent in the job. And pretending to be something I'm not." Doris sighed. Olivia had become her best friend over the past year and a half. They'd known each other's history; they'd both been guilty of those same manipulations. Being similar personality types, she hadn't ever thought they could become friends, and yet here they were. "I almost decided to resign immediately."

"What? And pull a Palin?" Olivia joked, but when she saw the sadness in her friend's face, she apologized. "Sorry. What's really going on, Doris? There's more to it than that. I've never seen you back down from a challenge or from hard times." When Doris was silent for longer than a few moments, Olivia looked around and spotted their server and called him over. Looking at Doris, she asked her if she knew what she wanted to order, and got a quiet answer. When he arrived at the table, she gave him their orders and gave him her credit card.

"What? Olivia, what are you doing?" Doris looked startled.

Olivia placed her hand on Doris's hand. "Getting our lunch to go. Towers isn't the place you want to be talking about this. Too many ears."

"Where are we going?"

"My office. Closed doors." Olivia picked up her purse. "Come on, we'll wait up by the bar for lunch."

In the intervening time, they spoke about nothing in particular, each seeing that the need for the conversation they had started was weighing on them, so when their packages of food arrived they quickly left.

Once in Olivia's office, they pulled out their lunches and set things up. Opening her door, Olivia called Keira over. "I'm in a meeting. No interruptions unless it's Natalia, okay?"

"Got it, Ms. Spencer."

Before the door had a chance to close, Doris spoke. "Thank you."

“Not a problem. I know Towers. You don’t say anything there you don’t want to read in the gossip rags.” She looked over at her friend and was concerned by her tired state. “You’ve been really quiet.”

“I’ve got a lot on my mind.” Doris rubbed a hand across her forehead.

Sensing the other woman was holding back, she responded, “That’s part of it.”

“Olivia, -”

“Doris, I’m trying to help. I can’t do that if I don’t know what’s going on.” Olivia let out a frustrated sigh.

After a moment’s silence, during which Doris focused on pushing her fork around her salad bowl, she quietly started to speak. “I have nightmares. About the shooting. All I see is people I care about getting shot, dropping like flies, and I can’t do anything. I’m trapped or something and when I look down and there’s so much blood – mine, Blake’s. Then I look up and I see Edmund holding the gun on Natalia.” Her voice stops, choking on the words, and tears roll down her cheeks.

Olivia stopped her eating and stood, pulling Doris up into a hug. She nodded, understanding. She’d been having variations of the same dream, except in the worst of her dreams, Edmund has shot Natalia and she loses the love of her life, or he’s shot any of their children. “I know.”

Sniffling, Doris pulled out of the hug after a few moments and was grateful when Olivia held out a box of tissues. “Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologize.” Olivia looked down at her discarded meal, no longer having much appetite. She covered it and put it in the bag and placed it up on her desk. “So, you thought about resigning.” She saw the other woman nod. “You know this is a really bad time for that?” Olivia asked gently.

“Yes,” Doris spoke more firmly, as she looked over at her friend. “Which is why I’m not. Right now, anyway.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Blake.” At Olivia’s questioning glance, Doris continued, “We talked last night. It helped me focus on things to do, and there’s so much to be done. I want to check on the police investigation and see where that’s going. I’m going to talk with Rick to see if the city can help fund a memorial scholarship in honor of those that died at the wedding. I couldn’t stop the shootings, but I can do something to help now.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“One of Blake’s,” Doris said, chagrined. “I’ve also got a meeting with the governor tomorrow to discuss a bill to tighten up punishments for violent crimes.” She smiled. Thinking of positive goals was starting to improve her mood, but it didn’t last long. “I’ve got something to tell you.”

Olivia noticed the change in Doris’s expression. “I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“No, most likely not.” Doris looked up at her friend with sympathy. “When I was at Blake’s last night, Clarissa mentioned a couple things about Emma that she’s noticed in school. She said that Emma’s been having a hard time concentrating in class, not getting her work done, and she’s been keeping to herself when she’s not in class.”

Olivia felt her world collapsing in on her; Emma had been her shining light for so long, and to hear that her light was fading and withdrawing was breaking her heart. She’d been noticing little changes in her daughter, as Emma was not spending as much time with her and Natalia, but she’d put some of that down to changes in the girl’s development. Her own troubled dreams and fears seemed to overshadow seeing that in her daughter, and for that, Olivia felt guilty.

Seeing her friend’s agonized expression, Doris reached a hand over to cover Olivia’s. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make things harder for you, but I thought you’d want to know.”

Swallowing around the lump she felt in her throat, Olivia spoke quietly, “Thank you.” As she sniffled, she rubbed her hand under her nose then took a deep breath. Looking down at herself and then over at Doris, she tried to lighten the mood. “Wow, we’re a pair.” Standing, she turned to her cabinet and pulled down a face cloth and towel for each of them. “There’s a sink in the corner. You might want to freshen up your face before you leave.”

“You’re no shining diva, Spencer,” Doris shot back with a chuckle.

Olivia stuck out her tongue and then grinned. Once Doris had finished, she cleaned her face from the tear-stained makeup and bloodshot eyes. “Next time, no bad news and we have burgers and fries at Company.”

“You’re on!” Doris smiled as she wrapped Olivia in a good-bye hug, and then she picked up her purse and left the office.

Olivia dropped down onto her chair, bending forward on her desk as she leaned on her elbows. She sighed knowing this news was going to be as hard on Natalia as it was on her.

The Springfield police station was busy when Eleni arrived that morning, and she tried to balance a couple cups of coffee in her hands when her cell phone rang. Putting the cups on the nearest desk, she pulled her cell out of her pocket and answered the call.

"Yes, Chief, I'm here. Give me a couple minutes to get the report from my office and I'll be in." Hitting the disconnect button, she blew out a frustrated sigh. "Damn it." Eleni looked around the office, and spotting Remy, she called over to him. "Hey, Remy! Have you seen Detective Li?"

"Yeah, she's in with Frank."

"Okay, thanks." Eleni scratched her chin for a moment as she was thinking of something, and then turned to head down the hall to her office. Arriving at her desk there was a folder on top with Edmund Winslow's name on it that she and Anna had been working on the previous evening. Picking up the file, she caught a sticky note attached to the top. *Dr Hastings called – Winslow's neurologist. Latest report on top of files.* Quickly flipping the top of the file over, Eleni glanced over the findings. Blood work was returning to normal parameters. A lung infection had developed. The PT levels measuring the time it takes for his blood to clot were leveling off with the blood thinners. She scanned the MRI and PET scan results. Swelling was down on his brain, and they were waiting on repeated brain function tests, some of which couldn't be done until he came out of the coma, if he ever did come out of the coma.

Remembering she was supposed to be in Frank's office, she tucked the file under her arm and picked up both cups of coffee, hoping the latter hadn't cooled down too badly. Trying to juggle the cups and the folder, she managed to knock on the Chief's office door, and was glad when it was quickly opened.

Thrusting a cup towards Anna, she kept hold of her own between a wrist and her chest. She took a look around the room, where Remy and Anna had taken seats, and Frank was sitting behind his desk.

"What's the latest on Edmund?"

Eleni held up the report she'd been holding underneath her arm. "Still in a coma. His neurologist says his blood work and scans are coming back within normal range."

