

Thanks for the Memories
by Susan L. Carr (aka Skeeter451)

Act One

The late autumn morning was progressing nicely in Springfield Township and Doris Wolfe was feeling good about herself as she stepped out of her SUV and onto the small parking lot next to Company. Sure, Edmund Winslow was still at large, but there had been no incidents since he disappeared. While it was her nature to remain pessimistic, there was a chance Chief Cooper was right and Winslow had fled the country. Still, she was taking no chances and expected a preliminary report from A.C. Mallet when he arrived in town. Which Doris sincerely hoped was soon.

Also arriving home for the Thanksgiving holiday was her daughter Ashlee, flying in from California with her best friend Daisy Cooper. Doris was looking forward to seeing Ashlee, but not as much as she was looking forward to seeing the feisty redhead who already had her morning cup of coffee ready and waiting for her as she stepped through the entrance door.

Blake gave her a bright smile and handed her the coffee after Doris perched herself at the counter. She took a sip and hummed in absolute pleasure as its warmth penetrated her body just as the fire in Blake's eyes filled her soul.

"Thank you," she said. "It's wonderful, as usual."

"My pleasure," Blake said and leaned across the counter to steal a quick kiss. Doris sighed happily and congratulated herself for not looking around to see if anyone had noticed. Blake had been good about giving her space, but Doris found herself more and more at ease with the idea of a relationship with Blake. Actually, she admitted to herself, they were already in a relationship, but at last she felt they were ready to move it toward the next level.

"How are you this lovely morning?" Doris asked.

"It just got even lovelier now that you're here," Blake said, then it seemed to Doris that she suddenly grew nervous. "So, I was wondering...tomorrow is my goddaughter's birthday party."

"I know," Doris said with a nod. "I was a little surprised that Frank sent me an invitation, but I figured it was Olivia's influence even though he's hosting the party."

"Probably," Blake said, absently. Obviously something was on her mind and Doris wondered what it was. "Well...I was wondering if you'd go with me?"

Doris was charmed at the faint blush on Blake's face. "Don't you have to work?"

"I'm going to ask Buzz for the night off."

"Okay, then yes," Doris said with a nod. "I'll go with you."

Blake's face lit up. "Great! It's a date." She paused with a frown. "It is a date, right?"

Doris laughed and nodded. "Yes, Blake. I will go with you to Francesca's birthday party on our first official date."

Blake's resultant smile made Doris's stomach flip happily.

The parking lot of the SFPD building was already filled with cars as Olivia swung their car into it and double-parked in front of the entrance. Natalia quickly exited the vehicle and started to unbuckle Francesca from her seat in the back.

Olivia popped the trunk and pulled the baby's weekend bag out. She quickly double-checked the contents then slammed the trunk closed. Natalia was already walking up the steps and she rushed to catch up. Natalia never liked Francesca's weekends with her father and always wanted to get the goodbyes over quickly.

Olivia opened the door with her free hand and waited while Natalia walked through, then she followed. Inside, the desk sergeant buzzed them through with a smile. Frank's office door was open, but Olivia rapped on the sill and Frank looked up from his paperwork, his frown at being interrupted turning into a smile upon seeing his daughter.

"Hey there," he said, getting up and coming around the desk to take the baby from Natalia's arms. "Hi! How's my baby girl?"

"Ai Poppy," Francesca said wrapping her arms around Frank's neck in a tight hug.

Olivia nearly laughed at Frank's shocked expression. The baby had been putting together simple sounds for weeks now, but this was the first time she successfully spoke the name of her father.

"Oh, my baby girl," Frank said happily as he hugged his daughter.

"Congratulations, Poppy," Olivia said with a smirk. She glanced at her partner who had tears in her eyes. She reached over to take Natalia's hand who in turn gave her a grateful smile.

"So is there anything else you need, Frank?" Natalia asked.

"I don't think so," he said. "You sent enough milk?"

"In the bag," Olivia answered. "We'll bring more to the party tomorrow night. If you run out, just call."

"Right," he said, nodding his head. They went through this every time they turned the baby over to him and she guessed they'd be doing it for a long time. It was simply a reflection of Francesca's parents: her and Natalia's obsessive concern and Frank's chronic absent-mindedness.

Frank turned to the baby. "Say goodbye to your moms, baby girl," he told her.

Olivia leaned in to kiss the girl on the cheek. "Bye, Sweet Pea."

"Ai, Mama," the girl replied.

Natalia leaned in for a kiss as well, but also lovingly caressed the spot she kissed on the baby's cheek. "Bye, my beautiful girl."

"Ai," Francesca said.

Natalia waited expectantly for a few moments and then pulled away. "Call anytime, Frank," she said. "For any reason."

"We'll see you tomorrow, Frank," Olivia added.

Frank nodded enthusiastically. "For the party – I can't wait. My baby girl's first birthday party."

Olivia held on to Natalia's hand as they left the station, leaving Frank behind them as he tried to get Francesca to call him Poppy again for the other officers.

In the car on the way to the hotel, Natalia was quiet. When Olivia finally pulled into her spot at the Beacon, she turned to her love and asked, "What is it?"

Natalia gave her a rue chuckle. "It's silly," she said.

"Not if it's bothering you," Olivia said. "Tell me."

"Well, it's just that Sweet Pea calls you Mama and now Frank is Poppy, but I'm no one."

Olivia chuckled. "That's because Frank and I spend hours a day trying to get her to speak our names. And you're not 'no one,' Natalia. You're her mother."

"No, I'm only the one who carried her for nine months, endured endless hours of labor and fed her every day of her life," Natalia said and Olivia's heart clenched to see her love's eyes fill with tears.

"Oh, baby," she said. "Come here."

She embraced Natalia and rubbed her back. "Look, with Rafe it was just you; you were his entire world so of course you came first. It was the same with Emma and me, but our baby has a whole passel of people who love her and I think that's a wonderful thing."

"I do, too," Natalia said. "I told you I was being silly."

"No, baby, you're not silly," Olivia said and pulled back so she could dry Natalia's tears. "Sweet Pea loves you and so do I."

"Thank you," Natalia said and leaned in to give her a thorough kiss. By the time she pulled back, Olivia's head was in the stratosphere.

"Wow," Olivia said. "What was that for?"

"For loving me and our family so well," Natalia answered with a warm grin.

"I can't help it," Olivia said. "It's as natural to me as breathing. Come on, love, let's get to work before one of our employees catches us making out like a couple of horny teenagers."

Natalia gave her a playful smirk. "Like that hasn't happened before."

"Oh God," Olivia said, rolling her eyes. "Don't remind me."

Olivia was warmed to her soul when Natalia took her hand as they walked into the Beacon.

Frank Cooper stared at his beautiful daughter. She was quietly playing with her brightly colored plastic toys as she sat in her walker. He found her happy mutterings soothing as he worked and although he knew a police station was no place for a baby, he enjoyed having her there. It wasn't as often as he would have liked that he got a chance to spend the whole weekend with Francesca, so rather than finding a babysitter for the few hours he needed to be here today, he decided to just let her play in his office.

He wondered how Natalia endured the separation from their baby. Even though she worked full time, she was rarely away from their daughter, a fact that he both appreciated and resented. The former because it meant his daughter received the love and attention she needed from her mother and the latter because Natalia didn't need to work at all and should be giving Francesca her *full* attention instead of sharing it with the Beacon or Olivia.

Not for the first time, Frank wondered how their life would have turned out if he and Natalia had married as they should have. Francesca would have two proper parents to love her and Natalia would have been able to stay home with the baby. Sure, if she decided to go to work when their child grew older he would have fully supported that. And if she hadn't, then he would have been more than happy to support her for the rest of her life. It was a role he was fully prepared to take on.

A knock on his door interrupted his reverie and his mood immediately brightened as his former son-in-law appeared in his open doorway. "Mallet!" he said happily as he stood up to shake hands.

"Frank!" Mallet said, enthusiastically pumping his hand in a firm grip. "It's so great to see you, although..."

Frank's smile dimmed a bit. "Yeah, I wish you were here under better circumstances, but still I'm glad to see you, too."

"Right," Mallet said releasing his hand. He turned toward the baby. "Wow, what a beauty she is!"

With his smile growing again, Frank said, "That she is." He pressed the intercom button on his phone. "Li, get in here," he said and then disconnected the line without waiting for a reply.

Mallet hunched down to get eye level with the girl. "Hey there, little one," he said, raising his hand toward her. Francesca immediately grabbed his finger and tried to bring it to her mouth. Mallet grinned and pulled his hand away, replacing it with the baby's teething ring she had dropped on the play mat.

"Poppy!" Francesca said bouncing happily in her seat.

Both Frank and Mallet laughed at her as Mallet stood back up. "She's going to be a heartbreaker when she grows up, Frank," he said, still chuckling.

"She already is," Frank quipped.

"And she's not even a year old yet, right?" Mallet asked.

"Her birthday's next week," Frank answered, proudly. "In fact, we're having her party at Company tomorrow night. Why don't you come by?"

"Yeah, that might be fun," he said with an agreeable nod. "We'll do that."

"We?" Frank asked with a frown.

Before Mallet could answer, there was another knock at the open door. "What's up, Chief?" Anna asked as she entered the office.

"Li, this is A.C. Mallet, the investigator the mayor hired," Frank said with a nod toward the man, his mood again growing foul at the thought of the mayor's constant interference in police business.

Anna strode forward to shake Mallet's hand. "Anna Li," she said.

"Pleased to meet you, Detective" he replied.

"Li's leading the investigation," Frank said. "She's your contact."

"Good," Mallet said, his tone serious now that they were down to business. "I'd like to see what you have so far."

"Of course. I've got everything ready for you."

Frank gave a sharp nod. "Then why don't you two get to it," he said. "The sooner you get started, the sooner you can clear the department." He answered Anna's resultant frown with a glare. "Any questions?" he added.

"No, Chief," she said. She turned to Mallet. "Want some coffee first?"

He nodded. "I know where it is," he said. "Let's go."

Frank watched them leave his office and absently turned back to check on Francesca. He reflected that life was so simple for her. She didn't have to deal with criminals or politics or overbearing mayors. Her needs were few and uncomplicated. With a heavy sigh, he said a silent prayer that it would always remain so for her.

While Mallet got his coffee, Anna quickly grabbed the boxes with the case information she had prepared for him and brought it to the conference room. She was laying out the various folders and evidence when he joined her, sipping at the steaming Styrofoam cup.

"Is this all you have?" he asked, sarcastically.

"So far, Mr. Mallet," she said, dryly.

"Call me, Mallet, Detective," he said. He set his briefcase and coffee on the table.

"All right," she said with a nod.

"Okay, Anna, so let's see what you've got." He sat down and pulled a yellow legal pad and pen from his briefcase and set them on the table.

Anna sat down next to him and opened up the first folder. "Okay, so we think it all started here..."

Coming into the kitchen, Blake spotted Buzz standing at the prep table chopping carrots. "Hey, Buzz," Blake said and the stocky man turned around.

"Are you out of here, Blake?" he asked.

"Yep, I've got to pick up Clarissa," she said. "But first I wanted to ask if I can have tomorrow off."

Buzz thought a moment. "Yeah, that's fine. Marina already promised to help with the party. You're going to miss it?"

"Oh no," Blake said. "Not going to miss my goddaughter's birthday. I'm coming with a date."

Buzz's eyebrows rose and he asked, "Really? Who's the lucky fella?"

"Doris Wolfe," she answered with a bright smile. Buzz's eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline.

"What about Doris Wolfe?" Frank asked as he walked into the kitchen carrying Francesca in her car seat.

"You ready for lunch, Frank?" Buzz asked, throwing his towel over his shoulder. "What can I make you?"

Frank ignored him. "What about Doris, Blake?"

Blake stared at him for a few long moments, totally nonplussed. It was one thing to announce to the world she was dating a woman, but quite another to tell her ex-boyfriend who already had two previous lovers fall for each other. She wasn't totally insensitive to his feelings, but she was not ashamed of her burgeoning relationship with Doris and he would find out eventually.

"I'm bringing Doris to Sweet Pea's party tomorrow," she finally answered. "As my date."

Frank shook his head as if he was clearing his ears. "Your what?" he asked.

Blake glanced at Buzz and noted he was silently watching them. She turned back to Frank and said, "My date, Frank."

"Your date?" Frank asked, shaking his head again. "Doris Wolfe is your date?"

"Yes, Frank," she said, starting to get exasperated with him.

"You're dating Doris Wolfe?"

"Yes, Frank," she repeated with a sigh. She knew him well enough to guess what came next.

"Are you nuts?" Frank yelled.

"Frank, calm down," Buzz said. "We've got customers out there."

"Stay out of this, Pop," he shot to his father, but Blake was glad to note he did lower his voice.

"No, Frank, I am not nuts and who I date is none of your business," Blake said.

"For God's sake, Blake, *Doris Wolfe*?" he blustered. "That woman is a shark, she'll eat you alive."

"Well, I certainly hope so," she flung back and out of the corner of her eye she saw Buzz put a hand over his mouth in an attempt not to laugh. "God, I never realized you were such a homophobe, Frank."

He blinked in surprise at her. "I'm not," he said. "I don't care that it's a woman, Blake, it's Doris Wolfe I can't stand."

"Well, that's just too bad," she said, pointing her finger sharply against his chest. "So you better tell me right now if we're welcome at your daughter's birthday party as a couple or not."

He stood there for a few moments, his face turning red. "No, no you're both welcome to come. Francesca is your goddaughter and Natalia wouldn't like it if I banned Doris."

"Frank..." Buzz started, but Frank once again stopped his father.

"Forget it, Pop," he said and then turned to Blake. "Look, you know what? You're right. It is none of my business. We're not together and you're free to date whoever you want." He turned to Buzz. "I'm going to take Francesca upstairs to feed her. I've lost my appetite." With that he turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Blake sighed and looked at Buzz. "I'm sorry, Buzz."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not your fault, Blake," he said. "You're just trying to find someone to make you happy. I'm sorry that person couldn't be my son, but I've seen you and Doris together a lot and I'd say you two really have chemistry."

"You think so?" she asked, a bright smile on her face.

"Yeah, I really do," he said. "Good luck, dear."

"Thanks, Buzz," she said and glanced at her watch. "Oh gosh, really gotta run now. Poor Clarissa is waiting."

"Go already!" he said and waved her onward with a laugh.

More coffee cups and the remains of a delivery lunch littered the table. Mallet sat back and rubbed his eyes with a sigh as Anna returned the last evidence bag to a box. He finally opened his eyes and looked at her. "You've done some good work here," he said. "Too good. I hate to admit it, but you and Eleni might be right."

Anna inwardly rolled her eyes as she sealed the boxes. She knew her evidence was solid and did not need Mallet's affirmation or praise. Remembering Doris's request to keep an eye on him, she remained silent.

He continued, "But we need more if we hope to pinpoint who Edmund's inside man is. Have there been any leads on DeSilva?"

"He was last seen in El Paso, Texas," she said. "That was eight months ago and the trail has gone long cold."

"Which means he's long over the border," Mallet said. "No sign of him in Mexico?"

"Not that we've been able to determine," she said. "The drug situation in Mexico makes requests from small-town police departments their lowest priority."

He made a note on his pad. "I'll get on that immediately," he said. "I've still got a few contacts in Mexico City."

"See if they also have any leads on where Winslow moved his base of operations. My bet is DeSilva is there."

"Even if he is," Mallet said, continuing to write, "getting him extradited will take time, but if we can question him, we might be able to find out who he was working with inside the department."

"Long shot," Anna said.

Mallet nodded and stood up to walk over to the bulletin board where photos of Edmund Winslow and his henchmen were tacked. She watched as he touched the one of her father. Even from her chair across the room, the photo's penetrating dark eyes haunted her.

"He seems too young to be your father," Mallet noted and then turned to look at her with his eyebrows raised.

"That photo was taken some time ago," she said. "The latest we have was a partial taken by Homeland Security when he last entered the country legally. It shows his hair is much greyer now, but there's not much aging in the face."

"He just walked into the country?"

Anna shrugged. "Happens," she said succinctly. "Of course, he and everyone else on that board are on every watch list in the world so it will be harder for them to come and go as they please."

"You sound like you don't believe that," he pointed out.

She shrugged again. "My father is very good at what he does, Mallet," she said. "But for what it's worth, I believe he and Winslow at least are still close by. Neither of them will rest until their revenge is complete."

"What exactly do they want?" he asked. Anna recognized the bewildered expression on his face; it was the same look Frank and the other officers have when trying to understand Winslow's motivations.

"My father wants whatever Winslow wants and Winslow wants to destroy everyone he believes has ever hurt him, that includes their families."

"That's damn near everyone in town," Mallet huffed in frustration. He paused a moment. "What about you?" he finally asked. He walked away from the board and leaned his hands on the table. "You're his daughter. If the evidence didn't show Winslow has had someone in the department for long before you got here, you'd be a prime suspect for the insider."

Anna refused to show how much the insinuation rankled her. "Hung Feng Li ceased being my father a long time ago," she said. "I've spent nearly my entire adult life fighting to bring him and Edmund Winslow to justice for all the hurt they have caused. I won't relax until they're both behind bars."

Mallet nodded thoughtfully and Anna guessed he was going to remain as reserved toward her as she was toward him. "Why the children though?" he asked.

Anna breathed an inner sigh of relief that he had moved on to the next subject. "Why should they live when his own daughter is dead?" she answered. "Judging from his attacks on Sarah Randall, Emma Spencer and Ava Peralta, he seems to grab on to any opportunity to cause mayhem."

"We're lucky we didn't lose any kids in the massacre," Mallet said, shaking his head.

"Not for lack of him trying," she said bitterly. "He was targeting Francesca Rivera when Jeffrey finally managed to take him down."

Anna could see he was thinking again. "So Olivia Spencer's great-niece, both of her daughters and her girlfriend's daughter." He ticked off on his fingers. "Maybe he's focused on Olivia?" he suggested.

"Possibly, but unlikely. Olivia is not the only one who's pissed Winslow off," she said. "Again, I think those were just opportunistic. He hasn't had a shot against Jeffrey's son and that would be even greater revenge for him."

"So anyone is fair game," he said.

Anna nodded. "In fact, I'd say the only kid in town who's fairly safe is Marina Cooper's son, Henry," she said and felt a small degree of satisfaction at the hurt that briefly flashed across the man's face. She had gotten the whole story thanks to whispered water cooler gossip about how a sterile A.C. Mallet had illegally adopted a child for his wife, never suspecting the infant was the son of Shayne Lewis and Lara Pizano, Edmund Winslow's daughter, tragically killed in a senseless accident.

"Was Henry at the wedding?" he finally asked and Anna noted how his jaw muscles clenched and unclenched.

"He was safe at Company with his mom," she said, shaking her head.

Mallet thought a moment. "So why hasn't Winslow kidnapped his grandson yet?" he asked. "If only to get him out of the line of fire?"

"Good questions," she answered. "He might be planning to do just that or someone else might be a target. We just don't know."

"The shooting at the wedding just seems so random," he said. "None of the victims were his obvious prime targets although they were there."

"It was chaos," Anna said. "A lot of people got really lucky that day."

"Did the Saint of Springfield really take a shot at him?" he asked, shaking his head in wonderment. "I never would have believed it of her."

"Yes, she did," Anna answered firmly; obviously Mallet wasn't as observant as he probably thought he was if he couldn't understand a mother's motivation. "I told you, Winslow was about to shoot her daughter. I just wish she had a better aim than Jeffrey."

He chuckled ruefully. "Well, we've got a lot to do so let's get to it."

"Right," she said in agreement, eager to get back to work. "I need to run to the lab to pick up some more analyses on the older cases."

"And I'll get on the horn with my contacts," he said. "Again, Anna...great job. Let's hope all that hard work pays off and we get our man. One dirty cop makes us all look bad and I don't like it."

"Me either, Mallet," she said. "Me either."

Eleni looked around at the gaudy Christmas decorations festooning the wide spaces of the Springfield Mall.

"It's not even Thanksgiving yet," she remarked to Frank who was pushing his daughter's stroller as they walked. "Didn't they used to wait until after the holiday before decorating?"

Frank gave her an absentminded shrug as he looked around the busy crowds for their destination. "They're doing it earlier and earlier each year. By the time Francesca's in school they will probably be decorating before Memorial Day."

