

Author: Geekgrllurking
Episode Title: Friends and Lovers

Act One

A light layer of frost covered the window in the master bedroom of the farmhouse, a testament to the fact that old man winter was well on his way. Warm and snug inside, Olivia Spencer yawned, groaning softly as she sleepily ran a hand through her tousled hair. Shuffling into the bathroom, she stretched slowly, working the kinks out of her back. Leaning forward on the vanity, she stared at her reflection and shook her head, smiling as she recalled just how she got those achy muscles.

“God, you’re getting old, Spencer.”

“I don’t believe a word of it, *querida*,” Natalia Rivera said as she stepped into the spacious bathroom and wrapped her arms around her grumbling partner.

“Hmph. So says the woman who tried to kill me last night. Somehow I think you’re a little biased,” Olivia grumped but leaned into the embrace.

“Besides, don’t you know that cougars are sexy?” Natalia nuzzled along the soft hair behind her lover’s ear before finding and nipping playfully at a tempting earlobe. “I’m just sayin’.”

Olivia turned in her lover’s arms, enjoying the sweet curves pressing her back against the vanity and closed the scant distance to taste her lover’s full lips.

“We will be late if you keep this up, missy.”

Natalia sighed and nodded, nuzzling closer. Their dinner in Chicago with her parents had been arranged for weeks and a part of her was dreading it, but she knew it was the right thing to do. Her mother had sounded stunned when she had called to make the arrangements. It would almost have been funny if it hadn’t been such a sad statement about their relationship. Regardless of the less than warm reception Natalia had Christmas presents wrapped and ready from their family for both of her parents.

Natalia leaned into her lover, taking comfort from her sleepy warmth as long fingers dragged lazily through her hair. The one good thing about all the craziness around them this year with Edmund was that Natalia realized just how important all her family ties were. Leyla’s deciding to come back into her life had been an unexpected blessing, one that Natalia cherished more and more with each passing day as she got to know the young woman better.

And now, despite how she had been treated over the years, Natalia still wanted her older brother Leo and her parents involved in her life in some way too. She didn’t hold out much hope of their actually attending the wedding ceremony over New Year’s, but deep down a part of her wished her parents would surprise her and rise to the occasion. Realistically though, she knew they had a hard enough time admitting their daughter was in a committed lesbian relationship.

Olivia sensed the change in her lover’s mood and pulled the slight brunette into a tighter hug, tucking the dark head under her chin. She wouldn’t push Natalia when she went into one of these introspective funks but she could just hold her, so she knew she wasn’t alone. Sometimes actions were more important than words.

“We can head out of town once we swing by the Beacon to drop Sweet Pea off and then it’s just you and me and some serious retail therapy with the credit cards.” Olivia smirked into the soft

dark hair. She still wasn't sure what she was going to get the dark-haired beauty for Christmas -- hopefully something would come to her soon.

"And alone time with my parents." Natalia said quietly.

"And time with your parents." Olivia conceded with a slight grimace. Her eyes suddenly twinkled with mischief. "And I'm definitely looking forward to finding our honeymoon present." Olivia waggled her eyebrows and flushed with pleasure as Natalia blushed slightly, snuggling closer into the crook of her neck. Grinning unrepentantly, she pulled back to catch the dark eyes of her lover.

"You still want to, right?"

Natalia bit her bottom lip and nodded her head shyly, her gaze travelling down Olivia's body. The desire she felt for the other woman did things to her that she never would have even considered before. And now...well, now she couldn't wait for the next adventure with her lover.

"In fact, I don't know if I can wait until our honeymoon to..." Natalia leaned in, trapping her lover against the vanity and whispered the naughty details into Olivia's ear.

Olivia smiled knowingly and tugged, pulling the tails of Natalia's white cotton shirt out of her jeans, all thoughts of a shower and getting dressed disappearing with the suggestive words falling from those delectable lips. Natalia caught her roving hands and pressed them to the countertop behind her, effectively trapping her before starting a searing trail of kisses down her body.

Olivia grinned as she felt herself guided up onto the marble vanity countertop, Natalia making quick work of removing her sleep shorts as she went.

"Well, so much for an early start..."

Natalia's lips trailed down Olivia's warm skin, pausing only to peel her lover's shirt from her body in one quick movement, thrilling at the gasp this caused.

"Little cold, baby?" Natalia smirked as her thumbs slowly circled erect nipples, and then flicked them, enjoying the hiss of pleasure from her lover with her actions. Olivia squirmed beneath her touch, clearly wanting more; and she was more than happy to oblige.

"More like hot for you," Olivia growled and arched into her fiancée's sure touch.