"There's nothing about that bastard that's *normal*," Remy said in disgust, which earned a look from Frank but the younger detective was sure his boss felt the same.

Anna had a contemplative look on her face. Looking back to make sure the door to the office was closed, she turned to face Eleni first and then Frank. "I wasn't going to say anything about this until I was sure there were no other ears around. Only one other person knows about this, and it's Jeffrey O'Neill." She paused, trying to assure them of the gravity of the situation. Jeffrey had suggested that she not tell anyone yet of her father's warning, but she'd learned to trust these people and she felt if their lives were going to be at risk, they had the right to know the source. "I had a threatening message delivered to my home yesterday morning."

Eleni looked at her concerned. "What? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I had to be sure I trusted everyone in the room. Look, it's not personal. I grew up not trusting a lot of people because of my family." Anna sighed. "The message was from my father. A warning to back off investigating the Winslows."

"What form did the message come in?" Eleni asked.

"A package was dropped off on my door handle around seven in the morning. After checking the outside of the box, I opened it with a knife along the edges. Carefully examining the packaging there was a single item in there: a pair of exercise hand grips."

"Hand grips? What kind of threat is that?" Frank asked incredulously.

"You don't know my father. He's a martial artist. I've told you before that he worked for the Winslow family for generations as security and head of the Royal Guard. He can and has killed people with his bare hands." Anna put her hands on Frank's desk. "You know what he and the Winslow family did to Olivia and she was just sixteen at the time. What we've been investigating in Edmund's present and past is far more pervasive than that. And don't for one minute think that my father doesn't have eyes and ears around Springfield, especially with Edmund in the hospital, still in critical condition." Anna looked around to each person in the room, making sure she made eye contact with each person. "I need to make sure that that information stays inside this room. Nobody else knows about it until I tell them, if I tell them. It's a threat, specifically for me, but since we are working as a team, that threat will extend to anyone investigating. Which is why I have told you."

Trying to take in the seriousness of the situation, Eleni asked her, "Can we scale back on how many are on the case?"

Anna stood, holding onto her now cold coffee. "Probably not. More than likely, he already knows who's investigating. So, right now, it needs to be business as usual."

Frank ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "Okay, if that's everything, I need to make some phone calls. Eleni, I need to see you later." Noting that she nodded her head

before she left, he sat back in his chair and heaved a sigh. It still wasn't even 9:30 in the morning and he was already feeling like he'd put in a full day's work.

The corridor to the offices of St. Elizabeth's Mission was quiet at this hour of the morning. Most of the volunteers that helped prepare the lunches were already down in the kitchen, and a few others were sorting through clothing that had been donated. Natalia had waved at them as she passed by; many she knew but there were a couple new young women that were helping out. Finding the office she was looking for, she knocked on the door. It took a moment, but the door opened to reveal a smiling face.

"Come in, Natalia. It's nice to see you."

Natalia opened the door and smiled at the nun that greeted her. Though in truth, Natalia thought the woman probably wasn't much older than herself. "Is this a bad time, Sister?"

"No, come on in. Just doing some budgeting. I'm glad for the break, really." Sister Anne shook her head. "Sorry, where are my manners. How are you?"

Natalia sighed and looked down at her hands that had been fidgeting with the straps of her purse. She had been glad that her sister was going to be staying at the house that morning to look after Francesca. Though she'd occasionally brought the baby over to the mission with her, this was one time that she didn't want her daughter to hear what she needed to talk about, whether she understood or not.

"Natalia?" Sister Anne was becoming concerned at the other woman's mannerisms and distraught expression. "Hey, come here." She guided Natalia over to a set of chairs along the side wall of her office.

Natalia sniffled and brought her hand up to her face, her knuckles pressed against her mouth, as she tried to stall the sobs that had caught in her throat. She hadn't wanted to fall apart so quickly, but she knew she trusted the kind woman before her.

Sister Anne sat patiently with Natalia, offering her tissues as she needed until the tears subsided. "Can you tell me what's the matter? Is it Olivia or the girls?" She saw Natalia shake her head. "Rafe?" Another shake. She was at a loss. She hadn't talked with Natalia in a few weeks, as both their lives had been busy.

When Natalia's breathing evened out, she looked up at Sister Anne. "Do you remember hearing about the shooting at a wedding in the park?"

"Yes, several people were shot, correct?"

Natalia nodded. "I shot at one of them. The bad man, Edmund." Her voice caught in her throat. "He was going to shoot my baby. I saw Olivia's gun and I picked it up and I shot him. I had to protect my daughter." Natalia's tears came forth again, and she felt the nun's arms come around her, hugging her.

"Oh my God, Natalia." She was starting to understand now why the woman before her was falling apart. "Did he die?"

"No. But I wanted him dead." Natalia sat back and wiped at her nose with a tissue. "I'm confused. Why don't I feel guilty? I should feel guilty for trying to take another person's life, shouldn't I?"

"Why do you think you should feel guilty?"

Natalia was a mix of curiosity and confusion when she looked over at Sister Anne; the other woman certainly didn't seem to follow along the same lines that she had expected. "It's what I grew up learning in the Bible: 'Thou shalt not kill'. Aside from the legal aspect of it, I grew up respecting that a life is a life, and taking another person's life was wrong." Natalia bit down on her lower lip. "But in that moment, when he held his gun on Francesca, it didn't feel wrong to shoot him."

"Natalia, you were protecting your daughter's life, and the life of others. Don't get me wrong, I don't advocate the use of violence at all, but I understand the need to protect your family."

When Sister Anne's voice had tapered off, Natalia looked at her. "Sister?"

She hadn't meant to zone out on the woman she was trying to help, but she knew that need to protect. She'd only been fifteen when she and her sister, Kathy, were in a convenience store in Chicago and a gun fight had broken out between two local gangs. A wild shot had penetrated through the store window and hit her older sister in the chest. Kathy hadn't even seen it coming and had dropped to the floor so quickly. One of the gang members, really not much more than a boy, came into the store to try to rob the place, holding his gun on the clerk and when he heard her crying, came over and threatened to kill them both. She remembered lying over her sister's still warm body, crying for all she was worth, paralyzed to do anything more. It was only when they heard sirens that the young man tried to run. By the time the ambulance got to the store, past the police and the gangs, her sister had died. Coming back to the present, she looked over at the other woman and shook her head. "Sorry, Natalia. I just got lost in some old memories."

"Are you okay?" Natalia asked.

"I'm fine." She chuckled slightly. "And here I am, trying to help you." Sister Anne reached out and covered one of Natalia's hands. "Have you talked to Olivia about what you're feeling?"

"Yes. She's trying to make me feel better, but I know she's hurting as much as I am."

"Of course she is. You're both mothers with a strong need to protect your family. That would affect you both, deeply."

"And Emma."

"Emma?" Sister Anne thought of the girl who would come in sometimes with Natalia and help sort through the clothes and perform other tasks, and she was saddened the shootings had affected her so strongly as well.

"She's had a couple bad nightmares. We've caught her having them a couple times and have brought her out of them. She had one last night that was really bad." Natalia had tears coming down her cheeks again. "All I want to do is hold them and make all the hurting go away. How can I do that when I'm hurting, too?"