Eleni shook her head at the blatant consumerism, once again wondering at the privileged habits of her adopted people, even in hard times such as these.

"There's the store," Frank said and pointed Francesca's stroller toward the baby clothing store.

Eleni followed him as he headed down the aisles making a beeline for the toddler dresses. After shuffling through a dozen selections he threw his hands up in frustration.

"These look all the same," he exclaimed.

Eleni rolled her eyes at him in amusement. "They are not," she said. She pulled two pretty outfits from the rack and held them up. "Which do you like better?" One was a light blue and the other a darker cerulean.

Frank looked back and forth between the two and shrugged. "They're both cute," he answered. "Like I said, all the same."

Eleni was looking between the both of them when she was rudely shoved from behind. With a retort on her lips, she turned to find herself staring into the surprised eyes of her daughter.

As they looked at each other, Shayne Lewis turned the corner of the aisle carrying Henry in his arms.

"Grampa!" the little boy cried and squirmed to get down. Shayne set the boy on his feet and he toddled over to Frank who scooped him up.

"Hey, big guy," Frank said as Henry gave him a wet kiss on the cheek and hugged his neck until Frank's eyes nearly bugged out.

"What are you doing here?" Marina asked as she continued to glare at her mother.

"Shopping for your sister's birthday," Frank said. "Then we're going to grab something for dinner. You guys want to join us?"

Eleni glanced at him to see if he really was that heedless to the hostility pouring off of their daughter.

Marina shook her head. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed. "Are you two *dating*?"

Eleni closed her eyes and sighed inwardly, not wishing to let Marina know how much the vitriol in her voice hurt.

"Well..." Frank started and Eleni noted the slight blush on his face. "Yeah, I guess we are."

Eleni turned back to Marina just in time to see the woman's face clenched in shock.

"You have got to be kidding me," Marina screeched and Eleni saw Shayne wince at the volume.

"Hey, honey, come on," he began.

"Marina, what..." Frank started but was cut off.

"Are you *crazy*, Dad?" Marina cried. "What is it with you and women, for God's sake?"

"Hey!" Frank blurted out, his face turning red.

"God, first that whore Olivia and then superwuss Natalia and crazy Blake," Marina sneered.

"Now you're back full circle with this mail-order bride reject?"

"Marina!" Shayne proclaimed his face taut with embarrassment. "That's your mother!"

"That's enough, Marina!" Eleni finally said, ignoring the onlookers, but was dismayed to note that Henry had his face buried in his grandfather's neck as if trying to hide and Francesca had a look on her face as if she were about to cry.

"What?" Marina said turning to Shayne, the look of scorn on her face shining darkly in the store. "Just because she gave birth to me doesn't mean anything. You can't choose your parents."

"And what kind of example are you setting for your son, Marina?" Eleni said, jerking her head toward the boy quivering in Frank's arms. "You're teaching him it's all right to disrespect your mother. What are you going to do when he can't forgive you for your actions and mistakes?"

"I'm not going to make any!" Marina proclaimed with the righteousness of the blind fool. "I remember all too well what it's like to grow up without a mother and I'm not going to be like you. I'm going to love him and be there for him all his life."

"Be careful of what you say, daughter," Eleni said darkly. "Don't make any promises you can't keep."

"Oh, is that supposed to be some kind of warning, *Mother*?" Marina asked, the venom on the last word causing Eleni to grimace. "Because I assure you, I learned my lesson well from you. I will *not* abandon my child."

"Marina, that's enough," Frank said, handing the now-crying Henry back to his father. "If you can't stop this nonsense and apologize to your mother, then just go home. Don't bother coming tomorrow night."

"But I promised to help," she started, but Frank cut her off with a raised hand.

"Forget it," he said. "We'll manage okay."

"Fine!" Marina huffed and turned on her heel to clack loudly out of the store.

Shayne simply shrugged and shook his head in apology to them both. "I'll drop off Francesca's gift in the morning, Frank," he said.

"Thanks, Shayne," he said.

"See you later, Eleni," Shayne said and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Thank you, Shayne," she said and caressed her grandson's cheek.

After the two left, she put her hands over her face, finally unable to stop the tears. Frank held her until her tears stopped and then they continued with their shopping as if nothing had happened.

Act Two

The small Springfield airfield was nearly deserted when Doris Wolfe's driver swung around the terminal to the small waiting area. He pulled next to a long stretch limousine already parked there and stepped quickly out to open Doris's door for her. She immediately lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out into the chilly morning air.

"Thanks, Jack," she said.

"You're welcome, ma'am."

The limo's back door opened and Philip Spaulding stepped out.

"Good morning, Doris," he said in greeting.

"Philip," she said. "Beautiful day, even if it is on the cold side."

"That it is," he agreed. "I just got off the phone with the tower. The plane is on its final approach so they will only be a few more minutes."

"Thanks again for bringing Ashlee home," she said.

Philip laughed. "That was James's way of impressing Daisy."

"*Trying* to impress Daisy, you mean," she said, joining him in laughter. "Waving money around a Cooper isn't going to get it done."

"I've tried to tell him that," he grinned. "But, I would have done it anyway. I feel better knowing they're safer than they would be on a commercial flight. My flight attendant does much more than just serve cocktails, you know."

"And it's appreciated," she said. Neither Ashlee nor Daisy knew about the Spaulding security team assigned to keep an eye on them at Berkeley. The likelihood of them being one of Winslow's targets was slim, but with the madman's penchant for targeting his enemies' children, Doris wasn't taking any chances.

Philip turned and shaded his eyes against the sun. "There they are now," he said with a pleased tone in his voice at his crew's efficiency.

Together in the crisp air they watched as the jet made a smooth landing on the tarmac and then taxied around to the disembarking area. Doris bounced on her heels in anticipation and after what seemed like an eternity, the hatch finally opened and the three young people stepped out.

"Ashlee!" she cried happily and rushed forward to embrace her daughter.

"Mom!" Ashlee said. "What are you doing here? I thought I was riding with James and Daisy to town."

"I couldn't wait to see you, honey," she said.

"Aww," Ashlee said with a grin. "That's so sweet, thank you."

As Ashlee said her goodbyes to her friends, Doris directed Jack to retrieve her daughter's luggage.

Once inside, Doris took Ashlee's hand as they chatted about the flight from San Francisco and the two days the youngsters had spent in Chicago including the shows they had taken in.

"So, how's the writing coming, honey?" Doris asked. "Last time we spoke, you said you thought you were near the end."

"And I was!" Ashlee said excitedly. "I finally finished it and spent the past couple of weeks getting it ready for submission. That reminds me, do you have Blake Marler's phone number? I lost it when I got a new phone."

"Of course I do, honey," Doris said. "Um, in fact I'll be seeing her tonight. We...uh, we have a date."

Ashlee blinked. "A date?" she asked. "You and Blake?"

"Blake and I," she acknowledged with a nod. "Is that okay?" Well aware of Ashlee's own rocky history with Blake, Doris waited for the answer on tenterhooks.

"What happened with Anna?" Ashlee asked. "You said you were considering giving it another try."

"I did," Doris said. "But both Anna and I realized that we were not meant to be and are working on being friends. She's been a great asset to me and the town and surprisingly has become a good friend to Olivia and her family."

"Okay, good," Ashlee said and Doris could see her daughter's mind at work. "So you decided to date Blake? I knew you were friends with her, but had no idea you were interested in her."

"Actually, she pursued me," Doris said with a wry grin. "I was interested in her of course, but my days of going after straight women were long over."

"She's not that straight obviously," Ashlee laughed. "Well, good for you, Mom. I just want you to be happy and if Blake can make you happy then I'm all for it."

"Thank you, honey," Doris said and leaned in to hug her daughter.

Jack pulled the SUV into their driveway and then helped bring Ashlee's luggage into the house. "I'm going to take a walk around the block, ma'am," he said and Doris nodded as he left them alone.

"Okay, that's the story of my love life," Doris said as she got them both a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "What about yours? Anyone interesting at school?"

Ashlee laughed. "I've been too busy with my studies and writing to meet anyone, Mom," she answered. "Although..."

Doris raised her eyebrows. "Although...?"

"I've been corresponding with Rafe Rivera," she admitted with a small shrug. "Emails, letters, the occasional chat online when we can swing it."

"Really?" Doris said surprised. She knew they were friends, but never considered anything more than that.

"Yeah," Ashlee said. "He had a stopover for a couple of hours in San Francisco on his way back to his unit after his last leave. We met up for drinks. Turns out we have a lot in common, other than the whole shooting someone and gay mom thing, that is."

"Wow, so do you think anything will come of it?" Doris asked, immediately worried for a variety of reasons, the least of which that he was a convicted felon.

"Too early to tell, so get out of mom worry mode," Ashlee said with a wry grin.

"Sorry, can't help it," Doris replied.

"I know, Mom, and I love you for it," she said, giving Doris's hand a loving squeeze. "But really, don't worry about it. We have plans to get together when he's stateside, but a lot can happen between now and then, some things I really don't even want to think about."

"I know, honey," she said. The horrors of the war loomed closer to home than she cared for. She made a mental note that if she was still mayor when Rafe came home – not *if* he came home, don't even think that Doris, she told herself – *when* he came home, she'd make sure he received a hero's welcome along with all of the other Springfield veterans.

"Well, I hope things work out the way you want them to honey, and if that's with Rafe Rivera it will certainly be with my blessing." Doris smiled at Ashlee's surprised expression, knowing a few years ago she would have flown off the handle at the news that her daughter was even considering a relationship with someone she had prosecuted so vehemently in court. "Besides," she continued, "Olivia and Natalia are my dearest friends. Anything that binds our families together is all good."

Ashlee wiped a tear from her eye and said in a thick voice, "Thanks, Mom."

Deciding she'd just about maxed out on her emotional sensitivity for the moment, Doris moved on to a less serious subject. "So, tell me about this book of yours. What's it about? What's it called?"

Ashlee smiled widely and launched into what obviously was one of her favorite subjects.

It was amusing how the kitchen table had become their family communal workspace, Olivia thought as she glanced around the cluttered tabletop. Emma had one third of it covered with her papers and various art supplies as she worked on a drawing. Olivia noted with interest that Emma was copying a drawing from an art book she had picked up at the library.

At the other end of the table, Natalia also had covered it with papers and was focusing on her address book, restlessly flapping through pages. In between Natalia and Emma, Olivia sat with a stack of wedding invitations and envelopes on the table before her and a calligraphy pen in her hand as she waited for Natalia to decide on another invitee. A stack of finished invitations sat in the middle of the table waiting for postage.

"We've already gone through the usual suspects," she said to Natalia, who glanced up at her.

"I know, I'm just trying to decide if..." Natalia broke off her train of thought while she flipped through her book again.

A knock on the door stopped Olivia from asking Natalia to finish the thought. She stood to answer it and found Anna Li waiting on the porch. "Come in," she said and closed the door behind the detective.

"Good morning," Anna said with a smile.

"Good morning," Natalia said, returning the smile.

Emma bounced up from her seat and rushed over to Anna. "Hi Anna! I'm ready to go!" she said.

"Oh no, you're not," Olivia said. "Go put your stuff away first."

Emma rolled her eyes, but at Olivia's stern look simply turned and quickly gathered her supplies from the table and then ran from the room.

"Anything we can get you?" Natalia asked.

"I'll help myself," Anna said walking over to the bottomless coffeepot.

"So how's she doing?" Olivia asked after Anna had fixed her cup.

"Great," Anna said. "She's doing really well. Her coordination is already showing a great improvement."

"She's not over doing it, is she?" Olivia asked, concerned. "Em has a tendency to jump into things with too much gusto and I don't want her to strain herself."

Anna shook her head. "No. I have her keeping a journal of her exercises and diet. She's right on target."

"Good," Olivia said with a nod. "Oh, that reminds me...we'd like you to come for Thanksgiving dinner."

Anna rubbed her nose and hemmed and hawed for a few moments. "I might have to work," she finally said.

"Uh uh!" Olivia said with an emphatic shake of her head. "You used that excuse last year and it's not going to fly this time. No excuses. We both want you here."

Anna glanced at Natalia who nodded in agreement. "All right," Anna said with a smile. "What can I bring?"

"Hmmm," Olivia thought for a moment. "Can you cook?"

Anna nodded. "Learned at the palace, same as you," she said.

"Great," Olivia said. "Do you remember that calabaza and spiced sausage dish everyone on San Cristobal served in the fall?"

"Oh yeah," Anna said. "That's a great dish and it fits in with American Thanksgiving traditions."

"That's why I thought of it," Olivia smirked. "I know a lot of us here will appreciate a taste of the island."

"All right," Anna said. "I'll bring that. Anything else?"

"You're welcome to bring a guest," Natalia said absently and Olivia watched her make a note on her Thanksgiving Day organization list. "Thanks Anna and thanks again for your help with Emma."

As she waited for her young student, Anna smiled. "My pleasure. She's a terrific kid and I'd hate for what happened with Jane and at the wedding to have a lingering effect on her." Looking down in a moment of regret, Anna sighed before continuing. "It's better that she directs those powerful emotions in a positive manner."

"It seems to be helping," Natalia said.

"I'm glad," Anna said and looked at Olivia with a wry shrug. "It's the least I can do."

Olivia sensed the other woman was again remembering the past. Although she hadn't known until recently, Olivia appreciated the fact that Anna was the only one who had tried to help her during that dark time. Anna herself might see it as a failure on her part, but Olivia didn't; Anna had lost her family and home because of it and Olivia understood the sacrifice. It was for that reason alone Olivia was willing to trust the detective with her daughter, especially when Emma was in such a fragile state.

"Trust me," she finally said, looking directly into Anna's eyes. "It's a lot."

Anna gave her a grateful smile and a short nod.

The rumble of Emma's feet running down the stairs alerted them to her imminent arrival. Anna took her coffee cup over to the sink to rinse it out.

"Okay, I'm ready now!" Emma said bursting into the kitchen.

"Go kiss your mothers goodbye and we can leave," Anna said, drying her hands.

"Bye Ma," Emma said, kissing first Natalia and then Olivia. "Bye Mom."

"Bye baby," Olivia said. "Have fun."

"And be careful," Natalia added.

"Oh Ma!" Emma moaned with an eye roll and pulled a laughing Anna from the house.

"Oh Ma!" Olivia teased as the door closed behind them.

"Hush, you," Natalia said with a smile.

"Okay, now where were we?" Olivia asked as she picked up her pen.

Natalia sighed. "I'm trying to decide if we should even bother inviting my parents."

"I gotta admit sweetheart, the chances of them coming are practically non-existent."

"I know," Natalia said. "Leyla hasn't spoken to them for months now so I'm sure they don't even know about it."

"Did you invite them to your first wedding?" Olivia asked, strongly suspecting the answer.

"No," Natalia answered confirming Olivia's suspicion. "By then I had stopped trying to include them in our lives. Rafe was five when I finally gave up."

"I'm still surprised they contacted you after all those years," Olivia said.

"They couldn't ignore *mi abuela's* dying request," Natalia said. "That was more important than their pride."

"I suppose," Olivia said. "But I can't imagine how they can value their stupid pride over their own children. They've lost two out of three now, not to mention a handful of grandchildren."

"That's why I *do* want to invite them, so they can make that choice," Natalia said. "But I think that just sending them an invitation is so..."

"Impersonal?" Olivia said.

"And insulting," Natalia agreed.

Olivia thought for a moment. "Then why don't we invite them in person?" she suggested. "We can take a weekend off when the girls are with their dads and ask your parents if we could meet with them, take them to dinner if they agree?"

"Hmmm," Natalia thought a moment and then nodded. "That will work, I think. I'll call and say we have something important to tell them."

"And no matter what, we can still have a great weekend in the city – maybe hit the Magnificent Mile and get some shopping done."

"That will be fun," Natalia agreed. "Although our closet is bursting at the seams with your clothes already."

"Hey!" Olivia protested. "Some of those are yours too, you know."

"Not as many as yours, though," Natalia retorted.

"Fine, blame me for everything," Olivia laughed. "But actually, I was thinking we'd go shopping for something besides clothes."

"Oh?" Natalia asked, obviously intrigued.

"Yes," Olivia said, flirtatiously. "I was thinking maybe we could get something just for the two of us."

"Really?" Natalia echoed her tone. "And would this be something for me or for you?"

"Like I said, for both of us," Olivia said with a smirk. "Something fun."

Natalia's eyebrows rose. "We already have fun."

"And different," Olivia added.

"Different can be fun," Natalia remarked.

Olivia nodded. "Sure can."

"How different are we talking about?" Natalia asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

Olivia leaned over and nuzzled Natalia's cheek as she whispered in her ear, "Nothing we haven't experienced before...just with one small difference."

"Not too small, I hope?" Natalia quipped with a raised eyebrow and Olivia burst out in happy laughter.

At Company, Ashlee sat in a booth with her laptop. She was so thoroughly engrossed in her work she didn't notice anyone approaching until she heard someone clearing their throat. Standing next to her table was a pretty dark haired woman only a few years older than herself.

"Ashlee Wolfe, right?" the woman asked and at Ashlee's nod added, "I'm Leyla Rivera, Natalia's sister."

"Oh, hello," Ashlee said, shaking her hand. "Have a seat." She shoved her computer and papers to the side as the other woman sat down.

"I've got something for you," Leyla said rummaging through her large bag. "Rafe sent it with his birthday gift for Francesca. He wanted to surprise Nat and Olivia so he sent it to me at the hotel and he asked me to give this to you."

"Thanks," Ashlee said taking the small package from Leyla. "Do you mind...?" At Leyla's go ahead gesture she pulled the lid off wondering if Rafe had bothered to wrap it first, knowing the Army inspected everything leaving the field, including emails and chats, which made trying to have a long distance relationship even harder, not to mention extremely frustrating.

"Oh wow," she exclaimed softly. Inside the box was a turquoise pendant on a delicate silver chain. She pulled it out and held it up to the light.

Leyla let out a slow whistle of appreciation. "Wow...I'd say my nephew is sweet on you."

Ashlee smiled and could feel herself blushing. She undid the clasp and put it around her neck. "How's it look?" she asked.

"Lovely," Leyla answered and searched through her bag again. She pulled out a compact mirror and handed it to Ashlee. The pendant rested a few inches above her cleavage and indeed it looked pretty against her skin.

"Is there a note?" Leyla asked.

She peeked in the box and spotted a folded piece of paper.

*Ash,
Saw this in the bazaar in town and thought it would look pretty with your beautiful eyes. Can't wait until I'm home again, so I can see if I'm right.
Yours,
Rafe*

Leyla whistled again and when Ashlee looked up, she said, "Looks like you're sweet on my nephew, too."

Ashlee could feel her blushing face grow hotter, but she smiled at Leyla, already liking the young woman. "Thank you for the delivery," she said replacing Rafe's note in the box and closing it. She touched the pendant again and felt a warm hopefulness running through her. "Will you join me for another coffee?" she asked.

"Sure," Leyla answered. "I'd love to hear more about Rafe. Oh!" she added, "I almost forgot... Rafe said to tell you to not forget the secret handshake." When Ashlee let out an amused laugh, Leyla brows furrowed and she asked, "What the heck does that mean?"

"The Springfield chapter of the 'our moms are gay' club," Ashlee explained. "I guess we're gonna have to induct Blake's daughter now."

Leyla laughed. "Okay – so, how did you and Rafe meet?"

"Well, you know about his juvie record?" Ashlee asked and at Leyla's nod she launched into a full explanation to her new friend.

Anna carefully watched the young girl as she followed Anna's lead through the series of slow exercises designed to warm up and stretch their major muscle groups. Using a combination of Tai Chi movements along with the standard cardiopulmonary preparations, Anna made sure the youngster wasn't overdoing it. Despite their resiliency, young children needed extra time to prepare for strenuous exercise and Anna always made sure Emma carefully followed the regimen. While the girl was not the first child who had been entrusted in her care – Anna had worked with them before through her previous department's youth outreach program – this was one child she was not going to take any chances with.

She was glad she had converted the spare bedroom of her apartment into an exercise room complete with punching bag, speed bag and weight lifting equipment. When she had started working with Emma, she had covered the floor in cushioned mats and one wall with floor to ceiling mirrors, the last allowing her to keep a closer eye on the girl. With a final movement, she turned to the young girl. "All right?" she asked. Emma nodded and wiped a bit of sweat from her forehead. "Good, then show me that move from last time."