"Oh, really?" Natalia grinned against soft skin, nipping and biting as she made her way down toned abs, gently licking to take any sting away. Her nose nuzzled along sensitive skin, as she descended below an adorable navel and down into the patch of short hair below. Breathing against the moist heat she found there, she smiled as Olivia rocked her hips clearly needing more. "Mmm, somebody's twitchy this morning."

Olivia whimpered softly in response, the hum of her lover's voice vibrating against her heated flesh driving her insane with want. She leaned back as the brunette shifted her position slightly, eagerly moving in to taste her desire.

"God, I knew there were benefits to living with a morning person." Olivia sighed as Natalia's tongue finally swirled around her clit, her right hand finding its way into soft dark hair, urging her on. Her lover hummed against her and flicked hard with the tip of her tongue in response. Olivia chuckled, her body jerking, enjoying every second of attention Natalia paid her.

It still shocked her sometimes how unbelievably arousing it was to find Natalia between her legs, taking control and wantonly pleasuring her so thoroughly. Liquid fire rushed through her veins as

Natalia suddenly lightly bit and sucked on her, pushing her quickly beyond rational thought as her head fell back, and she cried out softly.

Natalia glanced up over the swell of Olivia's naked belly at the adorably tousled honey-blond head. She paused and waited, wanting to see those amazing green eyes once more before taking her completely over the edge. She wasn't disappointed as Olivia's eyes opened, hooded and dark with desire, stared intensely at her. Dipping her head again, she captured the stiff throbbing clit, flicking hard with her tongue as Olivia ground hard against her, clearly needing more. Natalia trailed her fingers through damp curls and claimed her lover, thrusting her hand deeply, intimately loving her with her touch.

Olivia moaned loudly, her eyes slamming shut as she was thoroughly taken, the first hints of her orgasm threatening to overtake her. Filling and thrusting deep into the wet heat, Natalia was rewarded with more needy moans as the lithe woman before her bucked, trying to increase the tempo. Natalia ignored her, taking her time bringing her to the peak and then slowing it down again, much to Olivia's frustration.

A slightly desperate whimper finally escaped from the older woman. Smiling at the familiar sound Natalia knew Olivia was close and took pity. Picking up the pace, she angled her hand slightly, thrusting deeper and began moving ever faster with the flicking of her tongue, circling the needy clit, bringing her lover once again to the brink. Natalia looked up and watched the fire of desire blazing in Olivia's intense gaze.

Humming softly in sympathy, Natalia watched as Olivia suddenly arched and stilled, frozen as she danced along the edge of pleasure and then came crashing and tumbling over to the other side. Thrusting hard against her, Natalia hung on for dear life, taking care to ride the waves of pleasure along with her lover, teasing her higher if possible. Her body finally relaxing, Olivia slumped and moaned softly, sated and exhausted as she tried to catch her breath.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?" Olivia panted once she could finally get her wits about her again as Natalia chuckled against her. She could feel puffs of hot breath tickling against her slick flushed skin, triggering tiny aftershocks. A deliciously lazy moan vibrated deep in Olivia's chest and Natalia gently pulled herself away and moved back up her body. She smiled as soft lips made a trail back up to her navel, a moist tongue tracing the salty hollows of her abs, her hips below moving and lifting of their own accord.

"Have I not worn you out yet?" Natalia murmured, moving up to capture Olivia's lips possessively before once again moving away and standing. Pulling Olivia off the vanity and onto her feet, she held on tight to her slightly wobbly lover, a part of her pleased she had affected her so intensely with their lovemaking.

"I'll never be tired of you." Olivia sighed, burrowing her nose along the collar of Natalia's shirt, breathing her scent in contentedly. "Don't you know, you're stuck with me?"

"And I thank God for that. Every. Single. Day." Natalia smiled softly, running her fingers through the thick strands of hair, meaning every word. "Now hop in that shower, while I finish packing for the weekend. I can take mine when you head down for breakfast." Natalia swatted her lover's bare bottom playfully before turning to make her way back out to their bedroom.

"That can wait," Olivia said, her fingers tangling with Natalia's, pulling her back towards her body, missing her lover's warmth. "I was thinking we could conserve some energy and shower together." Olivia grinned and arched an eyebrow saucily before moving away to step into the stall.

Swallowing hard, Natalia blinked for a moment and then stripped quickly before following her lover into the narrow shower stall, the hot water hitting her like needles. Natalia's eyes raked hungrily down Olivia's sleek wet form, desire plain on her face.

"I like the way you think." Natalia moved her hand, hesitantly, almost reverently, across Olivia's delicate collarbone and down to trace along lush full breasts before looking up at her lover's eyes again, sharp teeth biting her full bottom lip.