"You talk to them. Don't keep it bottled up inside, because it will fester, and it won't be good for any of you. Try to get them to talk to you, as well." Sister Anne went up to her desk, and after sorting through a small box, she retrieved a card. Sitting down, she handed it to Natalia. "I have to be honest with you. I think that the help you all might need goes beyond my scope of practice. That's not to say you can't come to me any time you need to talk, you can."

Natalia turned over the card and read the name, *Dr. Felicia Boudreau*, and she smiled. "Olivia and I were talking yesterday about maybe booking an appointment for us with her."

"That's good. Make that appointment and talk with her. She's a very good doctor."

"Thank you, Sister." Natalia smiled. She was about to add something when she felt a vibration from her cell phone. Taking it out of her pocket, she looked at the message on the screen. "It's Olivia. I turned off the phone before I came in."

"Tell her I said 'hello' and if she ever wants to talk, she knows where my door is."

"Thank you." Natalia lifted her purse up onto her shoulder and walked out of the office, feeling a little better for having talked with the nun, who had become a good friend over the months that she'd gotten to know her.

Sliding up her phone, she dialed Olivia's cell number, glad to hear her partner's voice.

“Hi” Olivia said, lovingly. “How are you?”

Sighing deeply after the talk she’d just had with her friend, Natalia responded “Better. You?”

“Rough morning. Where are you now?”

Sorting through her purse for her car keys, Natalia almost dropped her phone. Resetting the phone between her shoulder and her cheek, she delved back into the bag. She grunted, slightly annoyed at the fact that the darn things always seemed to end up in the bottom of her purse. Finally locating them, she grinned. “I just finished talking with Sister Anne. Why?”

“Just wanted to see if you wanted to grab some lunch.”

If the sound of someone’s voice through a phone was a tangible presence, Natalia swore she could see the joy and love in her partner’s voice at her request, and she smiled reflexively. “Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye love.”

The Turkish food vendor in the market was quickly fixing a wrap with lamb and vegetables for a group of customers when Alex Spaulding walked up, looking around to see if she could locate Dinah. When she had called Phillip last night, she got the latest news on Edmund, as much as he had learned from Rick. Alex was glad that the son of a bitch was still in a coma. She knew some of the hospital board members that had died through her social circles and their wives from event fundraising galas. She knew her own past wasn’t void of any misdoings; however, as far as she was concerned a little blackmail, emotional manipulation and kidnapping were nowhere near outright killing ten people and injuring several others.

Digging into her purse for a few Euros to pay for her lunch, she almost missed Dinah passing by. When she looked up to pay the vendor, she spotted a familiar form standing at a nearby table.

“Alex!” Dinah called out over the din of pedestrian traffic. She wanted to get this over with, to find out what the older woman knew.

“Dinah, dear, how are you?”

Leaning against a booth, Dinah turned to the elder Spaulding. "Just fine. So, what did Phillip say?"

"Getting right to the point, aren't you?" Alex smiled, used to the other woman's tendency to talk her way into or out of most situations.

"Well, I kinda want to know if there's going to ever be a chance of real Edmund coming after my ass for killing fake Edmund. I did want the bastard dead after all."

"Well, someone almost beat you to the punch. Apparently the bullet's still lodged in his brain. Edmund's in a coma, and no idea of when he's going to come out of it."

"Mmmm. Doesn't instill a whole lotta confidence in a girl." Dinah fidgeted with the strap of her purse. "What else is going on?"

"Oh the usual craziness of Springfield. Lizzie's about to pop with the baby, and Phillip's actually excited about being a grandfather."

"That is kinda crazy," Dinah said, grinning at the thought of her cousin being a grandfather. That, she decided, was worthy of plenty of teasing. Pausing for a minute, as she realized she hadn't heard from her mother since the initial text. She'd tried sending a return text but she had been having problems and seemed to keep missing Vanessa when she called the house. Nervously clasping her hands, she looked over at the older woman. "Alex, Phillip didn't happen to mention how Billy Lewis is doing, did he?"

"He's improving. He apparently came through the surgery fine." At the other woman's heavy sigh of relief Alex continued. "I'm sure he's going to be just fine."

"Thank you. You don't know how much that means." Glancing down at her watch, Dinah realized she was supposed to be meeting Mallet. "Look, I've got to get going. It was nice to see you again. See you around?"

"Are you heading back to Springfield?"

Smiling, Dinah lifted her purse up to her shoulder. "You never know. Stranger things have happened."

The afternoon sun still warmed the air in the park as Natalia neared the beloved gazebo that held so many memories, happy and sad, for them. Seeing her partner sitting and reclined back against the wooden slats of the railing, she stopped and admired Olivia's beauty. It would be their anniversary soon, and Natalia considered all they had been through over the past couple years, and she couldn't be more thankful to have the other

woman in her life as her love. Life had definitely tested them, and time after time they returned, building a stronger and more resilient family. She knew that they could overcome so much together, and she only hoped they would persevere through their latest struggle without too much damage.

As she noted Olivia stand to meet her, she moved forward, ascending the short step into the gazebo and was quickly wrapped in a tight embrace. Relaxing into the solid presence of Olivia's arms, she tucked her head under the older woman's chin. "You feel so good." She felt the press of Olivia's lips against her head as her partner guided her over to the bench. Turning slightly to face her partner, she moved her hands to cover Olivia's. "Why the rough morning?"

"Ugh. I had to intervene in an argument between Greg and one of our conference vendors. They'd increased their prices without informing us but the materials they were providing us with weren't of the same quality they've been sending. We'd be paying more for lesser quality. So I had a chat with the vendor. We'll pay the increased fee; however, they will be providing us with the higher quality materials, across the board. Of course, I did threaten him that if they didn't, we'd find another vendor."

"My business mongrel," Natalia said with a smile.

When Olivia noticed the smile didn't quite show in her eyes, Olivia grew concerned. "Natalia, what's wrong? Is it something you were talking about with Sister Anne?"

Natalia shrugged a little but nodded.

"Come here, querida," Olivia spoke softly, once again bringing the younger woman into her arms, conveying as much love and affection for Natalia as she could. Gently with one hand, she brushed over her partner's hair, twining her fingers through the thick brown locks. They stayed that way for quite some time, silent but sure in their love for each other.

Eventually, Natalia pulled back, a few small sniffles remained and she passed a hand over her face, brushing away a few stray tears that clung to her cheeks. "I love you so much." She leaned forward and placed a kiss on Olivia's lips, starting very tender and light and then growing deeper, more passionate as she felt her partner respond.

"Thank you," Olivia responded after they parted, catching her breath from the intensity.

Natalia sighed, looking down. "Olivia, Emma had another nightmare last night. I'm really worried for her. When I went in, she was thrashing about, yelling out for someone to stop, and that they couldn't get her, and couldn't take Francesca." When she looked back at Olivia, fresh tears were brimming on the lids of her eyes. "They seem to be the same but are getting progressively worse."

“I know, sweetheart.” Olivia drew Natalia back against her, wrapping her arms around her partner’s stomach, and she pressed a kiss to the dark head. “We’re not the only ones noticing how this is affecting Emma.” When Natalia pulled to the side to look quizzically, Olivia continued. “When I was talking to Doris earlier, she told me Clarissa’s noticed Emma having a hard time concentrating on her school work and withdrawing from some friends.” Olivia wrapped her arms tighter around Natalia, resting her head against the side of the younger woman’s. Quietly, she spoke. “It’s breaking my heart how much she’s hurting. I wish she would just tell me what she’s feeling, but I feel like she’s shutting me out.”