Emma again nodded, this time with a slightly feral grin as she bowed formally and then rushed at Anna. Inwardly, Anna rejoiced at the young girl's progress as she performed the maneuvers with a flurry of limbs. Emma was by far the most exceptional student of her age group that she had ever had and Anna was already proud of the girl's accomplishments.

Twenty minutes later, Emma finally succeeded in dropping her to the mat and then stood there staring down at Anna in surprise. "I did it!" she cried happily, jumping up and down and then gasped in surprise as Anna smoothly swept her off her feet with a leg. A moment later, Anna had Emma pinned to the mat.

"And what did I say about letting your guard down, sweetie?" she asked lightly as she stared down at the trapped youngster.

"Don't do it?" Emma gave her a wry smile.

"Right," Anna said. "Never, ever let your guard down, but let me show you what to do if you find yourself in this position again."

Anna was pleased with the intense concentration Emma displayed and by the time the young girl had finally broken out of the hold using her newly learned technique it was time to quit for the day.

"Great job, Emma," she said as she handed her a towel and water bottle.

"Thank you, Anna," Emma replied and then drank deeply from the bottle. "I thought I'd never get free. You're so much bigger than me."

"Like I told you, it's all a matter of leverage, not size," Anna said as she wiped the sweat from her brow. "Using your head is more important than using your muscles. Remember that and you'll be all right."

Emma nodded thoughtfully and Anna had spent enough time around the girl to guess she was about to move on to another subject. Sure enough, the youngster wandered over to the bookshelf near the single window. On it, Anna had placed the few mementos from her home she had taken with her when she left San Cristobel. She watched as Emma carefully picked up a small, but intricately carved statue of a Chinese woman sitting on a lotus pad.

"What's this?" the young girl asked. "It's pretty."

"It is," Anna agreed. "That's a statue of Quan Yin. It was my mother's and had been passed down to her through many generations of our family."

"Quan Yin?" Emma asked. "Who's that?"

"She's a goddess in the Buddhist religion," Anna explained. "There's an old legend that tells before she became a goddess, she was the daughter of a cruel king who wanted her to marry a man she did not want to marry. She told her father she would agree to marry the man if the king would ease the misfortunes of his people. The king refused and had his daughter executed."

"That's so sad," Emma said with a frown.

"It is, but that's when she became a goddess with the power to ease the misfortunes of her people herself. My mother taught me that it's very important for a woman to stand up for what she believes in, to be strong and independent and to always help those in need."

"Like my mommies?" Emma said.

Anna nodded. "Yes, Emma, like your mommies. They are both very strong and independent women who do what they can to help others."

Emma was quiet again for another few moments then turned to Anna. "You knew my mommy before, when she lived on the island, didn't you?" she asked. "You were friends?"

"Not friends, but I knew her, yes," Anna said, wondering where this conversation was going.

"What was she like?"

Anna smiled. "She was very pretty, just like you are, although she was a bit older than you when I first knew her. She was very popular in school and had a lot of friends."

Anna frowned when Emma turned to her with haunted eyes. "Something bad happened to Mommy there, didn't it?" she asked in a low tone of voice. "I heard her and Ma talking about the bad thing, but I don't know what it was." She paused then asked, "Was it like Jane? Did someone die?"

"No, baby, no one died," Anna answered, kneeling down in front of the girl. She tucked a sweaty lock of hair off of Emma's forehead. "But, yes, something bad happened to your mommy, but she came through it stronger than ever and today she's happier than she's ever been, isn't she? That's why I want to help you, so the bad things that happened will stop hurting so much and you can be stronger, too."

"Like Quan Yin?" Emma asked.

"Yes, sweetie," she answered. "Just like her."

Anna felt tears in her eyes as the child wrapped her arms around her neck and squeezed tight.

"Thank you," Emma whispered.

"You're welcome, Emma," she replied, her voice thick with emotion.

Once again looking at the grandfather clock to see how long before Blake arrived to pick her up for their date, Doris wondered why she had finally agreed to go out with Blake.

"Because you like her, you idiot," she said to herself and then rolled her eyes at her own foolishness, not only for talking to herself, but also for lying to herself as well.

She knew she more than 'liked' the fiery redhead. She had realized a while ago – even before her date with Anna to see if they could work things out – that she had romantic feelings for Blake. She just didn't know what to do about them.

Blake herself had pretty much decided that for her, first by ambushing her at Ladies Night and then by pursuing her with a dogged determination that was no less than astonishing – and incredibly romantic.

Ever since Doris had run out of Blake's house like a burglar caught with his hands in the safe, Blake had showered her with attention and small gifts, that Doris, with her history of one-night stands and short-lived affairs, had not experienced before. Blake had clearly stated her intentions

to woo and woo she had, every day showing up at the mayor's office with a small token of her affection. Sometimes it was a small bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolates or, once, a small, golden butterfly pin that Doris had worn on her blazer every day since. Doris never knew what time Blake would show up at her office, but she invariably looked forward to the brief visit. Of course, there were Doris's visits to Company each morning for her coffee-to-go where she always got a kiss along with a perfect cup of Joe.

As the weeks progressed and Blake continued her subtle courting without pushing or demanding anything from her, Doris had started to relax and she found herself opening up more and more to the other woman. When Blake had casually mentioned she was going to spend some time in the park with Clarissa, Doris had surprised them both with a thermos full of hot chocolate and warm muffins from the bakery. The afternoon that followed had been filled with laughter and warm conversation. While Blake's daughter had played, Doris found herself explaining some of the reasons why she had been reluctant to embark on a relationship, of the heartache she had experienced when lovers she had given her heart to had turned their backs when it was time to resume their normal lives.

Blake had listened quietly as she held the mayor's hand and had offered no promise not to do the same, but Doris could see it in the redhead's eyes and ever since she decided to let her fears go and see where Blake and her own rejoicing heart took her.

The doorbell shook her out of her musings and she once again glanced at the clock, noting that Blake was exactly on time. She walked through the foyer to the front door and opened it with a smile. Blake's own jubilant smile seemed to outshine the porch light.

"Wow," Doris said, giving her a long lingering look. "You look great."

Blake was dressed under her coat in a flowing blue silk dress that reached just past her knees, her delicate calves highlighted by the four inch heels she was wearing. "Thanks," she said. "You look great, as always." She reached out and lightly touched the golden butterfly Doris had pinned to her own dark green dress.

"Let me get my coat and the baby's gift," Doris said, moving back into the house and leaving the door open. "Where's Clarissa?"

"I dropped her off already," Blake said.

"All right," Doris said, as she put on her coat and grabbed her keys and the wrapped package. "I'm ready."

Blake patiently waited while Doris locked the door and as she reached out to take Blake's hand for the short walk to the car, she realized she was indeed ready.

The handmade sign posted on the front of Company's entrance read, 'Closed for Private Party.' Natalia glanced at her partner who was carrying a tall stack of packages. The topmost toppled and before it could crash to the ground, Natalia deftly caught it.

"Thanks," Olivia said. "Saved my butt once again."

Natalia balanced the gift on top of the slightly smaller stack she was carrying. "I think we overdid it here," she said. "We're going to spoil her."

"Never!" Olivia said. "Our Sweet Pea deserves everything we can give her. All our kids do. Get the door?"

Natalia laughed as she pushed open the door and then stood aside to allow her partner to enter first. She decided not to argue with Olivia's statement, especially since she too had overspent for their baby's first birthday. When she thought of Rafe's first year when she'd had to rely on the church's charity just to clothe him, it seemed to her that Francesca's life by contrast was opulent to the extreme.

Then she glanced at her partner. Olivia had told her numerous times that money itself had no meaning, that only the security it provided for the safety and comfort of their family was why the pursuit of it was necessary. Natalia had to admit that now that she had a comfortable nest egg in the bank and an incredible steady income to boot, the constant fear for her child she had experienced during Rafe's childhood was absent. And she certainly did not miss it.

Inside the restaurant, the atmosphere was warm and jovial. A crowd of Coopers were already surrounding the birthday girl, who was cheerfully yanking on her father's hair. Natalia noted that despite the smile on his face, there were tears in his eyes from the pain.

As they approached, they were loudly greeted by the boisterous family. Buzz and Lillian came over to help with the packages. After thanking them, Natalia went over to see her daughter, already missing her after just one day, while Olivia went to get them drinks.

"Hi Frank," she said. "Hello, Sweet Pea!"

Francesca let go of Frank's hair and leaned toward Natalia with her arms outstretched. Frank stood and handed the baby to her.

"Hi, Natalia," he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

Francesca wrapped her arms around Natalia's neck in a big hug and Natalia kissed the top of her sweet smelling head. She looked down at her baby's outfit and asked Frank, "Is this new?"

"Yeah," Frank said sheepishly. "Early birthday present. Eleni helped me pick it out."

"It's beautiful," Natalia said, noting the delicate lace adorning the pretty pink satin dress and the matching patent leather Mary Janes. "Thank you and give my thanks to Eleni, also." She paused

then asked, "Are you two getting closer?" Normally Natalia wouldn't ask about anyone's personal business, but Frank was the father of their child and anyone in his life would, by extension, be in Francesca's life.

"When we're not butting heads at work," he admitted with a wry shrug. "I don't know," he said and Natalia detected a strain of doubt in his voice and she knew him well enough to sense that he wanted something to come of his reunion with his ex-wife. "We have a lot of history, you know." Natalia nodded and he continued, "I've always felt that Eleni and I..."

"What?" she asked, softly. She knew a lot of Frank's history with his ex-wife had, at times, been very turbulent.

Frank sighed. "I just feel that despite everything, we were always meant to be together. That she has always been the love of my life." He chuckled and looked down as he scuffed his shoe against the tile. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he said.

"Because we're friends, Frank," she said, putting a comforting hand on his arm. "More than that since we'll always have Francesca to share."

Frank nodded. "Thanks Natalia," he said. "I don't think that I could have asked for a better woman to raise my daughter."

Just then Olivia approached them holding two glasses of soda.

"Mama!" Francesca yelled happily and Natalia rolled her eyes.

Olivia gave her a brief shrug as if to say 'It's not my fault!' and put both glasses on a nearby table before leaning in to kiss Francesca's cheek.

"Happy Birthday, my beautiful little Sweet Pea," she said as she wound an arm around Natalia's back and caressed the baby's cheek with her other hand.

"Mama!" Francesca said again.

Olivia smiled sweetly at her daughter and then turned to Frank. "Hi Frankie," she said giving him a big smile as well. "Thanks so much for throwing Sweet Pea her party."

"My pleasure," he said, returning the smile.

Natalia turned her head to look at Olivia. "Can you go see if Buzz made any of his souvlaki? I'm dying for some."

"Are you kidding? Of course he did," Frank laughed. "Pop always makes every Greek dish he knows for a Cooper family event."

Olivia nodded in agreement. "Beef or lamb?" she asked Natalia.

"Both," Natalia said, giving her a cheeky grin.

"Be right back," Olivia said, lightly kissing her on the lips before heading off in the direction of the buffet table.

Natalia watched as her lover playfully shoved Doris Wolfe aside. She smiled as the mayor immediately shoved Olivia back. Then she turned back to Frank. "If you really feel that Eleni is the love of your life, Frank, then you should go for it. Don't let work or the past keep you from giving it a shot. Life can be too unpredictable and if you let her get away, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Frank glanced to another part of the room and she followed his gaze. Eleni was standing with Lillian and Josh and talking animatedly, with plenty of hand movements. Natalia looked back at Frank and watched him smile in a very familiar way; it was the way he used to smile at her when they were engaged.

Finally, Frank turned back to Natalia. "Thank you," he said with real meaning.

"You're a good man, Frank Cooper," she said. "You deserve to be happy."

Frank shrugged and then said, "Did you know that Blake and Doris Wolfe are here...together?"

Natalia bit her lip and then nodded. "Yes," she answered. "They're both very good friends of ours."

"Did you and Olivia encourage this?" he asked, his eyes flashing.

She shook her head. "No, Frank, but honestly we could see it coming for a while so it's not a surprise."

Frank sighed and turned to stare absently at nothing. "Oh well, Blake and I have been over for a long while now, so it doesn't really matter." He paused and then said almost as if to himself, "I wonder if Eleni ever..."

Natalia looked at him blankly, and then blinked rapidly as his meaning hit her hard. She wanted to remain silent, let him think she was still the innocent woman he had idealized. However, she had lived with Olivia long enough that her inner snark was given free rein to let itself loose at people other than her partner. "Well," she started in a casual tone, "which Greek island is Eleni from again?"

Frank turned his head slowly in her direction and his mouth worked, but no sound emerged. She had to bite down on her laughter at the look on his face.

Just then Natalia noticed Francesca had started to squirm in the way that meant she was hungry. She tilted her head toward the back room. "I'll go feed her," she said.

"I..." he started, but she interrupted him.

"It's okay," she said. "I need to anyway. Can you let Olivia know where I've gone?" she asked and didn't wait for an answer. She clutched Francesca to her and rushed away before she could break into a fit of hysterical laughter.

"Hey!" Blake called out into the cold night air. Doris, just about to light her cigarette, turned with two raised eyebrows. Blake marched up to her and plucked the cigarette from Doris's mouth.

"Give me that."

"What...?" Doris began, but Blake interrupted her by grabbing Doris's blouse and pulling her in for a long kiss. Finally she leaned back and smirked at Doris.

"There," she said. "I wanted to do that before you got all stinky."

Doris smiled. "Well then, you better make my nicotine deprivation worth my while."

Blake wrapped her arms around Doris's neck as the mayor leaned in to capture her lips. Blake's head swam and her body tingled with desire as Doris deepened the kiss. Letting out a moan of appreciation, she let one hand travel down Doris's back until it was wrapped around her waist, then she pulled Doris's body closer to her own.

So lost in the kiss, she was suddenly startled when Doris pulled abruptly back. Blake's eyes snapped open and then two loud voices cried out at the same time, "Mom!"

Turning, she was shocked to see her twin sons and a smirking Holly Reade standing behind them.

The scene before her, Olivia thought, would have been an inspiration for Michelangelo. Natalia was seated at Buzz's desk, casually leaning back as she cradled the baby in her arms. Francesca was quietly suckling at her mother's breast, her eyes closed in contentment while Natalia softly hummed a lullaby.

As Olivia watched, Francesca released the nipple with a soft sigh and Natalia gently wiped her mouth.

"*Ay, mamá,*" Natalia said softly to her baby. "*Tu eres muy hermosa, mi hija.* So, so beautiful."

Olivia felt herself fall in love with them all over again and she croaked out hoarsely, "*Ella es tan hermosa como su madre.*"

Natalia looked up with a loving smile on her lips. "She takes after both her mommies, then," Natalia said. "You are also beautiful, my love."

"Well," Olivia said. Her voice was hoarse with emotion. "Isn't she the luckiest girl in the world?"

"Kevin! Jason!" Blake cried out happily and rushed forward to embrace them.

Doris watched as the boys wriggled free after a few moments.

"Mom!" Kevin said angrily.

"What are you doing?" Jason added.

Blake ignored the question. "Why are you home?" she asked, then turned to Holly. "What happened? Where's Ed? Is everything all right?"

"Ed is at Rick and Mindy's. The boys are fine, Blake," Holly answered. "They had some trouble, but we'll talk about that later." Holly gave a pointed look in Doris's direction. Blake turned to her and met her eyes. She reached out to grab Doris's hand and pulled her forward.

"Boys, this is Doris Wolfe, my girlfriend," she said and Doris could feel her hand trembling in Blake's.

"Your girlfriend?" Jason asked scornfully. "You're gay?"

"For *her*?" Kevin added. Doris inwardly rolled her eyes.

"Hey, hey!" Blake admonished. "Didn't they teach you manners at that fancy school?"

"Your mother is right," Holly said in a quiet voice. "Show respect."

Both boys glared sullenly, but kept silent.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're home," Blake said, her natural exuberance taking over. "Come on! Let's go inside. Clarissa's going to be so happy to see you." With that she herded the boys through Company's entrance, leaving Doris alone with Holly.

Doris pasted a fake smile on her face and turned to Holly, who had a small smirk gracing her lips.

"So," Doris said, uncomfortable.

"So," Holly repeated. "I see you finally came out, Doris. It's about time."

Doris's mouth dropped open. "You knew?"

"Of course I knew," Holly said with a chuckle. "There wasn't much that went on in this town that I didn't know about. Not everything made the nightly news."

"Well, that's just...yeah," Doris said, sensing that Holly Reade had a lot of other secrets stored away as potential blackmail fodder against a rainy day. She was glad that she had come out, although the last time she had been blackmailed resulted in one of the best friendships she had ever had.

"How long have you and Blake...?" Holly asked.

"Not long," Doris answered. "Although we've been friends for more than a year." Doris paused. "Is this the part where you ask me my intentions toward your daughter?"

Holly laughed. "Knowing my daughter, all kinds of depraved acts of debauchery." Doris laughed out loud at that. "But as long as she's happy then I don't care who she is with."

"Thank you," Doris said quietly. "Cigarette?" Holly shook her head and Doris lit up. She tilted her chin at Company and asked, "How old are they?"

"The twins?" Holly said and then at Doris's quick nod, "Fourteen."

"Oh God," Doris muttered.

"Indeed," Holly said with a small chuckle.

Blake watched her sons as they stood talking with their sister. From the hurt on Clarissa's face, she guessed that the boys were teasing her about something. She was very happy to see her sons, but she was worried about why they were here. The last time she had spoken to her mother about them everything was fine and when asked, Holly had said her and Ed were taking the boys to Italy with them over their holiday break. Deciding to get some answers, she searched out her mother.

Holly was speaking with Olivia, the two old friends in an animated conversation about what Blake guessed was both of their successful love lives.

"Hey," she said interrupting them. "Can I borrow my mom for a few?" she asked her friend.

"Sure," Olivia said agreeably. "I want to go check on Natalia anyway." Blake waited while Olivia turned to the older woman. "Holly, come by the Beacon for lunch before you head out of town again. You can get to know Natalia better. You're going to love her."

"I'm sure I will, dear," Holly said with a warm smile. "She seems absolutely lovely and congratulations on your beautiful daughter's birthday."

"Thank you," Olivia said with the adoring look Blake had noticed she always wore when speaking of her family.

"Thanks, Olivia," Blake said and led her mother to an empty booth. "Now tell me what's going on. Why are you here with the boys?"

At that, Holly launched into an explanation of Kevin and Jason's increasing disciplinary problems at the boarding school, culminating in a practical joke against a teacher resulting in a fire that caused thousands of Euros worth of damage to the school's cafeteria.

"Oh, my God!" Blake exclaimed. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Fortunately not," Holly answered. "But they were expelled. I made several inquiries into other schools in Europe, but none are willing to take both of them at the same time and I think splitting them up will do more harm than good at this point."

Blake glanced at the twins. "They seem like strangers to me," she said softly. "I mean, they're my sons and I love them, but I hardly know them. I had no idea they were so wild."

"Perhaps this is your chance, then?" Holly commented and Blake turned to her, surprised.

"You mean you want them to live with me?" Holly's unwillingness to let Blake raise her own children was legendary.

Her mother gave her a small yet wry shrug. "I think you can handle it now," she answered. "You've grown a lot these past few years, but make sure *you* think you can handle it, Blake. It won't be easy. They're at an age where they'll need firm guidance."

"I'd like to give it a shot," she said. She had missed her boys terribly. In fact, now that they were home, she realized how big a hole in her life their absence had been. With them here and Doris finally seeming to come around, her hopes for a happy and fulfilled life seemed within her grasp. Unconsciously, she looked around the festive room to seek out the mayor. Doris was nibbling from a plate of finger food and talking with Beth Spaulding. As if sensing her attention, Doris turned to meet Blake's gaze, giving her a saucy smile and a wink before turning back to her law partner.

"Is it serious?" her mother's voice broke into Blake's thoughts.

"Doris and I?" Blake asked and at Holly's nod she continued, "I hope so. I think so. I know I am."

"She's a formidable woman," Holly said. "Strong, intelligent, shrewd. In fact, I'd say she's a lot like Ross."

"You're not planning on stealing her away from me, are you, Mother?" Blake asked with a raised eyebrow.

Holly laughed gaily. "No dear," she answered. "I'm very happy with Ed."

"Good, because she's all mine," Blake said with an emphatic nod.

"Ashlee!" Leyla said happily as she saw her newest friend arrive at the party. "I'm so glad you could make it."

Ashlee settled herself into the booth next to Leyla. "Not late, am I?" she asked.

"Nah," Leyla answered. "I've been enjoying people watching." She directed Ashlee's gaze toward the section where Doris and Blake were standing. "Although I think your mom is looking a little green around the edges."

"Oh?" Ashlee remarked. "Oh! Blake's sons?" Ashlee frowned. "Yeah, they don't look too happy about Mom and Blake. I hope they're not going to get as bad as Rafe did."

"Yeah, I heard he was pretty rough," Leyla said.

"He was brutal," Ashlee agreed. "I gave him a hard time about it, too, although I wasn't the nicest to Mom when she finally came out to me." She watched them for a moment and then laughed. "Well, if anyone can handle hostile step-kids, it's my mom. At least we've got two more inductees for our club."

Ashlee looked around the crowd again and Leyla watched as her gaze stopped on a tall figure. "Is she back in town?" Ashlee asked, her tone dark.

"Ava? Yes," Leyla said, her voice matching her friend's. "She's been back a while."

"I take it you don't like her very much either, do you?" Ashlee asked with a wry smirk.

Leyla shrugged. "I *have* to like her, she's family. What's your beef?"

"She tried to steal my boyfriend," Ashlee answered. "I was pretty insecure back then and she was everything I was not – tall, charming, *thin*. Add to that my mother's attempts to sabotage any relationship I had and it's amazing Coop and I lasted as long as we did."

"Coop?" Leyla asked, her mind thinking of the intricate Springfield relationships. "Buzz's son, the one who died?" at Ashlee's nod, she placed a hand on her friend's arm. "Oh Ashlee, I'm so sorry. And that bitch tried to ruin it for you?"

Ashlee laughed. "So much for family."

"You're practically family, too," she said.

"Thanks, but it's okay," Ashlee said. "Coop and I weren't together at the time, but he'll always be in my heart. First loves, you know?"

Leyla nodded. "Yeah," she said and her eyes brightened as Jonathan entered the room with Sarah walking beside him. Sarah ran to play with Emma and Clarissa as Jonathan headed for the food table, stopping briefly to kiss his aunt.

"Speaking of first crushes," Ashlee laughed.

Leyla turned to her. "You and Jonathan?"

"Oh, I tried, but he was hung up on Lizzie at the time."

"Oh," Leyla said, her voice low.

Jonathan's face brightened as he caught sight of Leyla, then widened with surprise on seeing who was sitting next to her.

"Hey, Sweet Cheeks," he said, pulling Ashlee to her feet and into a huge bear hug. "Welcome home. I heard from Auntie O that you'd be visiting and hoped to run into you."

"Great to see you, too, big guy," Ashlee said, returning the hug.

Jonathan suddenly pulled back and said with a cheeky grin. "Is the big bad Wolfe around? I don't need to spend the night in jail."

Leyla watched the two old friends, feeling a little left out and a bit jealous at their apparent shared history.

Then Jonathan turned to her and said, "Can I steal you away from this pretty girl for a sec? I want to ask you something."

Leyla turned to Ashlee who held up a hand. "I'm gonna go mingle," Ashlee said.

"Okay," Leyla agreed with a nod and Jonathan slid into the booth in the seat Ashlee had just vacated.

"So...here's the thing," he started. "We always seem to meet up either here or at the daycare or Auntie O's and that's great and all, but I was wondering if maybe..." he paused.

"What?" Leyla prompted.

"Well, Sarah's at her mom's for the next couple of days and I was wondering if you would like to go out tomorrow? With me?"

"You're asking me out?" she asked and smiled at his resultant grin.

"Yeah," he answered. "I am."

"Well, it's about time!" she said, swatting him on the arm. "What took you so long?"

He laughed. "Never seemed like the right time. So, I take it that's a yes?"

"Definitely a yes," she answered.

"Great," his smile warmed her. "Hey, there're Daisy and James. Have you met Daisy yet? She's a character."

"Not yet," she answered.

"Come on," he said taking her hand and Leyla was happy when he didn't let go even after the introductions.

Anna sipped from her mug of coffee as she watched the gathering. Her gaze fell on Doris and Blake and lingered for a moment. She was glad Doris was here with Blake, the mayor's affection for the redhead had been evident during their last and final date. As if sensing her perusal, Doris turned to her and gave her a smile. She turned back to Blake and pantomimed lighting a cigarette and with a sour look Blake nodded.

"Join me for a smoke?" Doris said when she neared the detective.

"Sure," Anna said. "It'll give me a chance to check outside."

While Doris lit up, Anna checked the area, especially the stairs leading to the boarding room. When she returned, Doris was already halfway through her cigarette.

"You never let your guard down, do you?" Doris asked, taking a long pull from her cigarette.

"Isn't that what you pay me for?" Anna smiled.

"Good point," Doris said and Anna laughed. Finally coming to the purpose for asking Anna to join her outside, Doris asked, "So how did your meeting with Mallet go?"

Anna quickly outlined the highlights of the meeting, finishing on their strategy for deepening the investigation. Doris silently smoked through one cigarette and then lit another as Anna spoke.

When Anna had finished, Doris nodded thoughtfully. "So tell me your impressions of Mallet." she asked.

Anna paused to gather her thoughts. "He seems competent. He certainly has a solid background in police work and procedure," she answered. "I think his contacts with the CIA may help us in nabbing Winslow and my father, but I still think that's going to take time."

"And personally?" Doris asked.

Again, Anna paused. She didn't care to discuss a colleague's private life with a civilian, but she firmly believed the inside man to be the greater danger and she trusted Doris implicitly. "I've observed him around the other detectives and the Chief and he does have a very close relationship with each of them. For now, I think he believes he can remain impartial, but if the truth proves the traitor is one of his friends, I don't think he can be trusted. From what I've learned, he's destroyed evidence implicating a cop before."

Doris nodded. "Gus Aitoro," she said and chuckled mirthlessly. "Funny how things work out, you know?"

Anna shook her head. "What do you mean?"

"Gus was allowing petty criminals to slide in order to get Olivia's name moved up on the heart transplant list," Doris answered.

Anna thought about that, dredging her memory for the bits of Springfield knowledge she kept filed away. "The same Gus whose heart Olivia now has?" Anna asked. "Natalia's husband?" Doris nodded as she puffed on her cigarette. "Whoa," Anna said, blinking her eyes.

"Well, keep doing what you've been doing, Anna," Doris said.

"All right," she agreed, although she would have anyway without her ex-girlfriend requesting it. She decided to change the subject. "It looked like your date doesn't approve of your habit," Anna said pointing her chin at the cigarette.

Doris laughed mirthlessly. "She doesn't."

"You going to quit?" Anna asked.

"Maybe," Doris shrugged. "I should quit anyway. Easier said than done, though."

Anna nodded then looked in her eyes. "I'm happy for you, D. Really."

"And you?" Doris asked. "Can I be happy for you, too, soon?"

"I'm working on it," Anna said. "Moving on, but you know, it's...easier said than done, though."

Doris nodded and crushed out her cigarette.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you," the gathered friends and family sang some more off key than others. "Happy birthday, dear Francesca. Happy birthday to you."

The crowd broke into loud applause at their own performance. The little girl sitting in her high chair with a large sheet cake on a rolling cart before her looked around in astonishment and then burst into tears with a shrill cry.

A collective "aww" went through the crowd. Francesca raised her arms for her mother and Natalia quickly scooped her up as Olivia blew out the candle and started to slice the cake. Frank grabbed the plates as she filled them and passed them out to the waiting guests.

Doris took two plates and handed one to Blake who accepted it with a kiss to the mayor's cheek, both women ignoring identical glares from the teenage boys slouching against the wall.

Buzz paused on his way to the kitchen with a bin full of dirty glasses to ask Natalia, "Is she all right?"

Natalia nodded. "She was just startled," she answered.

Francesca indeed had ceased her crying and gave her grandfather a smile. Buzz leaned over to huff into her belly, causing her to laugh. He grinned and then continued on his task.

Leyla left the table where she had been sitting with Ashlee, Daisy and James and pulled the baby's highchair over to the table piled with gifts. Natalia sat the now-calm girl in it and looked around. "Emma, do you want to help your sister unwrap her gifts?"

Emma nodded eagerly and skipped to the overflowing table, leaving Clarissa behind without a glance. Natalia said to her, "Do you want to help, too, Clarissa? Francesca has so many."

Clarissa nodded eagerly and walked over to the table to pick up a package. Meanwhile, Emma was showing Francesca how to unwrap a gift, but the baby seemed more interested in the paper rather than what was inside, much to her parents' amusement.

Lillian stood by the table with a pad and pencil to record each gift and the giver's identity for later thanking. Eleni simply stood watching the family's interactions, her gaze flitting from Frank to Francesca to Natalia and back again.

Beth snuggled next to Phillip who was watching his daughter with a small smile on his lips. Beth leaned over and whispered to him, "She seems to be doing better."

He nodded, his gaze not leaving Emma's laughing form. "She's going to be just fine."

Holly Reade sat at one end of the counter sipping from a steaming mug of coffee, her plate of cake next to her untouched. Her eyes scanned the room in a constant observation of the various interplays going on. An amused grin played over her lips at her daughter's clumsy attempts to feed her date some cake.

Ava Peralta sat at the other end of the counter with her back to it and her elbows leaning against the top as she observed her youngest sister enjoying her celebration. Jonathan approached her and handed her a bottle of beer, receiving a smile of thanks in return.

Anna Li, like Holly, also scanned the crowd constantly, especially the entrances and exits. She stiffened when the door to the restaurant opened, but relaxed slightly when A.C. Mallet stuck his head in.

"Hey everyone!" he said. "We're not too late, are we?" As he stepped into the room, a second figure walked in behind him, revealing a shyly smiling Dinah Marler.

The room grew silent as the couple walked in. Mallet grabbed a slack-jawed Frank's hand to shake and pressed a present into his other.

"Congratulations on your daughter's first birthday, buddy," he said, grinning widely.

Eleni had straightened from her relaxed posture and caught the eye of Anna, who blinked, then turned back to the tableau unfolding in the restaurant.

"Oh boy," Doris whispered and Blake looked at her curiously.

"What..." she began but cut herself off at the mayor's subtle head shake. Doris then turned to Beth and gave her an almost imperceptible tilt of her head toward Dinah.

Frank finally closed his mouth and thrust Francesca's gift to the side, not bothering to see who took it. He then stepped purposefully forward until he was standing in front of Mallet's companion.

"Dinah Marler," he stated in a firm voice. "I am hereby arresting you for the murder of David Andrews, also known as the Edmund Winslow impersonator."

The only sound heard in the room was the soft crinkling of Francesca happily tearing her birthday wrapping paper.

Act Three

Olivia shook her head in disgust as she watched the drama play out in the restaurant. Leave it to Frank to let work get in the way of family. She moved to get between him and Dinah. "For

Christ's sake, Frank," she exclaimed. "You can't arrest someone at your daughter's birthday party."

"Get out of my way, Liv, before I arrest you for obstruction," he said, moving her aside.

The room was abuzz. Frank looked around for Anna and motioned her over.

"Frank, come on," Mallet said. "Don't do this now. Look, Dinah can turn herself in on Monday morning. If you take her in now, she'll be stuck in jail over the weekend. We don't even have a lawyer yet."

"She has one," Beth Spaulding said as she stepped forward. She handed the police chief a business card. "Frank, I will personally vouch that Dinah Marler will surrender at the police station first thing Monday morning. You have my word."

"Oh? The word of a Spaulding?" Frank sneered and Olivia could hear the old Spaulding-Cooper feud rise up in Frank's voice. "Forget it," Frank said and turned to Anna. "Take her in and get her processed." When Anna hesitated, he barked, "Do it, Li!"

Olivia looked at Natalia who watched as Anna escorted Dinah from the restaurant followed by Beth. She had a grim look on her face.

Frank ran his hand through his hair and then said to the room at large, "Sorry about that folks. I guess the party is over, but you're welcome to stay. I've got work to do."

As he brushed by her, Natalia snagged him by the arm.

"Are you forgetting someone, Frank?" she asked and Olivia could hear the barely contained fury in her voice. She was so glad it was not directed at her this time.

Frank looked confused until Natalia jerked her head toward their daughter who was still playing happily with her wrapping paper.

"Oh," he said and blinked. "Can you take her home?"

"You bet we're taking her home, Frank," Natalia spat. "Thank God she's too young to realize how you just ruined her party."

"Me?" Frank protested. "I'm just doing my job, Natalia. Dinah Marler is wanted for murder and has been a fugitive from justice for over a year now. Am I just supposed to let a murderer go free?"

"And yet Edmund Winslow is happily prancing about God knows where," Olivia said.

"I told you to stay out of this, Olivia," he growled. "This is *not* your business."

"Francesca *is* my business, Frank," she shot back, poking him in the chest. "She's my daughter and don't you forget it. If you hurt her, you'll have to deal with me and I guarantee, it won't be pretty."

"Oh, like I'm supposed to be scared the old Olivia Spencer is back?" he said with a cruel laugh. He turned back to Natalia, effectively dismissing Olivia. "Look, I'm sorry about the baby, but I've got a job to do." With that, he turned and left the building.

Olivia looked around and saw Buzz standing nearby. The man gave her a wry grin and shrug. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "Look, Lillian and I can take the little one if you two had plans. We don't mind."

Olivia shook her head. "Thanks, Buzz. We appreciate that, but it's okay. I guess Frank just has a different set of priorities than we do."

"He's under a lot of pressure," Buzz said and Olivia admired him for his dedication to his son, no matter how clueless and incompetent Frank was in his chosen profession.

"Thanks for hosting Francesca's party, Buzz," Natalia said. Olivia moved to help her gather up the presents. Emma and Leyla had already re-boxed the opened ones.

"Hey, it's not every day one of my grandkids turns one," he said with his natural exuberance.

After he left to oversee the cleanup, Olivia moved over to Natalia and placed a hand on her partner's lower back, still sensing the younger woman's tension. "Ready to go home, sweetheart?"

"Oh, you bet I am," Natalia said, her eyes still dancing with ire. "Sweet Pea can finish unwrapping her gifts at home."

"Just as long as she doesn't throw a conniption when we toss the paper in the trash," Olivia quipped and was glad to see her partner laugh at her joke. With a final glance around the nearly-empty restaurant, she gave a sigh. Their baby's party was definitely over.

Despite the late hour, the boys and Clarissa were bickering loudly from their seats in the back of Blake's car and the noise continued to rise with each passing minute. By the time, Blake pulled the car into Doris's driveway the cacophony had escalated to a roar. Blake glanced at her date and noted Doris's clenched jaw.

"Hey guys," Blake said, raising her voice to be heard over the noise. "Simmer down."

"This isn't home," Kevin said.

"Where are we?" Jason asked.

"Aunt Doris's house, doofus," Clarissa said with a sneer.

"Aunt Doris's house," Kevin mimicked.

"Kevin, stop that," Blake admonished. "You guys be quiet while I walk Doris to her door."

"Goodnight, Aunt Doris," Clarissa said.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," Doris said, giving the young girl a warm smile. "Goodnight, boys," she added this time with a slightly cooler smile.

Both twins ignored her and turned to look out the window. Blake saw Doris smirk at Clarissa's eye roll.

Doris was quiet on the short stroll up the way and Blake could feel her own apprehension growing with each step. Now that their first date was coming to an end, Blake was nervous that Doris's former fears would come back with full force in the face of the reality of Blake's kids and other assorted baggage. Blake adored spending time with Doris – indeed she was coming to realize just how much she adored Doris – but she was afraid that Doris would decide that Blake just wasn't worth the hassle.

After Doris unlocked her door, she turned to Blake. "What a night, huh?" she asked with a rueful grin.

"I am so sorry," Blake started, but stopped when Doris shook her head in confusion.

"For what?"

"For everything!" Blake exclaimed, waving both hands around. "My mother showing up out of the blue, my juvenile delinquent sons with the horrible way they treated you, and my step-daughter getting arrested."

Doris shrugged. "I've been a politician and a public servant for most of my career, Blake," she said with a smile. "If I haven't grown a thick skin by now, I never will. And Dinah's case is going to be good for the firm, so don't worry about it." She paused and moved closer to Blake who almost imagined she could feel the heat coming off of the other woman's body. "I had a really great time tonight," Doris whispered in what Blake thought was the sexiest voice on the planet.

"Really?" she managed to croak out. "Even with my hellions?"

"Yes, Blake, I had a wonderful time because I was with you...and I want to spend a lot more time with you so the hellions better get used to me," Doris said moving even closer.

Blake could feel her smile light up at her girlfriend's reassuring words and her mood went from anxious to flirtatious in a flash. "So does this mean you will go out with me on a second date?"

Doris nodded. "And a third and a fourth and so on," she said. "If that's what you want?"

"Oh, I definitely want," Blake agreed and embraced the other woman, pulling their bodies together and eliminating any unnecessary space between them.

This kiss was not like their previous kisses, Blake noted with the one small part of her mind that could still function. It was heady and passionate as their others had been, but this time it held the promise of even greater things to come. As Doris seemed to fully put her heart and soul into the kiss, it was as if she was finally allowing herself to feel intimacy with Blake. And the skillful way Doris was kissing her gave Blake a glimpse of just how great a lover Doris could be.

Blake couldn't wait to find out.

The intrusive blare of her car horn snapped them back to reality.

"Wow," Blake said with barely enough breath to speak. "That was..."

"Yeah," Doris husked and dipped her head to nip at Blake's throat.

The car horn sounded again.

"I'm gonna kill 'em," Blake growled.

Doris laughed. "It's okay, baby," she said. "We have plenty of time."

Blake's stomach flipped at the endearment and the promise of the future. "Thank you," she said. "Talk to you tomorrow?" she asked.

"Call me when you get home so I know you're all safe," Doris said softly.

"All right," Blake said softly, touched by the concern. "Good night."

"Night," Doris said and kissed her briefly, but broke it off before the horn could sound for a third time.

Blake returned to the car with a light spring in her step. She ignored the boys' identical glares, but smiled happily at Clarissa's delighted grin.

"Okay gang," she said, starting the engine. "Let's get home!"

Officer Mahoney inspected the contents of the two women's purses and brief cases before patting them both down.

"Watch it there, bud," Mel warned with a growl in her voice. "This is not the TSA."

The officer said nothing, but Mel was happy to see a blush cross his features. He led them to the interview room and said, "Wait here. I'll bring the prisoner."

Mel set her case on the table and pulled a legal pad from it while Beth nervously paced.

"Relax," Mel said to her partner.

Beth gave a short chuckle. "Sorry," she said. "First big criminal case and all."

"From what Doris said, you handled yourself pretty well during the arrest."

"Not well enough to keep our client out of jail during the weekend."

The door opened just as Beth said that.

"That was my own damn fault for showing my face in public on a Saturday night," Dinah said as she was led into the room by the cop.

"Remove the cuffs," Mel ordered Mahoney. When he hesitated, she added, "She's not going anywhere."

Without a word, he complied and the three women took a seat at the table.

"All right," Mel began. "Let's start with the events of that day. We need everything you did from the moment you woke up until after the death of David Andrews."

Dinah nodded and began her tale.

Blake walked into Towers and looked around. The room was filled with the usual business crowd, but she didn't see the person she was meeting.

"Table for one, Ms. Marler?" the hostess asked as she approached.

"I'm meeting Ashlee Wolfe," she said. "Is she here yet?"

"I am now," a voice from behind her said.

Turning, she saw a grinning Ashlee. Blake leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Right on time," she said and turned back to the hostess. "We'll have a table for two, please."

"Right this way, ladies," the woman said.

Once they were settled and had ordered, Ashlee reached into her portfolio, pulled out a thick, bound manuscript and handed it to Blake. "Here it is," she said with a smile and an excited bounce in her seat.

"Fantastic," Blake said flipping through the pages. "I can't wait to sink my teeth into it. From your emails it sounds intriguing."

"I think it is," Ashlee said. "I got some really great feedback from my professor. She was a big help in some areas I had trouble in."