“Honey, she’s scared. She doesn’t want people to see how much she’s hurting.” Natalia smiled, tapping her fingers against Olivia’s hand that rested over her stomach. Gently, she said, “She reminds me of someone else I know.” She felt Olivia nod and she caressed the older woman’s arms.

Swallowing past a lump she felt in her throat, Olivia said, “I don’t know if that scares me more than her shutting me out. I already see so much of myself in her; I really wish she took after you more in that regard.”

“The only way we’re going to get through this together, is to talk with someone – you, me, and Emma.” Natalia felt Olivia’s slow nod and then the other woman’s chin rest on her shoulder. Assuredly, Natalia continued, “When we get home, we’re going to call Dr. Boudreau and set up an appointment, okay?” It wasn’t so much a question as a statement.

“Okay.” They spent several more minutes in quiet reflection before Olivia asked her how her meeting with Sister Anne went.

“She was helpful. We talked about guilt and protecting family.” Natalia shook her head, slightly baffled. “Just when I think I have an idea of what she’s going to say, she surprises me with her understanding.”

“She’s a good woman. She’s taught me a lot about a faith I never thought I had; not religion, per se, but a different perspective.” She thought about what she was saying, and then added, “I’m not saying you haven’t been a positive influence on me in that regard as well, you have been. For most of my life, my mother’s brand of religious bigotry hung over my head, and I learned to trust only myself, no one else. No God was going to help me. Slowly you broke down those barriers, but I didn’t understand your faith, so I lashed out.” She knew Natalia understood that, felt that. “Sister Anne helped in a time when I wanted to understand more about your faith and I felt I couldn’t ask you.”

Natalia turned in the embrace, to face Olivia, smiling tenderly. "I hope you know you can ask me anything."

"Anything?" Olivia asked, with a quirk of an eyebrow.

"Behave." Natalia shook her head, chuckling. She fully anticipated that was probably her partner's response.

"Where's the fun in that?" A wiggle of two eyebrows was the response.

"You and your fun." Natalia grinned. "On a serious note, I'm glad she's been helpful to you as well. She's said her door's open for you to talk with her any time you need it." Natalia sighed. "I think I'm going to continue to talk with her on a therapeutic level as well. While the personal outcome of the shooting for me has changed, it doesn't negate that I wanted him to die for threatening to shoot Francesca, and I'd do anything to protect my family. I'm not sure how to completely reconcile that with all I've been taught in the church for most of my life."

"Natalia, you do what you need to do. But you can always talk with me, too. Okay?"

"Okay." Natalia leaned forward and pressed another kiss on Olivia's lips, this one quick with much affection. Smiling, she asked, "So where's this fun you keep mentioning?"

Olivia flashed a huge grin and pushed Natalia back a little so she could stand, and then she reached out a hand as they headed to Olivia's car. "Your chariot waits."

"But, I have my car here, Olivia," Natalia said amusedly.

"Do you have anything in it you need for the rest of the day?"

Natalia thought about what she did have in her car. "Um, no."

"Okay, well we can come back later, or I can give Greg the keys and he can bring it by the Beacon later this afternoon."

"Um, okay." Grinning at Olivia's infectious smile, she took her partner's hand and was led to the white Nissan. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise." Olivia leaned in to give her a quick kiss before opening the door and gently guiding her into her seat.

When Doris walked into Company, she looked around for Blake and spotted the red-headed woman in the corner booth, with a concentrated look on her face as she stared at her laptop's screen. In the other woman's hand, she quickly jotted down notes on a notepad. Doris looked at her affectionately. "Whatcha workin' on?"

It was almost comical how much Blake jumped in her seat, as the pen in her hand flew into the air; Doris felt sorry for startling her.

"Why do you insist on sneaking up on me like that? I swear I'm going to get a collar with a bell for you."

"A collar? Sounds kind of kinky there, Blake." Doris watched as the other woman's face flushed a bright shade of pink. "And so early in our relationship; people are going to talk," she jibed with a smile.

Blake shook her head, rubbing her hands over her face, hoping the blushing had decreased. "Ha ha." Looking up at the other woman, she asked, "So, what brings you by, other than scaring the daylights out of me?"

"Just wanted to see you?" Doris shrugged with a grin, but then her mood turned somber. "Actually, I came by to talk with you. I spoke with Olivia this morning about the shooting and what Clarissa mentioned about Emma."

"How did she take it?"

"About as well as any of us?" Doris ran her fingers over the cutlery in front of her absentmindedly.

"Well, let her know if they need any help, let us know."

Doris's response was delayed as she heard a familiar voice up at the bar of the restaurant asking for a couple cups of coffee and a take-out order. Looking up, she saw Anna looking around Company before meeting her eyes, and she sighed. Ever since the detective had come over to her distraught after thinking she had been shot, their interactions had been strained again. Doris didn't quite know what to make of her.

Taking one of the cups of coffee with her over to Doris and Blake's table, she stalled a moment. "Doris, hi."

Not wasting any time, Doris looked over at the other woman. "What do you need, Anna?"

"Just giving you an update on the Edmund Winslow case. Jeffrey O'Neill is being formally charged with the attempted murder of Winslow. Given the circumstances, the district

attorney's office is going to release on his own reconnaissance." Anna paused a moment, as she ran her hands along the side of her mug. "There's going to be a hearing next week. There are a few people going to be called as witnesses to the event. You will be one of them, as will Natalia Rivera, though I'm sure the DA will take everything into account." Pursing her lips, Anna blurted, "I've got to get back to the station. I just came to pick up some coffee and a late lunch."

"Thanks for the information," Doris said thoughtfully.

"No problem. Enjoy your evening." Anna walked up to the bar to get the cups and bag of meal containers and left.

"Wow," Blake said softly. "That's some news."

"Yeah." Doris pulled out her cell phone, and then looked up at Blake. "Do you mind if I give Olivia a call?"

"No, go right ahead. I'm going to go refresh my coffee. Did you want some?"

"Please? Thanks." As she dialed Olivia's number, she watched as Blake got up to head over to the bar, refilling her own mug and then grabbing a second mug from under the counter to fill. "Hey Olivia, how are you?...Great. Look, Anna just told me about Jeffrey being charged with the attempted murder of Edmund...When are you going to let Ava know?...Ah okay.... How's Natalia handling it?...That's understandable...Thanks.... Yeah, that sounds great. What time?... Good, see you then...Yes, she is...Okay, I'll pass the information along." Doris closed her phone just as Blake was returning.

"They knew?" Blake asked.

"About Jeffrey? No. Olivia's going to talk with Ava this afternoon."

"Ah, okay."

Doris nodded. "Look, Olivia invited us out for supper tonight. You interested?"

"She invited both of us?" Blake asked curiously. "Together?"

"Well, she asked me to go out, and then she asked if you were here with me, and when I said yes, she extended the invitation." Doris shrugged curiously.

"Oh. Okay." Blake looked down at her laptop and frowned at something she was looking over. "Did she want us to bring anything?"

"I said we'd bring a bottle of wine." Doris moved to peer around at the screen. "What are you looking at?"

"I was reading this story online. Fictional. Really interesting. It's about a cop show, that's really not a great cop show, but the female leads are in this relationship. It's kinda hot. The police plot seems really improbable. Kinda like some of those soap operas. Weird, huh?"