"Oh good. I'm so glad the program is working out for you. It's been hard on your mom – she misses you so much – but she's also so proud of you and she knows that being there is the best thing for your future."

"I miss her too," Ashlee said. "Oh and please...don't feel you have to publish that just because you're dating my mom."

"Oh, don't worry about that, honey," Blake said with a smile. "This is business and Doris is personal. But really Ashlee, if this is as good as your work on Jenna's book, I'll be more than happy to publish this. And, if it makes you feel better, I'll give a copy to Natalia without telling her who wrote it. She's got a talent for knowing what will do well and what won't. If she gives it a thumbs-up, you'll know it wasn't from any bias on my part."

"Fair enough. Thanks Blake," Ashlee said. "Mom's worked so hard to get where she is...I want to show her that I can do the same."

"Oh honey, your mother adores you," Blake said, laying her hand on Ashlee's and giving it a squeeze. "No matter what you do, she will always love you and I also think she did a wonderful job raising you. It's one of the things I admire most about her."

"Thanks Blake," Ashlee said again with a smile. "Oh and speaking of Mom and you dating..."

Blake groaned and dropped her head to her chest. "Let me guess...if you hurt my mother, blah, blah, blah." Blake looked up to see Ashlee smiling sweetly at her.

"Two words," Ashlee said holding up two fingers. "Alan. Spaulding."

Blake nodded with a grin and said, "Gotcha."

The waitress arrived with their meals and after she left, Ashlee said brightly. "So what else have you been up to – other than work and chasing my mother?"

Blake laughed as she picked up her fork, prepared to enjoy her meal and conversation with Doris's wonderful daughter. The boys might not be too happy yet, but at least Clarissa and Ashlee were on their side and that, she told herself, was half the battle.

The officer on duty glanced up as Shayne Lewis entered the station.

"Hello, Shayne," he said. "Marina is not here right now."

"That's okay, Carey," Shayne told the officer. "I'm here to visit a prisoner, Dinah Marler."

"All right," he said. "She's with her lawyers right now, but you're welcome to wait if you wish."

"That's fine," Shayne answered and the officer pushed the register book across the desk.

After signing the log, Shayne took a seat, prepared to wait. After a few minutes, the door to the station opened and in walked Marina. She stopped short when she noticed him sitting there.

"Shayne," she said, obviously surprised. "Why aren't you at work?"

He stood up to face her. "I had a few minutes so I thought I'd come by to see Dinah."

"Dinah?" she asked and Shayne winced at her tone. "Why the hell would you come see her?"

"Well, she's a friend, Marina," he explained. "You said it yourself; she did what she did to help Henry. I'm not ever going to forget that."

"A friend?" Marina spat. "She was once a lot more than that!"

"Marina, where is this jealousy coming from?" he asked. "I have never given you any reason for you to be acting this way. What's going on?"

"Nothing!" she said and Shayne noticed that the desk officer was watching them avidly. Shayne pulled Marina outside.

"Listen, your relationship with your mother is your business...I don't care for the way you treat her, but that's up to you to fix or not. However, my friends are my business and I will *not* let you tell me who can or cannot be my friend. Dinah was there for me when I needed her and I will return the favor. Understand?"

"Oh fine," she said and he was dismayed to see she had started to cry. "Just be that way. You're just like my parents. Go ahead and turn your back on me."

"Marina, I'm not turning my back on you and I'm not going to choose between you or my friends. Just tell me what is going on with you."

"I said nothing!" she nearly screeched as she waved her arms. "Why does everyone blame me? Fine, you know what? Have your stupid friends. I don't care. Dinah's in jail and that's where she's going to stay so there's nothing you can do about it anyway."

With that she turned and briskly walked away. Shayne ran his hands through his hair and wondered just what the hell was up with Marina Cooper.

By the time Dinah had ended her narrative, her mouth was dry and both lawyers had their pads teeming with notes. After taking a sip of water, she leaned back in the uncomfortable aluminum chair and asked, "So what's the plan?"

"First we need to get you out of here," Beth said glancing at her watch. "The arraignment hearing was supposed to be first thing this morning, but the D.A.'s office requested a postponement while they deal with a small problem."

Dinah noticed that Mel had a smirk on her face. "What problem?" she asked.

"Though she's remaining on as Mayor, Doris Wolfe resigned as D.A., which threw the office into chaos. If they haven't gotten their act together by the afternoon deadline, the judge will have to release you on your own recognizance even though you're a flight risk."

"I practically turned myself in," Dinah said.

"Which we will argue if the prosecutor objects to bail," Mel said. "Either way, you should be out of here by late this afternoon."

"If the judge does rule me a flight risk, won't he set a high bail?" Dinah asked. "I don't think Mal and I can cover it, even if my mom helps out."

"Phillip has promised to ensure you make bail," Beth said softly.

"And Doris resigned to help me?" she asked.

Beth nodded. "She was going to do it anyway. This way it helps our case."

Dinah sat back in amazement. She had not received this kind of help since her father was alive and even then it had often come with a high price. "Why are you all doing this?" she asked.

"Phillip and Doris and your firm?"

"Well, Phillip because anything that goes against Edmund Winslow is good in his book," Beth explained. "You thought David Andrews was Winslow and for Phillip that makes you a hero. He just wishes it *had* been Winslow because then the trauma to his daughter would not have happened. As for Doris and us...well, we're a new firm and even with the names Wolfe and Spaulding attached to it, a high profile case will attract the types of clients we want. Win or lose, we all win."

"Will you?" Dinah asked looking between Beth and Mel. "Win, I mean?"

A slow smile spread across the dark-skinned woman's face. "With Wolfe, Boudreau and Spaulding on the case? I can't see how we can lose."

Jeffrey O'Neill walked into the Beacon's lobby, outwardly displaying the casual, regal air he had carefully cultivated decades ago, but inwardly he was very hesitant to be entering a building co-owned by a woman who had made it quite clear his presence was no longer welcome or even tolerated. However, the hotel was a public place and his daughter's workplace. Besides, he rationalized to himself, Natalia had only banned him from the farmhouse and did not specifically state the Beacon.

"I'm here to see Ava Peralta," he told the concierge, who was standing behind his lectern.

The man didn't deign to glance up at him. "Ms. Peralta is in the ballroom overseeing preparations for tonight's reception, sir."

Jeffrey didn't respond, he simply turned around and walked toward the ballroom, not bothering to see if the man had even glanced up.

The ballroom was a beehive of activity as workers quickly set up tables and swarmed over the walls and ceiling hanging decorations. He quickly located the tall, dark-haired form of his daughter. She was standing at the main table directing who he assumed was the technician working on the sound system. Jeffrey stopped and watched as she tapped on the microphone.

"Testing, tes..." Just then she caught sight of him and her face broke into a happy expression. "Dad!" she yelled into the mike, causing a loud whine of feedback and the technician to tear off his headphones in pain. "Sorry, Pete," she said and Jeffrey watched with a smile on his face as she ran around the table and into his waiting arms.

"Dad," she said again.

He closed his eyes as he hugged his daughter tightly. "Hi honey," he said with tears in his voice.

"When did you get back?" she asked, pulling back. "It seems like you've been gone forever."

"Just now," he answered.

"Did you reserve a room?" she asked. "Why didn't you call? We're pretty booked with this wedding, but I think I can find something."

"Whoa! Honey, slow down," he said, laughing at her enthusiasm. "I've already got a room at Towers."

"Towers!" she said, scornfully. "No way, Dad! Listen, I'll find something here or you can just stay with me."

"Ava, it's fine, really," he said.

"But..."

"Tell you what," he said, stopping her with a raised hand. "You can buy your old man some coffee at Company while we catch up. How about that?"

Ava huffed in frustration, but then she smiled in resignation. "All right," she said. "Give me a minute to finish up here."

"Great," he said. "I'll wait for you outside."

Ava nodded and hurried back to the technician. Jeffrey gave her one last look, admiring the competent air she projected, then turned and quickly headed for the exit. The sooner he was off the Beacon's property, the better he would feel.

Blake smiled happily as her girlfriend entered the restaurant. Doris's answering grin and brief kiss made her glow all the more.

"Hello, there," she said, grabbing Doris's favorite mug and filling it with coffee. "Weren't you just here an hour ago?"

"Well, yeah, but I needed some more coffee and Brandon's brew just isn't the same as yours," the mayor answered.

"Uh huh," Blake said with a knowing wink. "Okay, if you say so."

"Busy morning?" Doris asked.

"Not too bad," she said. "How about you?"

"Endless budget reports," Doris said. "Every day I feel more and more like a paper pusher."

"Well, hang in there, honey," she said consolingly. "In the meantime, do you want to come over tonight?"

Doris raised her eyes. "You've got the kids, right?"

"Oh sure," she said. "But I promised Natalia I'd bake some pies for tomorrow and I could use the help."

Doris's eyes widened in surprise. "You want me to *bake*?" she asked, her voice lowering on the last word as if it were a dirty word.

"Well, yeah," Blake said. "Why not?"

"Blake, I...I'm not exactly the baking type," she answered.

"That's okay," Blake answered, patting her hand reassuringly on Doris's arm. "I am. Don't worry, I promise you nothing too strenuous, okay?"

Blake watched as Doris sat there thinking a few moments and then the other woman smiled. "All right," she finally said. "Just don't tell anyone, okay? It'd ruin my reputation."

"I promise," Blake said, crossing her heart. "See you at seven? Dress comfy."

"Seven it is," Doris said.

Jeffrey followed his daughter as she made her way past the other diners to an empty booth near the back. He could feel several pairs of eyes watching their progress, among them Doris Wolfe who was sitting at the counter across from Blake Marler. As he and Ava settled into the booth, Blake pushed away from the counter and walked over to them with her pad and pencil ready.

"Hi, Ava," she said with a big smile. "Hello, Jeffrey. Just get back?"

"Uh, yeah," he answered, rubbing his hand down his cheek to smooth his beard.

"Going to stick around this time?" Blake questioned and Jeffrey had to remind himself that she was the biggest gossip in a town full of gossips.

"Possibly," he answered cryptically. "Haven't quite decided yet, but there is a lot here for me." He gave Ava a fond smile and was pleased with her answering grin.

"Um hmm," Blake nodded. "So, what can I get you?"

"Just coffee for me, Blake," Ava said.

"The same for me please," he followed.

"You're sure that's all?" Blake asked. "Buzz just pulled a fresh batch of apple pies out of the oven and a slice of pie with some ice cream is heaven."

Ava shook her head and Jeffrey said, "Maybe later."

"Okay," Blake said, closing her pad. "Two coffees, coming right up."

Jeffrey followed the redhead's progress as she headed for the coffeepot and noted the look that passed between her and the mayor. After Blake had delivered their order, he turned to Ava and asked, "What's up with those two? They look thicker than thieves."

Ava snorted as she stirred sweetener in her cup. "They're dating," she said.

Jeffrey's eyes rose. "So Doris is all the way out of the closet?" he asked.

"Well...yeah," she said with a nonchalant shrug. "I mean, she never gave a press conference declaring it or anything, but it's no secret here in town."

"Have there been any repercussions for her?" he pressed. "Politically, I mean?"

"Not that I know of," she answered, setting down her spoon and looking at him. "I think she might have gotten some hate mail, but that was from the regular nut jobs on the fringe. People in Springfield have more to worry about than who their mayor is sleeping with."

Jeffrey nodded thoughtfully as he watched the interaction between the two women. He felt bad for his friend Anna that things hadn't worked out for her, but he knew that her energies were better focused on pursuing Winslow rather than on a relationship.

"Why the questions, Dad?" Ava asked and Jeffrey turned back from his inner thoughts.

"Can I trust you to keep a secret?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "'What's up?'"

"I *am* coming back to Springfield, honey," he said and laughed at her resultant happy squeal. "Permanently."

"That's so great!" She reached over the table to hug him briefly. "But why's that a secret?" she asked as she sat back down.

"Well, I'm going to need to do something with my career," he answered. "Either get my job as the district attorney back or I'm thinking about running for political office."

"For mayor?"

He nodded and glanced back at Doris Wolfe.

"Dad," Ava said sharply and he turned back to her. He blinked at her sternly frowning face. "I hope you're not planning on running a smear campaign against Doris because she's gay."

"Oh no, honey, of course not," he answered, not wanting to reveal he had been thinking of doing just that. "I just asked about Doris because I wondered how accepting folks in town have been. You know, to see if the voters can separate personal and politics."

"Politics *is* personal, Dad," she said. "You know that."

He grinned. "I do," he admitted. "When did you get so smart?"

"Are you kidding?" she asked with a laugh. "With you and Olivia Spencer in my gene pool how could I *not* be?"

"I guess so," he said and rubbed at the back of his neck. "That brings me to my next question...if I do decide to run for office, will you manage my campaign?"

Ava bit her lip thoughtfully. "My work at the Beacon takes up most of my time, Dad. I don't know if I can find any extra for that."

"Well, you could take a sabbatical, couldn't you?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I'm sure Mom wouldn't mind, but like I said I really enjoy my work."

"Well, there's no reason to decide right this minute," he said, deciding to let her off the hook for now. "Just think it over, okay?"

"Sure, Dad," she said. "So what time do you want to come over tomorrow?"

He blinked in surprise at the question. "What do you mean, honey?" he asked, already suspecting her answer.

"Thanksgiving dinner at the farmhouse," she said, sipping her coffee. "You're coming, of course."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, honey, but Natalia clearly said I'm not welcome there anymore."

"Bull!" she said, slamming her cup on the table with a hard thunk. "It's Thanksgiving, the one day of the year when family gets together. She's always going on about how important family is...well, you're my family."

"Yeah, but really Ava, it's fine," he said. "I'll just have dinner at Towers."

"No, Dad," she said holding up a hand. "I'll talk with her and Mom. You *will* be there."

Jeffrey wanted to protest further, but he knew it would be futile in the face of his daughter's persistence. She was, after all, a product of her genes.

Olivia pulled another file from the shrinking pile that Keira had left her. Opening it, she noted that she also needed Natalia's signature on it. Standing up, she quickly crossed the hallway separating their offices and entered her partner's office. Natalia was obviously just ending a call and she hung up the phone and turned to greet her.

"Hi!" she said. "What have you got there?"

"Need your signature, please," she said placing the folder on Natalia's desk.

She leaned against the desk as Natalia looked over the papers with an adorable frown of concentration on her face. Olivia once again felt the pride swell up in her heart for just how far her love had come. Perfectly content with working as a waitress and a maid, Natalia only needed a nudge in the right direction from someone who believed in her. For the rest of her life, Olivia would count that as one of her greatest accomplishments.

Finally setting the papers on the desk, Natalia grabbed her pen and signed her name with a flourish. She neatly placed them back in the folder and handed it to Olivia. "There you go," she said, smiling.

"Thanks," Olivia said, tucking the folder under her arm. "Are you almost done?" she asked.

"Just about," Natalia said. "I just need to tie up a few loose ends. And I've got to return a few calls regarding upcoming bookings. You?"

"Yep, should be ready in about an hour," she said as she headed for the door. "Can't wait to get the holiday weekend started."

"Me either," Natalia said. "At least we'll get to enjoy Thanksgiving this time."

"Hey, I had fun last year," Olivia laughed.

"You weren't in labor, my love," Natalia quipped.

"Thank goodness for that!" Olivia said.

A knock on the door caused them both to turn and the slender form of Ava appeared. "Hi," she said. "Have you both got a moment?"

"Yeah, honey," Olivia nodded. "What do you need?"

"I just saw Dad," Ava said. "He's back in town."

Olivia glanced at Natalia and she could see the anger flare up in her partner's eyes, although she was sure Ava would not be able to see it. "Oh?" she asked casually, turning back to her daughter.

"I invited him tomorrow, but he thinks he's not welcome," Ava said with a glare aimed at Natalia.

"Ava..." Olivia started, but was cut off by Natalia laying a hand on her arm as she stood up.

"That's right, Ava," she said and Olivia could hear the firmness in her tone. "He's not welcome in our home and he's not invited to our Thanksgiving dinner."

"He's my father, Natalia," Ava said and Olivia could see she was trying to control her temper. She sensed it wouldn't last long because she knew this was one issue Natalia would not budge on.

"I know he is," Natalia said. "He's also the man who hurt your mother and I won't have him in my home or around my children. I don't think he's changed since then. Everything he's done recently has proven that he cares more about his own agenda than his responsibilities."

"That has nothing to do with you or Mom, who forgave him for what he did to her a long time ago," Ava said, her voice starting to rise. "Long before *you* came into the picture."

"I know she did," Natalia said. "Her forgiving nature is one of the many things I adore about your mother, but Ava...*I* haven't forgiven him and I don't know if I ever can."

"Isn't your God all about forgiveness?" Ava sneered.

"Yes, He is," Natalia said. "But I'm only human and I can't forgive such a heinous act so easily. It's going to take time, but for now he's not welcome in our home. And that's final."

"Then if he's not welcome, neither am I and I'm not coming," Ava shouted, her control finally breaking.

"Ava..." Olivia started, but was interrupted again.

"No, Mom!" Ava said, swiping furiously at the tears in her eyes. She turned back to Natalia. "God, you are *such* a hypocrite. You begged my mother for her forgiveness when you tore her heart out and got it, but you can't forgive my father for something he did decades ago and has tried to make up for it ever since?"

"I'm sorry, Ava," Natalia said, her own tears starting to fall. "I just can't."

"Well, to hell with you," Ava said and turned to Olivia. "Have a nice Thanksgiving, Mom. Give my sisters a kiss for me, please."

She turned to leave and Olivia moved to stop her. "Ava...wait!"

"No!" Ava said and ran from the room.

Olivia stared at her departing form for a moment and then turned to her partner who was slumped in her chair with her hands covering her face. Olivia moved to kneel down in front of her. "Hey," she said softly.

"I'm sorry," Natalia muttered. "I'm so sorry."

"No, sweetheart," Olivia said. "It's okay."

"She's right," Natalia said, wiping her face with her hands. Olivia reached over to the credenza and grabbed a tissue from the box. She gently wiped at Natalia's eyes, now horribly smeared with her makeup. "I *am* a hypocrite."

"No, you're not," Olivia said. "She forgets that you haven't had time to deal with what Jeffrey did, not like she and I have. You'll get there and while I know you probably won't hustle another game of pool with him, you will forgive him. I know you will."

"I just can't," Natalia said. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," she said again. "Ava's an adult and can make her own decisions. If she doesn't want to be with us, then that's fine. It hurts, but we'll have our other friends and family with us."

"Maybe I should..."

"No, Natalia," Olivia said, guessing where her partner's thoughts were going. "You can't back down from your decision now. She'll be okay, I promise."

Natalia ran a hand through her hair. "So, what? You're psychic now?"

"No," she said. "I just know my daughter. She'll be fine."

"I'm sorry," Natalia said again.

"Say it one more time, and you will be," Olivia laughed and then stood up. "Come on; let's finish up work so we can get our weekend started."

Natalia nodded and reached for her phone. Olivia considered hunting down her daughter, but decided to give her some time to cool off and instead returned to her office to resume her work.

Her bodyguard opened the door for her to step out onto the driveway of Blake's house.

"Will you need me anymore tonight, Madame Mayor?" he asked.

She glared at him. "Yes," she answered with a hiss. "I will text you when I wish to be picked up."

"Very good, ma'am," he said tipping his hat.

Doris clacked up the driveway and then slowed her steps before she reached the front door to light up a cigarette. Blake had made clear her displeasure with her smoking habit and Doris knew this would probably be the last cigarette she'd get for the rest of the evening. . . at least until she called Jack to go home. As much as she'd love to, she had no intention of staying the night.

Things with Blake were going good, she thought to herself. Very good and she did not want to mess things up by jumping into the sack too quickly, even though Blake seemed to be ready. As she puffed on her cigarette, she remembered something her best friend had told her about her many failed relationships and her determination to do the exact opposite, even though the road to Olivia's happiness with Natalia had been, at times, painful to watch.

It had worked, Doris knew, because their love was strong, but while it might have also worked had Olivia done things her old fashioned way, Doris wanted to take the lesson as her own which was why, despite Blake's utter sexiness, she wanted to wait until they both were sure the time was right.

The noise of a car pulling up the driveway caused her to turn around. She could see the cheerful face of Rick Bauer through the windshield and his wife seated beside him. Then both rear doors opened at the same time and Blake's sons stepped out of the car. Rick waved to Doris through the glass then backed the car out of the driveway.

"Good evening, boys," she said as they approached the door. Doris thought for a moment they would simply ignore her, but as she raised her cigarette to her lips, they both paused as one to look at her.

"Got a smoke?" Kevin asked and Doris raised her eyes.

"It's okay," Jason added.

"Yeah, we know how," Kevin said.

"Everyone at our school smokes," Jason said. "It's like a European thing."

"This is America," Doris pointed out. "And you boys are too young."

"Oh yeah?" Jason asked with a sneer.

"How old were you when you started?" Kevin asked.

Doris pursed her lips, and then finally answered. "Fourteen."

Both boys smirked and Doris rolled her eyes. "Your mother wouldn't like it."

"She doesn't have to know," Kevin said.

"Yeah, she wouldn't," Jason said.

Doris laughed. "Your mother is not stupid boys," she said. "She complains that she can smell the smoke on me all the time."

Both boys shrugged in perfect unison and Doris thought that while they might not be identical, they were definitely twins.

"Do you like our mom?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, do you?" Jason added.

"I like her very much," Doris answered.

"In a gay way," Jason said and Doris knew it wasn't a question.

"More than just that, Jason," Doris said. "I value my friendship with your mother as well."

"But still gay," Kevin said.

"Our mom's not gay," Jason declared. "She was married to our dad."

"No," Doris agreed. "Your mom is not gay."

"Then why was she kissing you?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, echoing his brother's derisive tone. "If she's not gay, why was she kissing you?"

Doris crushed out her cigarette in the dirt and felt a headache coming on. She willed it away, because she wasn't going to let anything ruin her evening with her girlfriend. For a moment, she couldn't believe the absurdity of the situation; she'd never imagine she'd be standing in front of Blake Marler's house discussing her sexual orientation with her sons.

"That answer is quite complicated, boys," she answered as she carefully tucked her butt into the tin she kept in her purse. "You'll learn that there are rarely any absolutes in the world. Your mom may not be gay, but she's not straight either. She is, however, open to a relationship with me and I'm okay with that even though she's been married before. So you have a choice to make – deal with your mom and me being together or don't. Either way, I'm not going anywhere." With that she turned and opened the front door leaving the twins behind.

With a couple of pot holders, Eleni pulled the casserole dish out of the oven and set it on top of a trivet. She turned her attention to preparing a fresh salad. She glanced up over the counter at her ex-husband, who was sitting on the couch with his attention glued to where a football game was playing on the sports network. They had both had a long day at work tying up some loose ends before the long holiday weekend. Eleni was tired and had looked forward to going back to her apartment for a well-deserved rest, but Frank had given her those puppy dog eyes as he told her he was dying for some of her lamb pastitsio, so she agreed to come over.

"It's almost ready, Frank," she said, placing the salad bowl on the small table she had already set while the dish was baking.

"Oh great," he said, turning down the volume on the TV, but leaving it on, she noted. He disappeared into the tiny bathroom for a few seconds, then sat down just as she placed his plate in front of him. "Mmm," he said, picking his fork and digging in. "Oh, I've missed this. Thank you, honey."

"You're welcome," she said and put her own plate on the table, before grabbing him another beer.

They ate in silence for a while, then Eleni asked, "Are you going to the farmhouse tomorrow?"

Frank shrugged. "Probably not," he said. "I think I'll drop by on Friday to give Francesca a birthday kiss. Don't want to miss out on her actual birthday."

"Sounds good," she said. "I have some forensic journals I need to catch up on, so I might just spend the day relaxing."

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Maybe I'll drop by."

"If you want," she said. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow though. Thanksgiving with the Coopers is always fun."

"It is," he agreed. "Pop's real glad you're coming, Eleni. So am I."

"Too bad our daughter isn't," she said with a scowl.

"Don't worry about Marina," he said. "She's just got some issues to work through."

She simply nodded, but inside she wondered if her daughter's 'issues' went beyond her feelings of abandonment. Pushing aside the thought, she concentrated on enjoying her evening with Frank.

Doris stood over the stove in Blake Marler's kitchen, stirring a saucepan of chocolate pudding and waiting impatiently for it to come to a boil. At the island, Blake was measuring wet

ingredients into a large mixing bowl for pumpkin pies. Doris found she had a hard time keeping her eyes on the pudding and not on her beautiful girlfriend. Every now and then Blake would glance up and catch her looking and Doris would quickly turn her attention back to the pan with a blush.

"So the boys will be able to start school on Monday," Blake said as she reached for the sugar canister.

"Well, that's good," Doris said. "You won't have to worry about them running wild for most of the day."

Blake nodded. "Fortunately Mom brought their medical and school records with her so there was no delay in getting them enrolled."

"Are you going to look into another boarding school for them?" Doris asked.

"I'm not sure any will take them," Blake said. "Granted, it was an accident, but burning down the cafeteria is a bit much for even the most liberal of schools." Blake paused and seemed to think a moment. "But I think it might be nice to have them home. That is if..."

Doris looked at her while continuing to stir. Blake was looking at her with an inscrutable expression. "If what?" she asked.

"If you don't mind them being here, that is," Blake said softly.

Doris felt her heart swell with Blake's question. "Blake, they're your sons," she said sincerely. "It doesn't matter if they like me or not. They belong with their mother. If you want them here, that's all that matters."

"Yes, but I want them to like you," Blake said. "I want..."

"What?" Doris asked when Blake paused for an extended time.

"I want you *all* here," Blake said. "Kevin, Jason, Clarissa...and you."

Doris smiled softly. She admired the way Blake was so free and open with her emotion, the same emotions she herself had kept a tight rein on for most of her life. "Then we'll make it happen... together," she said. "But again, I'm not going to worry about them liking me or not. They either will or they won't and that's up to them, not you or me. It's like Olivia and Rafe – he hated her with an unholy passion, but he got over it."

"Love triumphs over hate?" Blake asked with a wry smile.

"You betcha," she answered with a laugh and then realized they were heading into too serious a territory for now and she changed the subject. "So, speaking of Olivia and Natalia, I was thinking about what to get them for their upcoming ceremony."

Blake seemed relieved at the about face in the conversation. She grinned. "Oh? What?" she asked eagerly.

"A marriage license," she answered and smiled at the surprised look on her girlfriend's face.

"Is that legal?" Blake asked.

"Well...no," she shrugged. "On the other hand, it's not *illegal*...at least not yet. It's like that mayor in California who ordered his clerk to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. At the time, it wasn't illegal for him to do it. Now it is since they passed that stupid law."

"So you want to start a revolution in Illinois?"

"No, I want to give my dear friends a very unique gift that no one else can give them," Doris explained. "Even if a marriage license is issued, it is not an official document on public record until it's filed with the state. Like Remy and Christina's marriage wasn't binding because Remy had forgotten to file the license. Olivia and Natalia have the choice to file or not. Even if they don't, they'll at least have something memorable for their special day."

"That's a wonderful idea, Doris," Blake said. "Will your clerk issue the license if you ask?"

"Oh yes, I'm sure he will," Doris said with a chuckle. "I think he's dating Olivia's banquet manager." Doris smiled as Blake laughed and turned back to the stove. The pudding had begun to thicken. "Is this done yet?" she asked.

Blake peered over Doris's shoulder, taking the time to run a gentle hand down her back causing Doris to shiver. "Not yet," she said, finally wrapping her arms around Doris's waist. "Wait until the bubbles get really thick and the color is a deep brown. Then take it off the stove and continue to stir for a couple of minutes to cool slightly. Then you can pour it into the baked shells." She pointed her chin at the waiting pie plates lining the counter. Doris knew the unbaked shells were waiting for Blake to fill them with the pumpkin custard she was mixing.

For just a moment she felt a strange sense of etherealness wash over her. Was this what life with Blake would be like? Evenings baking while the kids upstairs did whatever kids do? Could she be satisfied with such mundane domesticity? Then she thought about the way her life had been: daily political machinations and legal maneuverings where it didn't matter who she hurt as long as she came out on top. Countless nights slinking about Ladies Night in a horrible fedora looking for a warm body to spend a few illicit hours with and then dreading the mornings after when one false move on her part could result in exposure?

So caught up in her musings she missed what Blake was saying to her. "I'm sorry, what?" she asked.

"Where did you go?" Blake asked with a smile.

"Just thinking," she answered. Then after a long and contemplative look at Blake, she continued, "I'm having a good time tonight, Blake. Thanks for asking me over."

"You're welcome," Blake answered with a big smile and tightening her arms that were still around Doris. "Better this than running all over town tomorrow picking up things that Natalia and Olivia forgot."

Doris laughed and turned her neck so she could give her girlfriend a warm kiss, enjoying the way Blake responded with a hint of passion. After a few moments, the redhead went back to her mixing and Doris turned once again to the stove.

Yeah she definitely could get used to this, she thought. Life with Blake promised to be much more rewarding than anything she had ever contemplated before.

Olivia watched as Natalia flitted around the kitchen in a random pattern, moving from one task to another. Occasionally, she would disappear into the living room and dust a few pieces of furniture, but after that she would dash into the kitchen to spend a few moments on another task such as wiping down the already impeccably clean counter space.

Olivia knew her partner was still upset about the confrontation earlier with Ava. Her silence during dinner did not go unnoticed by Leyla or Emma, but neither had said a word. After, Natalia had declined any help with the cleanup, but Olivia stayed nearby as she read budget reports, her mind focused on her partner and not her work. Emma quietly took herself to her room while Leyla went to visit Jonathan after she put the baby to bed.

While Natalia was rearranging the dining room table for the fifth time, Olivia came to a decision. She said to Natalia, "I'm going to check on the kids and make sure Emma went to sleep."

Natalia nodded absently and moved to get their good china out of the cabinet.

Upstairs, Francesca was sleeping soundly, her sweet face angelic in repose as she clutched her blanket. Emma was also sound asleep, Olivia was happy to note, although she had left her video game on and her clothes strewn around the floor.

After quickly straightening Emma's room, she shut off the game, leaving just the soft glow of the nightlight to watch over their sleeping daughter. She then headed to the master bathroom and ran hot water into the tub, adding a good handful of lavender bath salts. She lit a few candles in the bathroom and the bedroom. She then returned downstairs.

Natalia was once again adjusting the dining room table. Olivia walked over to her and took her hand before she could flee back into the kitchen.

"Oh," Natalia said, obviously startled to see her. "I heard the water running and thought you were taking a bath."

"That's for you, sweetheart," Olivia said and gently tugged on her hand. "Come on."

"Olivia!" Natalia protested, trying to yank her hand away, but Olivia refused to let go. "I have a ton of things to do."

"That all can wait until tomorrow," she said. "Right now, you're going to take a bath." When Natalia opened her mouth to protest again, but Olivia stopped her with a pout and her patented puppy dog eyes. "Please, *mi amor*?"

Natalia sighed and Olivia could feel her give in, so she tugged again and this time Natalia followed her to the bathroom.

There, Natalia kept her eyes glued to her face as Olivia slowly undressed her, first removing her blouse and bra, then her slacks and panties. She pinned Natalia's hair up with a few quick moves and then held Natalia's hand, steadying her as she stepped into the tub. When Natalia leaned back into the water, a soft sigh escaping her lips, Olivia kneeled beside the tub.

"You're not joining me, *querida*?" Natalia asked, her voice indicating she was already relaxing from the heat of the water.

"No, sweetheart," Olivia answered as she lathered a washcloth with gel. "I want to take care of you tonight."

"You always take good care of me," Natalia whispered, still watching Olivia's face as she began to gently wash her partner.

"We take good care of each other," she agreed.

"I don't deserve it," Natalia sighed and finally looked away.

"Of course, you do," Olivia chided gently. She knew Natalia was still feeling guilty about Ava. "Don't I deserve it when you take care of me?"

"Yes," Natalia said with a pout.

"Believe me, *querida*, I have done far worse than you have or ever will or could ever imagine doing," Olivia said.

Natalia turned to look at her again and Olivia was glad to see Natalia's eyes darken as she ran the washcloth over her sex. Olivia wasn't trying to arouse, so she quickly moved on, but she knew that they only needed to have their hands on each other for them to be turned on. It was one of the things that had surprised her the most when she realized she was attracted to the other woman. Something as simple as a hug from Natalia could do more for her than any of her previous lovers.

She helped Natalia to stand and step out on to the rug. She took the towel she had set out and used it to carefully dry Natalia.

"Thank you, *mi amor*," Natalia said, reaching for her robe.

Olivia intercepted her hand and smiled. "I'm not done taking care of you yet, baby," she said and led Natalia to the bed.

Olivia stepped back a pace and began to remove her own clothes as Natalia sat on the edge of the bed to watch, her breathing quickening as each article of clothing hit the floor.

When Olivia was finally nude, she pushed Natalia back and laid on top her of her, knowing how much her partner loved to feel her naked form pressed against her own. Indeed, she could feel Natalia shudder against her as she spread her legs to allow Olivia to move even closer.

Olivia spent a few moments looking down at her lover. Natalia was the most beautiful woman she had ever known, but she was never more beautiful than this with her skin glowing with love and desire in her eyes as she anticipated Olivia's lovemaking.

"Olivia," Natalia breathed out.

"I love you so much, Natalia," she said and leaned down to kiss her deeply.

She spent what seemed an eternity kissing her love, knowing that an eternity spent kissing Natalia would never be enough. Natalia's mouth was like a sweet well, dark and deep and she reveled in exploring its sensual mysteries.

"You are exquisite," Olivia whispered with awe in her voice as she kissed a path down Natalia's sternum and then with her tongue licked over to one of Natalia's full breasts, gently laving the engorged nipple and causing Natalia to gasp and arch upwards.

"Olivia," Natalia said and Olivia could feel the passion in her lover's voice to her very core.

"Olivia, please."

Olivia let go of the nipple and licked her way across Natalia's chest to give the other the same attention. Natalia's hands entwined themselves in Olivia's hair; tugging and pulling in the way Olivia knew Natalia was ready for more. Instead of immediately granting the unspoken request, Olivia began to move over Natalia's torso, kissing, licking and nipping at every inch of skin. Natalia's firm abdomen clenched even tighter under Olivia's ministrations and her hips gyrated in an attempt for more friction. Olivia used both hands to caress Natalia's breasts and could feel the sweat already beginning to pool in the hollows of Natalia's body.

"Oh fuck, Olivia, please!" Natalia begged as one hand left Olivia's head and clutched desperately at the bed sheets. Olivia knew that when she started to swear, Natalia was at her greatest need, so she left the area of skin between Natalia's thigh and hip that she had been exploring and nuzzled her way to her lover's swollen lips. Natalia's short hairs were soaked with her arousal and Olivia tasted them with great relish and enjoyment. Eating Natalia was better than dining at the world's finest restaurant and Olivia knew in her soul she would never grow tired of it.

As Olivia let her tongue worship Natalia, she glanced up at her lover, not wanting to miss the spectacular view. Natalia had her head thrown back into the pillow with her long neck arched upward and Olivia could see her throat working as her urgent moans grew louder.

Olivia opened her mouth even wider to take more of her lover in and she slid the length of her tongue along Natalia's quivering clit until its tip penetrated Natalia's entrance. She continued tongue fucking Natalia as the woman writhed in ecstasy beneath her. While Olivia watched, Natalia grabbed the sheet in both fists and jammed it into her mouth to muffle her shrieks. Olivia's mouth was suddenly flooded with sweet liquid as Natalia's body seemed to arch impossibly higher off the bed. She grabbed Natalia's hips to hold her in place as she continued to love Natalia with her mouth, bringing the woman to completion again and again.

Finally, Natalia pushed her weakly away, her body collapsing on the bed. Olivia gently lapped up Natalia's essence, and then moved to take Natalia into her arms. Olivia felt her lover's breathing begin to slow, but then Olivia realized that Natalia was crying and the tears quickly turned to sobs.

Olivia held her lover tightly, lending her love and her strength during Natalia's emotional release, fulfilling her promise to always take care of her. As Natalia finally fell into an exhausted sleep, Olivia knew her partner was going to be just fine.

The dining room table was filled with cooling pies and Doris looked on with satisfaction. "Not bad," she whispered to herself.

Blake had excused herself some minutes ago to use the bathroom and Doris went in search of her now. She finally found her in the living room stoking the fire to new life.

"The pies look great," she said, taking a seat on the couch. She noticed an open bottle of wine on the coffee table and filled the two glasses next to it. She was taking a sip as Blake finished with the fire.

"I've had a wonderful time tonight, Blake," she said setting down her glass. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Thank you for coming," Blake answered, sipping her own wine. She also set down her glass and took Doris's hand. "I enjoy spending time with you," she said in a soft voice.

"Me too," Doris admitted, shivering as Blake gently stroked her hand.

"It's a lot different, isn't it?" Blake asked thoughtfully.

Doris had some idea what Blake meant, but she wanted to hear the other woman say it. "What is?"

"Being with a woman," Blake said. "I mean, of course it's different, how could it not be, but there's a totally different energy being with you."

Doris chuckled. "Your New Age is showing, baby," she said. "Energy?"

"Yes," Blake answered with a nod. "With men, it's always like they're focused on the end game. Always moving toward that goal, but you're not like that. I feel like just being with me makes you happy."

"It does," Doris said, her voice thick with feeling.

"And being with you makes me happy, too," Blake said. "I'm so sorry for ambushing you that night, Doris. I really didn't understand before, but now I do. My whole approach was as a straight woman going after a man, so no wonder you got spooked. Thank you so much for giving me a chance."

"Come here," Doris husked and pulled a compliant Blake into her arms.

One kiss led to the next which led to another in what seemed to Doris an infinite number of kisses. Never one for holding back her passion, Doris was amazed that she was utterly content with their leisurely kisses, softly exploring Blake's taste and smell and her beautiful essence. Pulling away slightly, Doris finally whispered into Blake's ivory-colored ear, "Blake, I have a confession to make."

"What's that?" Blake whispered back, leaning her head back to offer her throat to Doris's attention.

"I'm more interested in the end game than I've led on," she said, mouthing her way down the smooth expanse of Blake's neck until she was nuzzling Blake's cleavage.

"Oh, thank God!" Blake exclaimed, pressing closer to Doris as if offering the mayor a delectable treat. Unable to stop herself, Doris cupped one of Blake's full breasts in her hand, the sensation sending a sharp dart of desire through her already aroused body.

"Ohhh," Blake moaned. "Doris."

"Blake," Doris strangled out. "I want you, but..." she paused and swallowed thickly, unable to believe she was doing this. "But..."

"But you want to wait," Blake finished. "Oh God, you're killing me."

"I'm sorry," Doris said, finally easing back from the passionate embrace.

Blake looked up, her face flushed with lust and her breathing rapid. "It's...it's okay," she said in a choked voice. "I said I'd wait and if that was anything what it'll be like, it's worth the wait."

Doris smirked, her confidence renewed now that she knew Blake wasn't upset at her. "I promise you, it will be soooo worth it. It's just that I don't want to worry about getting interrupted by noisy kids or having to be places the next day." She leaned in close again to nip at the side of Blake's mouth as she murmured, "I want it to be just you and me and a large soft bed so that I can show you everything you've been fantasizing about."

"Oh God," Blake moaned again.

This time Doris moved further away and picked up her wine glass, amused that so much time had passed without her realizing it. The chilled wine had warmed and droplets of condensation collected on her fingers as she drank. She glanced at her watch and saw it was indeed late.

"I better go," she said and dashed off a quick text to her driver. She looked at Blake and smirked at the still flushed look on the redhead's face. "I'll pick you and the kids up tomorrow? Ashlee said she's going to ride over with Jonathan and Leyla." Blake nodded and Doris could see she was still trying to regain her composure. "Are you all right?"

Blake glanced at her and narrowed her eyes. "I'm fine," she growled. "Except for the fact that you're driving me crazy." Then she smiled. "It's a good thing I'm crazy about you, Doris Wolfe."

"I'd say that is a very good thing, indeed," she answered.

Act Four

Olivia felt the bed move slightly as Natalia slipped out from under the covers into the chilly morning air.

"Mmm," she said in protest. "It's still dark."

"Shh," Natalia whispered. "Go back to sleep, *querida*."