Doris shook her head, amused. "So, show me the website for this show." She watched as Blake typed in a web site URL and turned the screen around. "Oh yeah. They're gorgeous. Wait a second, she looks familiar."

"Yeah, she was on one of those '*Law & Order*' shows you keep watching," Blake said, smiling over at Doris. The two women continued to peruse the sites for more information.

ACT V

The chaos around the Spencer-Rivera household had become a normal state of affairs, with an infant and a ten year old, the various family or guests coming and going; for the life of her, Olivia didn't think she could be happier. As Natalia finished feeding Francesca her supper, Olivia was working on cutting up some vegetables to go into a stew. Emma was working on some school work at the table and occasionally asking Natalia some questions. Since they'd learned that their daughter was having some problems with school, she and Natalia wanted to keep an eye on the work she brought home with her.

Emma's math exercises went rather easily, since it was one of her favorite subjects; in fact much of her homework was done without any difficulty, until she got to her social studies homework, and she balked.

Natalia noticed that Emma had stopped writing and looked at the girl's saddened face. "Emma, what's wrong?"

"I can't do this," Emma said as she closed her exercise book and placed her pencil on the table.

Turning around from the counter, Olivia came over to stand next to her daughter, as it was unusual for her to say she couldn't do something. "Emma?"

"I can't. I don't know how to do it." Emma's voice sounded small and unsure.

"I'm sure Natalia and I can help you, Jellybean." Olivia leaned closer, pulling Emma against her. "What are you working on?"

Sniffing a little, Emma said, “Laws and how they work in society.”

“Sounds interesting,” Natalia said with a smile. It had been one of her favorite things to learn in school. Standing up to retrieve a cloth to clean the baby’s hands and face, she looked over at Emma, asking her what she had to write about.

“I’m supposed to find something in the newspaper about laws and justice and write about it.”

A sinking pit seemed to develop in her stomach as Olivia realized the most recent coverage in the local papers was centered on the shootings at Rick’s wedding and the outcomes discovered so far. Pulling Emma against her tighter, she wrapped her daughter in a hug. “Ah, Bean.”

“We have to write about the laws that were broken and how to change them.” Tears worked their way down Emma’s cheeks and were absorbed into Olivia’s shirt as the girl grasped onto her mother. She sniffed. “I just want the bad man to go away forever.”

Natalia noticed the matching tears falling from her partner’s eyes as Olivia pressed a kiss to their daughter’s head. She wanted the same thing Emma did, so she knew the hurt the girl was going through. Since Edmund was in the hospital and incapacitated he couldn’t do any more damage, but they were going to have to wait until he was out before any charges could be formally laid. She knew it wasn’t fair to promise Emma something about Edmund going to jail for a long time, since she didn’t know what was going to happen. Reaching a hand over to rest on Emma’s arm, she spoke quietly but with assurance. “So do I, Bean. Your mom and I, your Dad, your sister and so many other people are going to love and protect you and Francesca. Never ever forget that.”

When the doorbell rang, Shadow came through from the living room, curious to know who was visiting. When Natalia stood to go open the door, the dog was right behind her, and as Doris and Blake entered, Shadow smelled each of them. Satisfied that neither woman posed a threat to her people, she then curled up on the floor near Emma’s feet.

Entering the kitchen, Doris sniffed the air and grinned. “That smells so good right now.”

Olivia laughed. “Alas, you’re going to have to wait. It will be about another 15 minutes or so before supper is ready; we were a little late getting home.”

“Do you have snacks?” Doris inquired hopefully.

“No snacks before supper,” Emma said from her mother’s arms.

The adults grinned at the well timed comment of the girl. Grinning, Doris looked between Olivia and Natalia. "So, which of you trained her on that one?"

"Both of us," Natalia responded looking at her partner and raising an eyebrow. She knew her partner still usually had something to nibble on when she came home from work, but at least with her influence, those snacks tended to be on the healthy side of things.

Doris looked over at the table and saw Emma's school books, and looked over at the redness that still clung to Emma's eyes. Remembering Clarissa's comments, she wondered what had caused the girl's tears this evening. She looked over at Olivia and, nodding towards the books and back to the other woman, she mouthed the question, "What's wrong?"

"Edmund, what else?" was the answer. Olivia looked over at Francesca's messy shirt and then to Emma. "Hey Bean, could you go grab me a clean shirt for Francesca?" She'd learned her lesson more than once that the infant could very easily transfer as much mess from herself to another, and though occasionally it was endearing, she really didn't relish having to go and change at the moment.

"Okay, Mom." Emma realized she was temporarily being dismissed, but since she had no desire to talk about what was bothering her, this time she didn't mind so much. She decided to take her time in her search for a clean shirt for her sister as she left the room.

"What happened?" Doris asked gently.

"She's got a school project that she's supposed to write about an article in the paper on a law that was broken, and what can be done to fix the situation."

"Oh, God," Blake said, realizing the problem. "And the Springfield Gazette has been full of stories about Edmund and the shootings. No wonder she's upset."

"Yeah. And since it has been, others in the class will be writing about it as well. I'm going to have to talk with her teacher to see what we can arrange for her."

Nodding, Doris added, "I'm sure it was well meant; learning about laws and how to change them is something that is part of the curriculum. It's just the timing on this particular lesson is unfortunate."

"It doesn't have to be the local newspaper, right? What if she uses a paper from another city? We could get The City Times from Oakdale, or maybe the Chicago Tribune. There's bound to be other criminal or civil law case stories available in the Tribune. The bookstore in town carries newspapers from around the state."

"It's a start. Thank you," Natalia said. "I hate that she's hurting, and it certainly explains her being withdrawn in school if the shootings are being talked about."

Smiling, Doris added, "Well, if she wants to write about law and what consequences are, I could talk with her about that."

Olivia got up to check on the stew and added a couple spices to it, stirring to blend it all together. At Doris's comment, she turned around, grinning teasingly. "Speaking from experience, are you?"

"Ha ha. You should talk." Doris could smell the stew and her stomach growled loudly. Chagrined, she looked around the room when the others glanced her way. "What? I'm hungry. I didn't eat much at lunch."

Blake smirked. "You and your appetite."

"What about my appetite?" Doris asked curiously.

"It's healthy?" Blake responded cheekily.

As Olivia looked between her friends and shook her head in amusement "Are we talking about food now or something else?"

"Shut up." Both Blake and Doris answered, causing Olivia to snicker.

When Emma came down with Francesca's shirt, she was happy that they'd moved on to talking about something else.

Seeing her daughter return, Olivia wanted to make sure the conversation did not return to anything related to the shootings and Edmund, so she turned to Doris. "So, how goes that approval for the Beacon expansion?" Quickly she removed the baby's shirt and put the new one on before lifting the girl out of her high chair and into the playpen.

Doris responded, "In committee."

"Well, can't you hurry it along some? What's the good of having friends in high places if I can't make it work for me?"

"Are you trying to bribe me, Ms. Spencer?" Doris looked on with a grin.

"Do you want to eat tonight?" Olivia stirred the stew for the last time before taking down some bowls and got Emma to place them on the table for her.

Doris stuck out her tongue. And then in imitation, so did Francesca, which caused the adults to laugh.