Olivia cracked an eye open. The digital LED on the clock read 05:27. She rolled over in time to see a robed Natalia disappear into the hallway and a moment later she heard the muffled whump of the furnace kicking in and a fresh blast of warm air blew into the room.

She drifted in that pleasant state between sleep and consciousness, awake enough to hear the soothing sounds of her lover taking a shower, yet her subconscious thoughtfully replaying images of their lovemaking the night before. Still upset about the confrontation with Ava, Natalia had been too distracted to focus on her holiday feast preparations. After Olivia had made sure the girls were asleep, she drew her partner into their bedroom where she had proceeded to make love to her until Natalia had fallen into a deep and contented sleep. Olivia felt a small smile grace her lips as she remembered holding her sleeping lover until she too had fallen asleep.

Minutes after the shower cut off, Natalia reentered the bedroom and Olivia watched through slitted eyes as she dressed in a pair of warm sweats. As Natalia was binding her still-damp hair in a ponytail, she finally noticed Olivia watching her from the bed.

"Why aren't you sleeping, love?" she asked, moving over to the bed.

Olivia reached a hand out from the blanket toward her lover. "Come back to bed," she croaked.

"I promised Sister Anne we would be at the mission by nine and I need to get working on all the things you wouldn't let me do last night," Natalia said with a smirk.

Olivia simply raised an unrepentant eyebrow and felt smug at Natalia's answering blush.

"Rest for a while, *querida*," Natalia said with a laugh. "Come down when you're ready."

As Natalia moved away, Olivia tried to hold on to Natalia's warm hand, but the other woman slipped free and quickly disappeared from the bedroom.

Olivia snuggled deeper into the blankets and considered getting up. There really was a lot to do today to get ready for their second Thanksgiving as a family. She grinned at the memory of how chaotic and disorganized they had been last year which aptly culminated in their Sweet Pea's timely arrival. Once again Olivia sent a silent prayer of thanks into the universe for the continued good health of mother and daughter and while she was at it, she sent thanks for Emma and their son who would be spending his Thanksgiving on the field of war.

Then her thoughts turned to their other daughter who also would not be present today. Olivia's heart ached for her daughter's pain, but she sensed that Ava needed the space to work out her issues on her own. Olivia didn't want Ava to disengage herself from her father, but she did want Ava to at least understand why Natalia felt the way she did.

Olivia knew that even though Ava intellectually understood the circumstances surrounding her conception, she suspected her daughter subconsciously did not want to fully comprehend the ramifications of the act. Growing up, Ava had known she had been adopted which left her with the knowledge that her birth parents had rejected her on some level, but then when she had learned that her beginnings had not only been unwanted, but a result of an act of violence, it had been that much harder to deal with. Add to that finding out her birth mother was the woman who had tried to have her killed, that knowledge came with a terrible price.

That Ava had managed to get past all that and not only forgive her parents, but to love them as well, simply showed what an incredible young woman she was. Yet even though she had reached that place of love and forgiveness, she was unable to understand how Natalia could not do the same. Ava thought if *she* could forgive her parents for their actions, then Natalia should be able to look past what Jeffrey had done. Olivia knew that her lover would indeed do that – someday – but that day might be a long time coming and until then, Olivia would support her partner's decision. Just as she would continue to love and support her daughter, no matter how stubborn she could be.

Glancing at the clock, she noted that it was still much too early to get up, but she knew that there would be no more sleep for her today. With a groan, Olivia finally pushed the blankets aside and crawled out of the warm bed. It was time to get ready for the second annual Spencer-Rivera Thanksgiving.

It had snowed the previous night and clouds still covered the sky, but Natalia thought the sun might make an appearance before long. She paused a moment before going back inside the mission with the final box of supplies to watch the gray clouds scudding across the sky.

"Looks like it's clearing up," a familiar voice said from beside her.

Natalia turned to find Father Ray smiling at her.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Father," she said.

"To you as well, Natalia," he said and then reached for the box. "Here, let me help you."

"Thank you," she said handing him the box.

"Are you dropping off donations?" he asked as he peeked at the contents of the box.

Natalia held open the door to the mission for him, then followed him into the main room, already crowded with those seeking a hot meal on the one day of the year they were almost guaranteed to get one. "No, Father," she said as she moved around him to lead him into the small kitchen. "We're cooking."

"We?" he asked, then his eyebrows rose as he caught sight of an apron-clad Olivia who was sitting at the stainless steel table peeling what seemed to Natalia a hundred pounds of potatoes.

Olivia raised her eyes from her task. "Hello, Father Ray," she said upon seeing the priest. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Happy Thanksgiving, Olivia," he said and set the box down on the table near Olivia. "Where's Francesca?" he asked turning to Natalia.

"She's spending the morning with her sister at the Spauldings," she answered.

"And Rafael?" he asked. "He's well?"

"Yes, Father," Natalia said. "Thank you for asking." Natalia's eyes met her partner's, and she knew that Olivia had noticed he had not inquired about Emma or Ava.

"Have you come to lend a hand, Father?" Olivia asked jovially. "If so, grab a knife. These taters ain't gonna peel themselves."

He shook his head. "Just making my rounds," he answered. "Although I am glad to see you here, Olivia. I would have thought writing a check would be more your speed."

"And that was certainly true at one time," she replied. "But Sister Anne has been a great friend to me and I owe her more than just money."

Father Ray nodded thoughtfully. As if summoned by her name, the nun entered the kitchen carrying a brown paper sack filled with canned food.

"Oh, hello Ray," she said. "Natalia, there are about a dozen cans of green beans in here. Can you add them to the pot?"

"Sure," Natalia said grabbing a can opener.

Sister Anne turned back to Father Ray and asked, "Will you have time to say mass here for the homeless?"

Father Ray pinched his nose, an unfortunate move on his part, Olivia thought, as it drew attention to an area he was sorely overabundant in.

"We discussed this last week, Sister," he said. "Everyone's welcome to attend the regular scheduled mass at the church."

"Many have no way of getting there and it's too cold to walk," she pointed out.

"If you want, we can send the Beacon's courtesy van over," Natalia said.

Olivia nodded in agreement then said to Father Ray, "That is if you don't mind your service attended by a bunch of homeless folk, Father."

"All God's children are welcome in His house," he answered, the faint blush on his face telling her he had been thinking just that.

"Then we'll give Ava a call and she'll send the van over when you're ready for it," Natalia said to Sister Anne.

"And we really should see about getting the mission a van or a bus," Olivia added. "I'll check the listings after the holiday."

"Thank you," Sister Anne said. "For everything. You two are truly among the greatest blessings we have here."

Olivia noted Father Ray frowned at that, but then his face cleared as he said, "Then I'll see you later, Sister." He turned to Olivia and Natalia. "Ladies, enjoy your holiday."

"Thank you, Father," Natalia said and Olivia nodded.

After he left, Olivia turned to Natalia and asked, "Do you think we should send him to that spa we went to after we first got together?" Natalia looked at her curiously. "Because, really, those eyebrows have got to go."

Natalia quirked up her lips as she finally got what Olivia was saying. "I don't know," she answered playfully with a finger on her chin. "I don't think they carry enough wax, do you?"

Sister Anne burst out laughing.

By two, the farmhouse smelled wonderful with the warm aromas of roasting meat and steaming vegetables. Leyla and Emma had finished setting the large table and Natalia obsessively basted the turkey every twenty minutes.

"What time is everyone supposed to get here?" Olivia asked as she headed for the refrigerator to start preparing her special homemade eggnog punch.

"Doris and Blake should be here any minute," Natalia answered. "Blake wanted to help and she said Doris wanted to get a good seat for the game." Olivia chuckled at that and Natalia continued, "I told everyone else to be here by four."

"Sounds good," Olivia said glancing at the clock. "It smells wonderful in here, *querida*. Have I told you how much I love your cooking?"

"Oh, maybe once or twice," Natalia said with a smile. "Usually when it's your turn to cook and you don't want to."

"Me?" Olivia questioned with innocence in her voice. "I never do that."

A knock on the back door proved Natalia right about their friends' imminent arrival. Clarissa and the twins were carrying covered pie dishes and Blake and Doris both had their arms full of recycled grocery bags.

"Set the pies on the buffet in the dining room, please," Natalia instructed the kids, who did as she asked. "Thanks so much for bringing them, Blake. You must have worked really hard."

"Oh, it was nothing," Blake said as she started to pull items from the bags. "Doris helped."

Olivia watched as Natalia looked at the mayor with a big smirk on her face. "Oh? You bake? How sweet."

Doris rolled her eyes. "Ha. Ha," she said and turned to Blake. "Thanks a lot. You promised not to tell."

"Sorry, honey," Blake said. "I'll just have to make it up to you."

Olivia snorted. "Gonna take a lot to make that one up, Blake," she said, winking at Doris.

"I don't mind," Blake said absently then looked up in confusion as the other three women laughed at her. "What?"

"Better make sure you spike that punch real good, Liv," Doris said and then left for the living room to claim her seat.

"What?" Blake asked again.

Olivia chuckled and grabbed the rum from the liquor cabinet.

Sister Anne stood waiting and watching as the parishioners for the Thanksgiving Day mass filed out of the church. Father Ray gave each one a smile and a handshake, but when the supplicants from the mission, who had waited until last to leave, filed by, his smile was a bit more restrained.

Anne thought that even though Ray had taken a vow of poverty and certainly honored that vow, he had still been brought up privileged and that sometimes showed in his attitude toward those less fortunate. She wondered if that was more a reflection of his family's notorious background or his cultural heritage. She would have loved to sit down and discuss it with him, but he wasn't the type to discuss his own shortcomings, especially with someone he perceived as a subordinate.

She liked Ray, she thought as she watched the last of the mission's itinerants file into the borrowed van, but she thought him outdated and parochial in his beliefs. She felt a wave of pity for him and for his flock.

"Thank you for coming, Sister," he said as he joined her.

"You're welcome, Ray," she answered. "And thanks for having us. I'm glad we could make it."

He nodded. "Yes, it was kind of Natalia to offer the hotel's van for your use," he said.

"And Olivia," she reminded, feeling a twinge of irritation at his continual dismissal of Natalia's partner.

"And Olivia, of course," he agreed, shifting his eyes away from hers.

"You still don't approve, do you, Ray?" she asked and his gaze whipped back to hers. "Even after seeing the great love they have for each other and how their family is thriving."

"It's not up to me to approve or disapprove, Sister," he said, his tone dark. "Church policy clearly states that such lifestyles are abominable in the eyes of God."

"That's the Church's policy, Ray, not God's."

"The Church isn't wrong about this," he stated emphatically.

"The Church has been wrong about a lot of things, Ray," she retorted, unable to keep the ire out of her voice. "It's just that when the world changes, it takes the Church a while to catch up. Like when it pardoned scientists condemned for heresy or canonized martyrs it had burned at the stake."

He gave a low, chuckling scoff. "Olivia Spencer and Natalia Rivera are hardly saints, Sister, no matter how many hours they serve at your little soup kitchen."

"No," she agreed. "They're not saints. They're just two women who live each day of their lives for each other and for their family. And that's all God asks of them."

"I don't think Olivia even believes in God," he said.

"Maybe not," she said. "But she believes in Natalia and I believe that's enough for God. Have a nice Thanksgiving, Ray."

With that she left him standing on the church steps, suddenly eager to get back to the mission because she had a lot of hungry people to feed.

Clarissa slowly crunched through the sparse snow cover as she made her way to the duck pond. Emma was using a rake to gather snow into a pile.

"What are you doing?" Clarissa asked.

Emma paused in her labor to glance at her friend. "Building a snowman," she answered then went back to work.

Clarissa looked around at the small pile Emma had made and said, "I don't think there's enough snow and it's not really cold enough to stick."

Emma shrugged, not stopping her raking. "I still want to try. Anna says that you'll never know unless you try."

Clarissa frowned at the mention of the detective's name, and then she shrugged. "Can I help?" she asked.

Emma nodded. "If you want, sure." She handed Clarissa the rake then picked up a shovel lying on the ground. Both girls began using their tools to scoop up the bigger drifts closer to the pond.

As the two girls worked, Emma chatted ceaselessly on a variety of topics, mostly on the things she was learning from Detective Li. Finally Clarissa's patience snapped. "Anna, Anna, Anna!" she said. "That's all you talk about."

Emma stopped working and frowned at her. "Well, she's great," she said. "And she's teaching me martial arts."

"That's all you do now," Clarissa complained. "All you care about is that dumb stuff."

"It's not dumb," Emma said loudly. "It's so I can defend myself from the bad men."

"But it's all you care about!" Clarissa cried.

Before Emma could reply, Clarissa heard a pair of familiar, derisive chuckles. She turned to see her two brothers approaching and she rolled her eyes. Since returning home, the twins had given her nothing but grief. At first, she thought having Kevin and Jason home would be a good thing. Emma worshipped her older brother and Clarissa wanted that as well, but her brothers were nothing but big bullies and after less than a week, she wished they would go away again.

"What's this?" Jason asked.

"It's a widdle snowman," Kevin answered mockingly.

"That's the most pitiful snowman I've ever seen," Jason laughed.

Emma scowled. "Go away. We don't need your help."

Kevin laughed. "This thing will never be a proper snowman."

"It's just a big old lump," Jason added.

"So?" Emma asked. "It's ours and that's what counts."

"It's stupid," Jason said.

"Just like you," Kevin said.

"Go away," Emma said, dropping her shovel and striding over to the boys who simply laughed at her.

Jason started to kick apart the pile of snow they had gathered together and a moment later Kevin joined him.

"Hey! Stop that," Clarissa cried as their hard work was rapidly being destroyed. She felt helpless tears sting her eyes.

Emma stepped forward again to get between the boys and the snow.

"Go away," she repeated in low voice.

Kevin laughed again cruelly and reached out an arm to shove Emma backward. Clarissa cried, "Emma!" as the younger girl fell back onto the snow pile.

Before she realized what was happening, Clarissa watched as Emma nimbly leaped to her feet and grabbed Kevin's still-outstretched arm with both hands. Giving him no time to react, Emma twisted the arm until the taller boy fell to his knees, where Emma immediately pushed him onto his face.

Jason recovered from his shock long enough to charge at Emma, who simply nimbly stepped out of his way and stuck out a foot, deftly tripping him so he too was lying on his face on the ground.

"I said, go away," Emma said in that same calm low voice.

Clarissa realized her mouth was hanging open and she shut it as the boys slowly got to their feet. She tensed to see if they would retaliate but Kevin said, "Come on, Jase. Let's leave the stupid snowman to the stupid girls."

"Yeah," his twin replied and Clarissa grinned as she realized neither one of them looked at her or Emma. "Stupid girls."

After they had left, Clarissa said, "I guess that martial arts stuff isn't so dumb after all."

"Ya think?" Emma said as she stood there with her arms folded watching the retreating twins. "Maybe Anna can teach you, too. If you want," Emma added.

Clarissa nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, that might be cool."

Emma nodded in agreement, then looked at her. "BFFs?" she asked and pulled her mitten off to hold out her pinky.

"BFFs," Clarissa agreed and twined her own pinky with Emma's.

By four, Josh and Doris were taking bets on the football game while Jonathan, Leyla and Ashlee were trying to outdo each other on the Wii game console Olivia had asked her nephew to bring

downstairs from Emma's room. Olivia had intended it to keep the kids occupied, but that was a futile effort as the young adults monopolized the device. Sarah was trying to get Francesca and Colin to participate in an impromptu tea party with her.

Reva, meanwhile, was helping in the kitchen, but Olivia noted that her idea of helping was to sit at the table, drink coffee and direct the other women as they worked. She did, however, get up to answer the knock at the door just as Natalia pulled the turkey out of the oven.

"Wow, that looks great," Anna Li exclaimed as she entered the door Reva held open. She was carrying a covered casserole dish and a moment later she was followed by Emma's old teacher, much to Olivia's surprise.

"Ms. Jennings!" Natalia said before Olivia could.

"Hello, Ms. Rivera, Ms. Spencer," she smiled and handed Natalia a wrapped bottle of wine. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Thank you," Natalia said. "How nice to see you again. And please, it's Natalia and Olivia."

"I'm Callie," she said, warmly. "And it's good to see you again, too. When Anna asked me to join her, I immediately agreed."

Natalia turned to Anna with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, you did say I could bring a date," Anna said with a shrug.

"So I did," Natalia smiled.

Olivia turned a smirk on Ms. Jennings. "So...diversity, huh?" she asked.

"So...roommates, huh?" Ms. Jennings shot back with a saucy grin of her own.

Both women burst into laughter and Olivia noticed that even Natalia was chuckling. Olivia put an arm around the teacher's shoulder and said, "Callie, this lazy wench is Reva Lewis and the other lady is Blake Marler." She then steered the woman into the living room. "These juvenile delinquents are my nephew and Reva's son Jonathan, Natalia's sister Leyla and Ashlee Wolfe. Her mother there and Blake's girlfriend you may know, Mayor Doris Wolfe and this furry fellow is Josh, Reva's husband. Everyone, this is Callie Jennings, Emma's old school teacher." Then feeling a little wicked, Olivia added, "Anna's date."

At that, Doris's head swiveled from the television to inspect the teacher. Then her eyes met Olivia's and narrowed before turning back to the game.

"Where's Emma?" Callie asked.

"Outside with the other kids," Olivia answered.

"I think I'll go say hello," Callie said.

"Okay," Olivia agreed. "Tell them to come in. Dinner's almost ready and they need to get cleaned up."

As the teacher left through the front door, Olivia's eyes again met with Doris's and smirked at the expression on her friend's face. With a shrug, she headed back to the kitchen.

Natalia was giving the turkey its final baste as Blake worked to plate the various vegetables. Olivia lifted the cover off the casserole and took a big sniff. "Oh yeah," she groaned in appreciation. "Smells just like home."

"Does it need to be heated up?" Natalia asked.

"Just for a few minutes," Anna answered. "It's best served hot."

Blake took the casserole over to the oven.

"So, Anna," Reva said, once again holding court at the table. "Any progress on Winslow?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," Anna answered. Briefly she outlined the progress she and Mallet had made, which wasn't much other than widening the manhunt to include more international agencies. She also told them Mallet's theory that Winslow might be specifically targeting Olivia's family.

Reva turned to Olivia, who was making the gravy from the turkey drippings. "You really need to stop dancing on people's graves, Liv," she said.

"I will if you will," Olivia smirked back as she dipped a finger into the hot gravy and popped it in her mouth. "Perfect," she announced to her partner.

"Can you plate the dressing, *querida*?" Natalia asked as she arranged the turkey on the serving platter. Then she turned to Anna and asked, "Are we his target?" Olivia could hear the concern in her voice.

"I don't think so," Anna answered. "At least, not his only target."

"Good," Natalia said. "But that's enough talk about that subject. Today is for giving thanks and remembering our many blessings. Everyone grab a dish and let's go."

Olivia smiled at her as Natalia carried the turkey into the dining room.

"All right, ladies," she said to the group. "You heard my woman...let's get this feast on the table."

With the children seated at a small table and the adults at the main table, Natalia felt a glow of satisfaction. She had always dreamed of scenes like this; a table bursting with homemade food with loved ones seated around it. Her heart felt filled with so much love it was only the absence of Rafe and Ava that kept the day from being perfect. So many times after being forced to leave her parent's home, Natalia had wished for this and felt so grateful that it was now possible thanks to the amazing woman at her side.

"Josh?" Natalia asked. "Will you say the blessing for us?"

"I'd be happy to, Natalia," the kind man answered and everyone joined hands. "Dear Father," he began. "On this day of giving thanks, we ask that our hearts be filled with Your love and our thoughts for those who cannot be here with us today. We ask Your blessing for those families whose loved ones were tragically taken from them and that this Thanksgiving Day you give them comfort to ease their pain. We ask for Your blessing for our lovely hosts Olivia and Natalia and their children, especially Rafael and we pray You keep him safe as well as the other brave men and women who are fighting for our freedoms. May they come home soon. Lord, we also ask that we remember those who are less fortunate so that we may be truly thankful for Your many blessings. Amen."

"Amen," everyone echoed and Natalia spent an extra moment reinforcing the former preacher's prayer to keep their son well. She finally looked up at Josh and said. "Thank you. That was lovely."

"You're welcome," he said with his usual warm smile. Then he turned to Olivia. "Are you going to carve that bird Spencer, or are you just going to let it look pretty?"