Pouring the stew into a large bowl, Olivia placed it on the hot mat in the center of the table, while Natalia got some bread from the cupboard. They all said grace, and then most of the supper meal was kept lighthearted and easy as they all ate and gossiped about the goings on around town. When they were almost finished, there was a knock at the back door.

"I'll get it!" Emma said as she got down from her chair. Seeing who it was, the girl's face brightened up. "Uncle Josh!"

"I hear there's a girl here that would like to look up at the stars," Josh said brightly.

"You found the telescope?" Emma looked at Josh and then at her mother. "Can we set it up now?"

"Hey, Bean, why don't you finish, and -"

"I'm all done." Emma got her bowl and glass and put them into the sink. She was quite eager to get outside while she was still able to, now that the evenings were starting to get darker earlier.

Natalia waved him in the room further. "Come on in, Josh. We're just about finished with supper."

"I'm going to go get a sweater so I can go outside," Emma said before darting into the living room and up the stairs.

Looking around the room at their guests, he turned to Olivia. Slightly chagrined, he tucked his hands into his jeans pockets. "Sorry I didn't call first. I found the telescope this morning in some old boxes at Cross Creek. I figured with all that's going on around here, she could use the distraction."

Grateful for his thoughtfulness, Olivia smiled at her ex-husband. "Thanks, Josh. That means a lot to us."

"Let us know if you need it back for Shayne and Henry," Natalia said thankfully.

Josh put up a hand to forestall any argument. "No, it's a gift."

"How's Billy?" Blake asked, remembering that his brother had suffered a major heart attack during the wedding in the melee of the shooting.

“He’s improving. There’s a lot of work to be done with exercise and diet. And he’s begrudging the fact that it means he’s limited to how much sugar and starch he’s allowed, so no regular pies.” Josh grinned knowing his brother’s love of food. “Vanessa’s arranged for Christina to come over and help him with his physical rehabilitation. It’s nice; Vanessa gets to fuss over the baby while Christina helps Billy with his exercises.”

Emma came barreling into the kitchen, full force with excitement about getting the telescope set up. “Can we go outside now, please?”

Looking over at Natalia and then back at Emma, Olivia smiled at her. “Okay, Bean. Take Shadow out with you and stay close to the house.”

Emma quickly got her sneakers on and picked up Shadow’s lead, attaching it to the dog’s collar. “Okay, thanks. Bye.”

“And there she goes,” Olivia commented with a smile. Since Edmund’s incapacitation, they’d allowed her a little more leniency around the yard, but she was still a bit nervous. That said, Josh was going to be out there with Emma, so she felt more comfortable.

Grinning, Josh motioned his thumb towards the door. “I better go before she has it all set up before I get out there.” Zipping up his jacket at the cooling evening air, he headed out onto the porch where Emma already had the main components out of the box. Over the course of the next fifteen minutes, they had assembled the telescope and he had pointed it up at the moon for Emma to look. The fullness of the moon lit the field around the house, and the grin on Emma’s face he thought could light a troubled soul. He only hoped that he could help brighten her life again; it wasn’t much but if it helped, he’d live with that.

“Wow! I can see the craters!”

“Yeah? What else do you see?”

“Cliffs and mountains.” Emma paused looking over at Josh. “This is so neat! Thank you!” She went over and gave him a big hug.

“You’re welcome, Emma.” Putting his hand into a leather bag he’d left on the bench, he pulled out a book and presented it to her.

“*Exploring the Night Sky: The Equinox Astronomy Guide for Beginners*,” Emma read aloud. Sitting on the bench beside Josh, she spent a few minutes flipping through some of the pages to look at the pictures. She flipped through the book until she came upon some information on the moon. Looking up at Josh, she smiled. “Can we show Mom and Ma?”

“You sure can, Emma. I’m sure they’ll enjoy it, too.” He stood to follow her in, taking hold of Shadow’s lead, bringing the dog back in.

Tucking the book against her chest, Emma jumped up from the bench to head inside. Not finding them in the kitchen, she ventured into the living room, where she saw her mothers and Blake and Doris sitting around. Handing the book over to Olivia, she was bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Mom, look what Uncle Josh gave me. It’s got the moon, and stars, and lots of cool stuff. And I got to see the moon in the telescope!”

“Did you thank him?”

“Yes, I did,” Emma grinned. “You have to come out and see.”

“Hey, Emma, how about we do that a bit later. We’ll go out and sit on the bench with some hot chocolate,” Natalia said gently.

“Okay,” Emma said begrudgingly, shrugging her shoulders. She felt a little deflated at having her excitement postponed, if only for a little while, though the promise of hot chocolate helped some.

“Look, I’ve got to get going. I promised Colin I’d give him his bath tonight, and I think Reva’s counting on it,” Josh said wryly. “It gives her some alone time, which she doesn’t have a lot of with an almost three year old on the go.”

Understanding the need for some occasional alone time, Natalia smiled at him. “Tell her ‘hello’ for us.”

Olivia, Blake and Doris each said their goodbyes to him and he left.

“Come here for a minute, Bean,” Olivia said, patting her lap. Settling the girl there, she gave her a hug. “I love you.”

“Mom,” Emma dragged out.

“Yes,” Olivia followed suit. Resting her head against her daughter’s, she knew what she needed to talk with her about was going to be upsetting. “I know it’s not going to be easy with school, especially when other kids in your class are talking about the shootings, but you know what?” She could feel Emma’s shake of head. “We’re going to help you, okay. And Doris said she’d be willing to go into your class and talk about laws, and breaking them and consequences.” She grinned when she saw the other woman’s head pop up at her comment. It hadn’t *quite* been what they’d talked about earlier, but she knew Doris would do just fine.

“What are consequences?” Emma asked curiously.

“It just means that when someone does something bad, they have to pay for what they did,” Natalia responded softly.

Emma bit down on her lip a little before looking up at Natalia. “Like with Rafe?”

“Yes, sweetie.” Natalia smiled sadly. “After Rafe shot Jeffrey, he had to go to jail.”

“Didn’t he go away first?”

“Yes, he did. That usually doesn’t happen. But when he came back, he had a hearing and he was sent to jail.”

Emma was quiet for a moment, thinking things over. “Is that what’s going to happen to the bad man who shot people at the wedding?”

“Yes. Well, if he lives, he will be going to jail,” Doris added. She was going to talk to the DA and make sure any charges stuck; the bastard was going to pay for a long time.

“Will he get out, like Rafe did?”

“I don’t think so, Em. He hurt a lot of people, killed people. He’ll be going away for a long time.” *At least I hope so!* Olivia thought. She wrapped Emma tighter in her arms.

“Okay,” Emma spoke quietly.

Deciding they’d had enough serious talk, Natalia stood up and walked over to Olivia and Emma, placing a kiss on her older daughter’s head. “Now, if all of you want to put on your sweaters and go out to look at Emma’s telescope, I’ll get Francesca bundled up and get some hot chocolate made.” Picking Francesca up from her playpen, she cuddled the infant close to her and placed a kiss on the dark locks of curly hair.

Emma hopped down from her mother’s lap, tired from the long emotional day, but still excited at the prospect of seeing the night sky again with her new telescope. She quickly headed to the back entrance to pull on her sneakers.

Standing, Olivia followed Emma and Natalia into the kitchen and she placed a kiss against her partner’s temple. “Why don’t I get Francesca dressed for bed and then wrap her up in some warm blankets? She won’t be out long anyway.” As Natalia handed the baby over to her, she noticed her partner’s yawn. Leaning in to give her a kiss on the lips, Olivia muttered, “Something tells me Sweet Pea won’t be the only one to come in early.”

"I should not be so tired given how late we slept this morning," Natalia said as she yawned again.

"Quit that, it's catching," Olivia said, smirking past a yawn of her own, as she headed out of the room.

After several minutes, Olivia returned with Francesca covered in her sleeper and a warm sweater, and Olivia had put on a wool pullover sweater. Holding out a sweater to Natalia, she grinned. "Thought you might want this."

"Thanks." Natalia shrugged into the sweater and then picked up the tray of hot chocolate and waited until Olivia held the door open for her.

"What took you so long?" Emma pouted at first and then smiled when she saw the hot chocolate.

Olivia tapped her daughter on the nose gently. "Well, Bean, you already had your sweater on. We had to get Francesca all ready and get our sweaters on."

Natalia passed the mugs around, leaving the women to get their own cookies that were also on the tray, and then once they were all given out, she placed the tray on top of the barbeque and returned to Olivia's side.

"Oh my God, Natalia this is great stuff!" Doris said after taking a sip. "Don't tell me you make that from scratch?" Shaking her head, she grinned. "Never mind, of course you did."

"And she's all mine, ladies." Olivia grinned broadly, wrapping an arm around her partner.

Looking over to where her impatient daughter stood on the grass by her telescope, she walked across to her and leaned down to press a kiss to her head. "So, Bean, I hear you have something you want to show us?"

"Uh huh!" She led her mother and Natalia over to the telescope. "Look, you can see the moon really clear."

After taking a minute or so to look at the telescope when she had her turn, Natalia was almost as excited as Emma. When she turned back to the others she noticed Olivia was looking at her endearingly and she smiled in return. "I've never seen it like this," she said in wonder.

"Never?" Emma asked curiously.

“Nope. I couldn’t afford a telescope when I was younger with Rafe.”

Excited at being able to share it for the first time with her Ma was great as far as Emma was concerned. “Well, now you have!” Her excitement turned into a yawn, which she tried to suppress. She wanted to stay out longer, so she didn’t have to go to bed so soon. She didn’t want to have any more bad dreams.

Seeing that it was time for their friends to get the girls to bed, Doris and Blake finished their drinks and said their goodbyes and headed back to Doris’s car.

Olivia, Natalia and Emma waved and then headed inside, bringing the dirty mugs in with them. Setting them onto the counter, too tired to deal with cleaning them tonight, Natalia ran some water over them so the remnants wouldn’t stick. Olivia had taken the sleeping infant upstairs and before laying her in her crib, she gently removed the sweater. She placed a blanket over her and stood back a moment before heading down the hall and poking her head around Emma’s open door. The sight of Natalia curled up next to her reading from the astronomy book made her smile. Quickly she moved to their own room to get changed into her pajamas, then returned and leaned over to her daughter, giving Emma a kiss goodnight.

“Night, Bean. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Mommy,” Emma said tiredly. Despite her earlier intentions of staying up, her eyes were lowering and she lay back against Natalia’s shoulder. She watched as her mother left the room and then she closed her eyes.

Not long after, Natalia joined Olivia in their room and got dressed for bed. Climbing into bed, she snuggled close to her partner.

“What happened to “*Charlotte’s Web*”?” Olivia asked. It had become one of her daughter’s favorite books.

“It got replaced for tonight, but I don’t think she paid too much attention to the book. She’s exhausted.”

“She’s not the only one.” Olivia curled around Natalia. “I’m so wiped it’s not funny.”

“Tomorrow we make the appointment for Dr. Boudreau for Emma and us.”

“Yes, and I’ve got to call Emma’s teacher about that blasted project.” Olivia grouched. She hated Emma being hurt from other people’s talk. She’d been subjected to that a lot growing up and she never wanted that for her children.

Natalia rubbed a hand rhythmically over her partner's back until she could tell the other woman had slipped into slumber. As she lay on her side, her head resting on Olivia's chest, the rhythmic breathing of her partner beneath her ear, it wasn't long before she joined her in sleep.

When Doris arrived at the bright conference suite of the Beacon hotel, she shielded her eyes as the morning sun poured through the windows. The governor was only in town a couple of days, and it had been her first chance to speak with him. She knew he wanted some status updates about the town, and to review the town's fiscal management along with announcing infrastructure funding, but with recent events in the town, she had a couple issues she wanted to bring up. She didn't have to wait long before he made his appearance.

"Mayor Wolfe, it's good to see you again," Governor Young said as he extended his hand.

"You as well, Governor."

"I believe in getting down to business quickly, so what can you tell me about this Edmund Winslow case?"

"Right now, he's still in a coma with a bullet lodged in his brain. The police are still reviewing the case against him but last I heard there will be ten charges of murder, along with several charges of assault with a deadly weapon, along with a couple charges of attempted kidnapping, and forcible confinement." She hoped they would be able to get him on the last charge, but she doubted it as it occurred outside the country.

"That's one nasty piece of work you have on your hands."

Growling, Doris said, "Tell me about it. Damned bastard tried to shoot me as well."

The governor looked at her shocked. "I didn't hear that part."

Doris smiled as she responded. "I had someone looking out for me who pushed me to the ground. Fortunately I wasn't hit."

"Is there anything my office can do for you?"

Taking this as her opportunity, Doris grinned broadly as she looked over at the well-dressed man. "As a matter of fact, you can. When we get this bastard convicted, I want him behind bars for the rest of his life. Here's what you can do," Doris said as she laid

out a detailed plan for addressing violent attacks, with cases of precedence to back up her argument.

The governor nodded as he reviewed the report. "I agree with all of this. Sometimes we have to step carefully around these issues."

"Forgive me for saying so, but bullshit, Governor. This is a bill that needs to be passed. A person should not be able to walk into a public area, well armed, and open fire, and not expect to be severely punished." Doris paused for a moment to catch her breath. Before he could speak, she continued, "And before you say it, yes, this case is personal to me. Several people that I know and care about were injured or were victims of this man's actions. It will be a personal vindication when he's convicted and sent to prison."

"I'll bring it to our representatives to bring up in the legislation. I can't promise anything."

"Just, please, make it happen. No one else should have to go through this devastation."

"I will do my best," the governor said, solemnly, then brightened. "In the meantime, I do have some good news for you. We have allocated some state funding to Springfield for capital infrastructure projects." He handed Doris the papers to review.

Taking her time, she reviewed the documents and was pleased with the outcome. "This looks good. I'll bring it to our town manager and if he has any questions, I'm sure he'll contact your office. Thank you." Doris outstretched her hand to shake the governor's.

Taking her hand, he responded as he walked with her to the door. "You're welcome. Have a good day, Mayor Wolfe."

Tucking the document into her case, she left for her office.

The first of her morning had been kept busy with teleconferencing meetings with her investors. She'd emailed them Leyla's business plan for the day care center first thing that morning along with her support of the project, and after informing them of the viability of the project, she had gotten the financial approval to start building the center.

Checking that item off her To-Do list, she scrolled down her Blackberry for the contact number of Emma's school. Dialing through, she waited for the receptionist to answer.

"Good morning, Springfield Elementary. How may I help you?"