Olivia picked up her freshly honed carving knife and said, "Oh, I'm gonna carve this bird up real good, Lewis."

Everyone laughed and Natalia started passing around the bountiful dishes.

While the others relaxed around the table, Doris slipped out the front door for a cigarette. Hearing the door open behind her, she turned, hoping it was Blake, but she frowned when Callie emerged instead. The two women looked at each other for a moment, and then Doris held out her pack of smokes and smirked as the other woman took one.

After a few minutes of smoking in the cold, Doris finally decided to break the silence. "So, you're a teacher?" she asked. "I heard Anna was assigned to the school. Is that how you met?"

Ms. Jennings nodded. "You're actually familiar with my work, Mayor Wolfe."

Doris frowned and frantically thought about what the teacher could mean.

Callie continued. "Two years ago Emma Spencer was my student."

Doris felt her stomach drop. "Oh God," she said. "My Two Mommies?"

The younger woman nodded. "I'm sure you could imagine my dismay when my student's report celebrating her loving family was turned into a political tool to spread hate and ignorance."

"Ms. Jennings..." Doris started.

"And imagine my surprise when later on I found out that you yourself are gay," Callie continued on.

Doris sighed. "I'm sorry," she said then twisted her mouth in chagrin. "I know that's a pathetic apology, but I really do regret that whole thing."

Callie shook her head. "A homosexual who persecutes other homosexuals is the worst kind of hypocrite, Mayor Wolfe. That was a horrible thing you did, not only to Emma and her mothers, but to the entire gay community as well."

"I know," Doris agreed. "And you're right, that was a terrible thing I did and I'm truly, truly sorry. I can only promise that I will never do something like that again."

Callie considered her thoughtfully as she ground out her cigarette. "I understand you've started your own law firm," she said. Doris nodded her head warily and Callie continued, "I'm on the board at the Springfield LGBT Community Resource Center and thanks to the generosity of several prominent benefactors, including Olivia and Natalia, we find our small organization growing faster than we can keep up with. That leaves us with an urgent need for legal services. Perhaps you would care to help?" Doris waited a moment and sure enough Ms. Jennings added, "Pro bono, of course."

Doris smirked, suddenly happy that her ex-lover had attracted the feisty little teacher, who had just proven herself worthy of the detective. "As a proud member of the community, Ms. Jennings, it would be my pleasure to provide my services...pro bono, of course."

"Excellent," Ms. Jennings said with an emphatic nod. "And call me Callie, Doris."

The Towers restaurant had made an attempt to be festive, Ava thought, but it still looked exactly like what it was: a lonely way station for people far from home and staffed by people too single or too newly-employed to warrant the day off. Looking around, she spotted individual diners, a

few couples and the odd family who had opted to enjoy their Thanksgiving feast out rather than stay home. She knew the restaurant at the Beacon looked the same.

Finally spotting Jeffrey sitting at a table for two, she made her way to it. He stood up with a smile and gave her a warm hug.

"Hi honey," he said. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"You too, Dad," she said then sat in the chair he held out for her. They made small talk as their traditional dinner was served, both of them carefully avoiding the subject of Olivia and Natalia. Ava felt a heaviness in her heart for not being with the rest of her family, but that did not lessen her anger at Natalia's stubbornness. It just wasn't fair that Natalia had turned a blind eye to the crimes her partner had committed, yet could not see past a mistake Jeffrey had made as a kid.

Realizing that her father had asked her a question, she returned her attention back to him. "I'm sorry," she said. "What was that?"

"I asked if you had given further consideration of my job offer as campaign manager," he said.

"Oh...well, not really, no," she answered. "Work was very busy with the holiday travelers this week. So, you've made up your mind you'll run?"

"Pretty much," he answered. "With Doris Wolfe stepping down as D.A. I've got a good shot at getting my job back and that makes running for office more feasible."

"Well," she hedged. "I really do like Doris, she's like Mom's best friend and you know how politics can get."

"I do," he said. "Which is why I want my daughter working with me. It will show the voters how good a family man I am with traditional family values."

Ava felt a sense of disquiet at that and tried to hide it from her father, but he must have seen it on her face because he added, "What is it, honey?"

Before she could evade the question, a mild disturbance from the entrance caught their attention.

Led by Felicia, the Boudreau clan consisting of Mel, Cyrus, Christina and Remy, who was carrying Clayton in his arms, entered the restaurant. As always upon seeing the young boy who resembled his half brother so much, Ava felt her heart clench in pain.

"Cute kid," Jeffrey remarked. "So, I really do think you should consider my offer, honey."

Ava turned to stare at him.

"What?" she asked.

"It could be your own start in politics," he said before popping another bite of turkey in his mouth.

"Cute kid?" she asked.

He looked at her, a confused look on his face. Glancing at the Boudreaus, he turned to her with a shrug and said, "He does take after his parents I imagine. What?"

"And he doesn't remind you of anyone?" she asked.

He glanced over at the family who was finally being seated at their table. "Well, like I said, he looks a lot like Remy. Ava, what's this about?"

"Do you even remember him, Dad?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Who?"

"Who? *Who*?" she repeated, this time louder. "Don't you think that little boy reminds you of someone? Say...your grandson?"

"I suppose," he answered. "But Ava, Max was only around a couple of days and that was two years ago."

Ava sat there in surprise. She felt as if blinders had been removed from her eyes and a series of images replayed through her mind: flying from San Francisco for her father's memorial service, her step-mother crying for her husband, her baby brother left without a father, Olivia mourning a lost friend. Then her mind flashed to things she knew had happened, but had not experienced: a naïve young girl dancing with a handsome young man, that same girl waking up with the sick realization she had been violated, realizing she was pregnant and trying to get help only to be condemned by her own mother, forced to give away the child because she was left alone and responsible not only for herself, but for her siblings as well.

"Oh, my God," Ava exclaimed in a strangled whisper. "Natalia was right. You really haven't changed, have you?"

Jeffrey looked at her with the same look of confusion on his face. "What do you mean, Ava?"

"You're still running away from your family."

He looked thunderstruck. "I just got back to Springfield," he claimed.

"That's not what I mean," she spat. "You always run away. You left Reva and your son. You left Mom alone and pregnant after you *raped* her."

"Ava!" he said in a whisper after quickly glancing around the restaurant. "Keep your voice down!"

"Why?" she asked, not modulating her volume. "Are you afraid that bit of gossip will hurt your political ambitions?"

"No, honey, that's not it," he said. "Look, I was just a kid. I had a job to do and I was the only one who could do it. What was I supposed to do?"

"That's your excuse? You had a job? Did you think that throwing a wad of cash at Mom was enough? That's how you take responsibility for your actions? What about me? Did you even care what happened to me?" Ava felt the tears running down her face.

"Honey, I didn't know Olivia was going to give you up for adoption," he said.

"But you knew she was pregnant," Ava pointed out as she roughly wiped her face with her cloth napkin. "Anna told you, but you just went on your merry way as if I didn't even exist."

"Ava, let's go somewhere and discuss this," he said.

"All you cared about was your fricking *job*," she hissed as if he hadn't spoken. "That's *all* you've ever cared about. What about your family, Dad?"

"I care, Ava," he said, his own face flushed with either anger or embarrassment, Ava couldn't tell. "I always have cared about you and I always will."

"No, you don't," she insisted and wiped at her face again. "Your job was more important than Mom and me and here you are nearly thirty years later and it's still more important than your wife and son. You abandoned us all and now you can't even remember your own grandson."

"Ava..."

"What kind of man are you?" she asked.

"Ava, that's not fair," he said. "I've tried to make it up to you and your mother."

"And what about Reva and Colin?" she said. "How are you going to make it up to them?"

"That's not your concern, Ava," he said angrily.

"Colin is my brother, Dad," she said. "He'll always be my concern." She stood up and threw her napkin on top of her uneaten dinner, and then she leaned forward to say in his face. "But you know what? He'll be okay because he has his mother and Josh and me and Olivia and even Natalia because we all understand the true meaning of family. If you haven't learned that by now, Dad, then you never will."

"Ava...", he started, also standing up, but she interrupted him again with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Oh, and by the way..." She picked up her purse and pushed her chair back so hard it fell over. "I'm going to have to decline your job offer. My skills will be better utilized serving the family business. But here's a word of advice: if you even *think* about using Doris's sexual orientation against her, you'll regret it. She's got a lot of allies in this town who would be glad to run your sorry ass out of town before you knew what was happening. Happy Thanksgiving, Jeffrey."

As she strode out of the restaurant, she caught sight of Remy watching her and in his eyes was the kind understanding that she had always admired. He gave her a small smile and a nod as she left the restaurant.

Putting another dish in the rack to dry, Natalia glanced out the window and saw a tall figure crossing the snow-covered yard and disappear into the barn. She looked at the guard who was on his break and eating his holiday dinner at the table, "Who is that in the barn?"

He immediately put down his fork and keyed his walkie-talkie and held a finger to his ear as he queried the agents on duty outside.

"Ms. Peralta," he answered Natalia a moment later.

Natalia nodded, shut off the tap and dried her hands before grabbing her coat from the hook near the back door.

"Should I go, ma'am?" he asked, half standing up

She held out a hand to stop him. "No, no. that's all right. Finish your dinner."

"Thank you," he said, sitting down again. "It's very good."

"You're welcome," Natalia said absently as she buttoned her coat and hurried from the house, not bothering to put on her boots. She barely noticed the cold from the snow as she walked toward the barn.

Pushing open the heavy door, she called out, "Ava?"

The inside was dark and Natalia felt along the wall until she found the switch that turned on the bare bulb that hung from the rafters on a worn electrical cord. "Ava," she said again and heard a small noise from one of the horse stalls.

"Can you turn off the light?" Ava asked in a voice hoarse from tears.

Natalia immediately switched off the light, but then she lit the Coleman lantern that sat on the supply cabinet. She carried the lamp to the stall and set it outside so it provided a soft light.

Inside the stall, Ava was huddled in the corner and hugging her knees against her chest in the same manner Emma did when she was upset. Natalia stepped over and quietly sat next to the young woman, who was weeping.

Wanting to give Ava time, Natalia simply sat there on the cold floor and her thoughts turned back to when she had first come to know the younger woman. Ava had been an active participant in her mother's campaign to steal Nicky away from her. At the time, Natalia had naturally resented Ava for her actions, but now she recognized them as just another part of the fierce Spencer loyalty toward family.

Olivia had told her that when she first revealed their relationship to her daughter, that she was in love with Natalia, but who had left, Ava's first response had been for Olivia to go and get her woman. After learning of that immediate acceptance, Natalia had grown to respect Ava for the remarkable woman she was.

"Sometimes I wonder if it was my fault he died," Ava said in a whisper. "All the lies and the scheming I did. Was it some sort of divine punishment for what I did?"

"No, sweetie, God doesn't work that way," Natalia said. "When Rafe got diabetes, I wondered the same thing. Was he being punished for my having him out of wedlock, or for not doing what my parents wanted me to and give him to a family who could better provide for him? But in time I realized that in a way Rafe's illness was a blessing. It caused us both to grow stronger and to overcome the obstacles it presented."

"I don't think I can ever see Max's death as a blessing, Natalia," Ava said.

"No, me either," Natalia agreed. "I can't imagine the horror of losing a child although Olivia and I live with that fear every day Rafe is overseas, but I think perhaps you have a chance to learn from the actions you took during that time – to learn from them and maybe take a different course next time."

Ava was silent a while then she said, "You were right, you know." Upon Natalia's questioning look she added, "About Jeffrey. He hasn't changed, hasn't learned anything from the past. All he cares about is his 'job.' He doesn't..."

Natalia's heart broke at the sorrow in Ava's voice.

"He doesn't even remember what Max looked like," Ava finished and broke into fresh sobs.

"Oh sweetie," Natalia said and pulled the crying woman into her arms. "It's all right," she said softly. "You'll always remember Max and so will Remy and Olivia. Max will live forever in our family's hearts. If Jeffrey can't do that, then that is his loss, Ava, and not your fault and certainly not Max's."

"I just miss him so much," Ava cried, speaking about her son. "Why does it still hurt so much, Natalia?"

"Because he was your son and you love him," Natalia answered simply.

"I just want it to stop hurting."

"I know," Natalia said, rubbing her hand soothingly over Ava's back. "I don't think it ever will stop hurting, sweetie, but it will get better. I think you can make it a little easier to deal with. Your mom told you how Dr. Boudreau has been helping us. Perhaps she is a good person to talk to about your feelings about Max, especially since she was his family, too?"

"Huh." Ava lifted a hand to wipe her nose. "I never thought about it that way," she said with a sniff. "Do you think she can help?"

"I do," Natalia said emphatically and felt the younger woman give a heavy sigh.

"All right," Ava said. "I guess it couldn't hurt as much as this."

"Of course it won't," Natalia said. "And just remember that no matter what, I am your family, too, and I will always be there for you."

"Even when I do stupid things?" Ava asked.

"Even then," Natalia answered. "I love you, Ava."

Ava sighed again and Natalia felt the other woman's body relax the tension it had been holding. Looking up, she saw Olivia standing quietly at the entrance to the stall, tears running down her face. As their eyes met, Olivia mouthed silently, "Thank you."

"I love you," Natalia said silently back. She felt the cold cement under her, but was warmed by the precious woman in her arms and the love shining at her from her partner.

Their guests had lingered long after dinner, Natalia noted with satisfaction and contentment. The children had slowly dropped off one by one and an emotionally exhausted Ava had been sleeping peacefully in Rafe's bedroom the last time Natalia had checked on her. Emma, Clarissa and Sarah had decided on a no-boys-allowed slumber party in Emma's room after the girls had confiscated the Wii from the protesting young adults. Ashlee decided to spend the rest of the evening with Daisy and James at the mansion and Jonathan and Leyla had gone with her.

After they left, Natalia thought about her feelings for the burgeoning relationship between her sister and the charming young man. From what she knew, Jonathan had been somewhat of a rake in his younger days, but then again, all of their children had been in trouble in one form or another so she certainly wasn't in any position to judge. However, she also knew from her own observations that the responsibility of being a single father had matured him. He had directed that wild energy in a positive manner of nurturing and protecting his daughter. She also knew

from an overheard conversation between him and Josh Lewis that he was making a fine career for himself.

Still, she worried for his safety and – by extension – Leyla's safety with Winslow on the loose. Jonathan's mad uncle had been trying to murder him since the day he had been born and the fact that he hadn't succeeded was due to Olivia's protection and Jonathan's own luck. In any case, she thought they made a lovely couple and she prayed things worked out for them.

Anna handed her a handwritten sheet, the recipe for the calabaza casserole she had brought. Olivia had enjoyed it so much, Natalia wanted to add it to their regular diet.

"Thank you," she said looking over the ingredients. "Are some of these spices available locally? I recognize some from Puerto Rican cuisine, but not all of them."

"Not here in Springfield, but in Chicago," the detective answered. "There's a small bodega I visit every few months to stock up," she said as she took the paper and added an address to it.

"Oh, I know this place," Natalia said happily, recognizing the name of a small shop in her old neighborhood. "Olivia and I are planning a trip to Chicago soon. I'll pick up extra for you, too."

"Thanks, Natalia," Anna said with a warm smile. "And thanks so much for having Callie and I today. We've had a great time."

"Thank you for coming," Natalia answered. "You both are welcome anytime and I don't just mean all the times you're here watching our backs or picking up Emma."

"All right," Anna said. "I think Callie is ready to go, so I'll say good night."

"Good night and be careful going home," Natalia said, moving in for a hug.

Looking around, she noticed Josh and Reva gathering up their sleeping son. Doris and Blake were also preparing to leave. Blake's sons were already heading out the front door without saying goodbye. She frowned at that. While the boys hadn't been outright rude, they hadn't gone out of their way to be polite or sociable either. Although she did sense something had gone on between them and the girls; when earlier Emma declared her room a boys-free zone, they had simply shifted their eyes and said nothing. Supposing they were the next set of Springfield's juvenile delinquents, she wished Blake strength in dealing with them.

Moving over to Olivia's side, she smiled as her lover put an arm around her shoulders as they said goodbye to their guests. As the last car pulled away, Olivia looked at her and said, "Another successful Thanksgiving, baby."

"The best yet," she agreed.

"But not as good as next year's," Olivia said with her eyes twinkling.

"Can't wait," Natalia responded with an emphatic nod. "Let's go to bed; I'm exhausted."

"Right there with ya."

Natalia woke up with the realization that the other half of their bed was empty. Looking around the room, she could see no sign of her partner. She grabbed her silk robe and went in search of Olivia.

The nursery's door was ajar and inside under the soft light of the Plush Bunny lamp. Olivia sat in the rocker cradling Francesca with one arm while holding a bottle for the baby with her other hand.

"Hey," Natalia said softly.

Olivia looked up with a wide smile. "Hi, baby. Sorry if I woke you."

"You know I can never sleep without you by my side," she said, moving closer.

"Me without you, either," Olivia grinned.

"You should have woken me if she needed feeding," Natalia said. "I guess she went to sleep too early last night."

"Too much excitement all day," Olivia agreed. As Olivia finished feeding the baby, Natalia glanced at the Sponge Bob wind up alarm clock Emma had bought for her sister, insisting that Francesca would need it for school, never mind that event was still years away.

"Oh!" Natalia exclaimed as she noted that the time was well past midnight. "It's her birthday."

Olivia smiled down at the baby. "Yeah, so it is. She's officially one year old. Happy birthday, Sweet Pea." Olivia kissed the child's hair.

Natalia reached for her daughter, who was yawning. She carried her over to crib and laid her down. She then leaned down to kiss her.

"Good night, my darling girl and happy birthday," she whispered. "I love you."

"Ov you, *Mamí*," the baby said and promptly fell asleep.

Surprised, Natalia quickly looked at Olivia who had a wide smile on her face.

"Love you, too, *Mamí*," Olivia said.

"You taught her to call me mommy in Spanish?" she asked, feeling tears in her eyes. "How did you know?"

Olivia shrugged in the adorable self-deprecating way of hers. "I heard you call her that so I asked Leyla. She said it's like a term of endearment between Hispanic mothers and their daughters. I figured it was apropos since we're teaching her Spanish anyway."

Natalia quirked her lips. "So how long have you been coaching her?"

"About a week," Olivia said with another shrug.

Natalia walked over and drew her lover into her arms. "Thank you, *querida*," she said, leaning in for a long kiss.

"Back to bed?" Olivia asked as she pulled away, slightly out of breath.

"Tired?" Natalia asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not really," Olivia replied.

"Good," Natalia said with a nod. "Then definitely back to bed."

Natalia felt Olivia's saucy smirk throughout her body and she took her lover's hand to lead her back to their bedroom, offering up another prayer of thanks for all of their many blessings.

As she pulled her car into her parking spot at her apartment complex, Anna felt herself smiling. Her date with Callie had ended very late and on a very good note. The two women had agreed to spend plenty of time together this weekend. As she approached her apartment, she jiggled her keys happily and thought about the romantic dinner she was planning to cook for the beautiful teacher, but then she stopped short, her whole body growing cold. Hanging from the doorknob of her apartment was a festive gift bag, colorful tissue paper and curled ribbons jutting out of the top.

Instinctively, she looked around, even though she knew she would find no one around, especially this late at night. Walking forward again, she plucked the bag from the handle and then unlocked the door. She entered quickly and double locked the door behind her.

She put the bag on her kitchen island and laid her service revolver next to it and then just stared at it for a few minutes. The gaily decorated bag seemed to mock her with its innocence and her anger grew with each passing moment.

Finally, she reached a hand inside and drew out a wrapped object about six inches long and the same wide. With trembling hands, she unwrapped it and felt her body grow even colder.

Sitting before her was a bronze statue of an armored woman sitting on an equally armored war horse. Her open helm revealed the grim, but determined visage of a very young woman, her expression one of surety and determination. One hand held the reins of the horse and the other held an outstretched medieval long sword. The entire pose was that of a woman ready to do battle armed with the holy knowledge that her cause was divinely ordained.

The most chilling aspect of her gift was that someone – her father she presumed – had wrapped a white cord around the body of the woman. It was as if to say that even the strong and determined can be bound by forces beyond her control.

"What the hell?" Anna whispered and breathed deep, suddenly very frightened to her core.

The End