"This is Olivia Spencer; I would like to speak with Mr. Barnes please?"

“One moment, Ms. Spencer. He’s just coming in from recess break.”

“Thank you.” Olivia scanned through some emails on her computer screen as she waited for the teacher to get to the phone. It seemed to take forever before the line was answered. “Yes, this is Olivia Spencer, Emma’s mother.”

“How can I help you?” The young man’s voice sounded genuinely interested.

“I need to speak with you about her social studies homework.” Olivia twirled her pen between her fingers.

“Is there something she doesn’t understand? I thought I was pretty clear when I explained the topic.”

“That’s not it, Mr. Barnes. She understands it all too well.”

“I don’t understand. Is there a problem?”

Shaking her head, she wondered if the man lived under a rock. “You might say that. You do realize that a very large chunk of the Springfield Gazette in the past week or so has been about the shootings at the Bauer-Lewis wedding in the park?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What you may not know is that Emma was present at that wedding and could easily have been one of the victims. Her infant sister was nearly shot and killed. If it hadn’t been the quick reflexes of the former district attorney who shot the bastard, she might well have been killed.” Olivia stopped for a moment and rubbed her fingers along the top of her nose. She could feel a headache starting. Before the teacher could respond, she continued. “In addition, she and my four year old niece were nearly kidnapped by the same bastard only a couple months before that after he killed Emma’s babysitter. She has nightmares about both events.”

The continued silence on the other end of the line had Olivia wondering if the call had dropped. Pulling the phone away from her ear, she looked at the display which still read that the call was connected. “Mr. Barnes?”

“Sorry, Ms. Spencer. I didn’t realize that Emma was at that wedding. It wasn’t in the papers.”

“No, we were able to keep that information from being reported.” Olivia sighed. “Look, I realize it’s too late in the term to request a change in topic for their papers, especially as

the topic has already been discussed in class but I was wondering if there is something we could do so that we can minimize the chatter about those shootings.”

“I can talk with the students and some of the other parents. It shouldn’t be too much of a problem. And if Emma wants to write on another social justice issue, she can do that.”

Over the phone, Olivia realized that it was hard to determine what the man was thinking. “Thank you.” Remembering her comment to Doris last night, she continued. “If you’re interested in exploring the social justice aspect some more, a good friend of mine, Doris Wolfe, is also an attorney. She said she’d be willing to talk with your class about laws and the consequences of breaking them if you’re interested.”

“Mayor Wolfe? That’s interesting. I’ll think about it today and I’ll give her a call one way or another. Thank you, Ms. Spencer.”

“You’re welcome.” Olivia ran her hand through her hair, wincing as her fingers hit some tangles. “Look, I don’t want to be a pain, but I’m trying to protect my daughter here. She’s hurting enough without people talking about a situation that they really don’t know much about.”

“I understand, Ms. Spencer. I will do my best. If you have any other questions about the project, just give me a call. If I’m in class, I will give you a call when I’m finished.”

“Thank you.” Olivia hung up the phone and rested her head against her desk. Two tasks completed and she had one more to get done before getting back to Beacon business. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out the business card of Dr. Felicia Boudreau’s that Natalia had given her the day before. Flipping it between her fingers, she sighed. Despite the fact that doctors were not high on her list of favorite people, psychiatrists were even lower than that, Olivia knew that if she and her family didn’t start talking with a professional, they were never going to start healing properly.

Biting the bullet, Olivia hesitantly pressed the seven numbers and waited for an answer.

“Yes, my name is Olivia Spencer. I need to book an appointment with Dr. Boudreau for myself and my family.”

Sitting with her feet propped up on the coffee table in her office, Doris nearly dropped half of her sandwich when a knock on her door startled her. It was only fast reflexes that saved it from its fate on the floor. Taking a gulp of water from the bottle she’d bought with her lunch, she called for the person to enter. Her young administrative assistant popped his head in the door.

“Yes, Brandon. Can I help you with something?”

“Mrs. Beth Spaulding and Dr. Mel Boudreau are here to see you.”

The women in question stood behind him and waited for permission to enter. “Come on in, ladies.” Doris went to stand but Beth waved her off.

“Sit, finish your lunch.”

“Thanks. It’s not much; ham and Swiss cheese.”

“Do you think it will go well with this?” Mel pulled out a bottle of champagne from behind her back. At Doris confused expression, Mel added, “To new beginnings.”

Comprehension clicking in, Doris smiled broadly. “Really? I mean I’d hoped we could get this working.”

“I’m game if you are,” Beth said. “Now, do you have some extra glasses?”

Standing up and heading over to a shelf in her office, she procured three tumblers before handing them over to the blonde. “Not exactly the right glass for this, but I don’t usually have need for champagne in my office.”

“This will do just fine,” Beth said with a grin. “As long as you don’t tell Alexandra Spaulding that.” Mel and Doris laughed with her a moment as she filled the glasses half-way. “If nothing else, it will be an interesting venture given our histories. So, new beginnings it is.”

“To healing old wounds and making new beginnings,” Doris said as they clinked their glasses together.

The evening air in Amsterdam had cooled significantly, and Dinah had gone inside the hotel looking for Mallet. Not seeing him in the front foyer, she frowned as they were supposed to be meeting there before heading out for a late supper. She wandered down the hallway towards the bar area and, looking around the dimmed room, she didn’t see him. Taking out her phone, she sent him a text asking him where he was. And she waited, and waited. Starting to worry and pacing the hallways of the foreign hotel lobby was not doing her any good, and it was just going to attract on-lookers. Blowing out a deep breath, she headed up to their room.

“Mallet, if you’re asleep, I’m gonna smack you one.” Dinah pulled up in front of their room and swiped the key through the lock. On first look in the room she didn’t see him, but she could hear his voice slightly muffled.

“Are you sure it’s a good time?” Mallet asked. “I guess. What about Interpol, are they able to do anything?...Okay. Thanks. I’ll let her know. When can you have the tickets sent? Perfect. See you soon.”

Mallet was a little startled when he came out of the bathroom to see Dinah sitting at the end of the bed, playing with the straps on her purse. “I guess you heard some of that.”

“I did. What’s going on?”

“That was Jeffrey. Still no sign of Edmund coming out of the coma. The investigation into his activities is on-going, but the noose is tightening.”

“You have to go back now?”

“Yeah, there’s some stuff coming up in reports that needs my attention. Jeffrey mentioned some past cases.”

“What about me? Is it safe for me to go back?” Dinah asked, aware that there was still a warrant out for her arrest.

“Look, wait until we get back to the States to figure that out. I’ll talk with Frank and Jeffrey, see what we can do. Besides, I think your mother will be happy to have you home.”

“I guess. It was not a great parting of ways with me taking off and not leaving much word. I think I broke Mom’s heart the last time we spoke in person.”

“Dinah, Billy had a heart attack. Vanessa’s going to want her family around her, no matter what you have done.” Mallet paused. “Jeffrey’s emailed me the electronic tickets for us. Amsterdam to London, then direct to Chicago.”

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Wow. Okay, so quick supper nearby and then we start packing.” Dinah looked around the room. “Well, I will say one thing for traveling around as much as we have; it limits the amount of packing we have to do.”

Mallet grinned. “Thank God for that.”

Throwing a sweater at him, she laughed. "Oh shut up."

THE END