"God what you do to me," Olivia murmured softly, a little shocked at how quickly arousal was flaring deep in her belly again. Taking a deep, shaky breath she pushed her needs to the side and reached out for the bottle of shampoo beside her. Moving slowly she popped it open and squeezed a dollop onto the palm of her hand. Olivia knew that she wanted to take her time, savoring the feel of this amazing woman slick and slippery beneath her fingertips.

"Turn around," Olivia all but growled. With a little sexy smile Natalia spun slowly under the water spray, giving her the opportunity to watch the rivulets of water race down her lover's back and delightfully toned bottom. She whimpered slightly at the sight.

Covering both hands with the shampoo, Olivia ran her fingers into the long dark tresses, building a lather of suds. Natalia stepped back against her, Olivia's nipples rubbing against the slope of her back. She heard a low moan as the brunette tipped her head forward and taking the hint, she started to massage her scalp.

Natalia's hands came up to brace against the tile wall, her legs parting slightly, Olivia smirked and took the invitation, sliding her muscled thigh between, pressing tight to her core. Natalia's breath hitched, and she could feel her wet heat start to rock against her.

Olivia started to rub little circles at the top of her lover's head, tracing her fingers down behind her ears, kneading and pulling at the cords of her elegant neck before gathering the dark tresses back up to the top of her head and starting all over again. Natalia's rumbling purr of pure pleasure hit her low, coiling in the pit of her stomach as her desire made itself known again, enjoying the feel of her body moving against her thigh, the curve of her ass pressing against her in a most delightful way.

Reluctantly Natalia moved away, her partner's growl of frustration making her laugh as she turned her into the spray of the showerhead, rinsing the soap and suds from her long dark hair. Leaning back into the water spray, Natalia's breasts presented too great a temptation, finding their way into Olivia's hands, palming the stiff nubs, the weight perfect as she squeezed and massaged them.

"Please, Olivia," Natalia moaned finally as she leaned forward again, watching her lover play with her body, whose thumbs were now circling very erect nipples. Unable to take much more of the teasing, her body flushed with a need that needed tending to now. Pushing weakly on Olivia's shoulder with her left hand, her partner grinned, taking the not so subtle hint and sank to her knees, bringing them nose to navel.

Olivia watched entranced as water trickled over tight abs, down and around an adorable bellybutton, small droplets of water falling into the tiny hollow. Nuzzling against the soft warm skin, she kissed and sucked at the water collecting there, her tongue laving around the delicate edge of skin. Natalia giggled, her stomach jiggling with the movement, coarse hair tickling at Olivia's throat reminding her of other places she was looking forward to exploring.

She ran her hands along the gentle curve of Natalia's hips to hold her steady, as she felt her lover's fingers slide through her own hair, pulling the moist strands back out of her eyes. Looking up the long body into dark chocolate eyes her heart clenched at the beauty and trust reflecting back.

"I love you so much..." Olivia murmured against soft skin, dipping her head to follow a trail of water trickling down the swell of stomach before her, licking and sucking her way lower, pausing

when finally reaching damp dark curls. Her hand slipped lower along Natalia's leg, trailing up the inside of a smooth thigh. She grinned knowingly as her lover thrust forward, her body silently demanding her touch.

Guiding a leg over her shoulder, Olivia opened Natalia further, her tongue sinking into sweet hot folds, lazily circling the stiff clit found there, before taking her in and starting to suck.

Rocking against an insistent mouth, Natalia quickly started to lose control, seemingly unable to get close enough, her left hand tangled into slick wet hair desperately trying to keep Olivia right where she needed her. Her lover continued to torment her with a few quick faint flicks of her tongue, before starting to build a steady rhythm. Wrapping a strong arm around her waist, she felt fingertips trail along her most sensitive flesh, parting her and then suddenly without any preamble or warning, she was filled completely.

"Oh, God..." Gasping, Natalia bucked hard, so much so that Olivia almost lost her grip on her needy clit. Moving back tighter against her lover's body, Olivia started to build the tempo with her thrusting hand, pulling out slightly and hesitating ever so slightly before pushing in, repeating this movement over and over again, taking her closer with each stroke.

Moans filled the air, mumbled words mixing with the steam, begging in several languages for release. Natalia's cries echoed around them as she twitched in anticipation, racing headlong to her fast approaching orgasm. Finally, Olivia felt her stiffen in her arms, shuddering around her, Natalia's body holding and clutching her fingers intimately, deeper even as she came hard for her.

Olivia watched, finally contented as Natalia's movements started to slow, waves of pleasure obviously still flowing through her body as she throbbed steadily against her mouth. Finally stilling, Olivia gently slid back up her partner's lithe body, before catching and holding her close. Natalia needed her lover's strength and the safety of Olivia's arms as she tried to catch her breath, completely spent. Leaning in, she smiled as she tasted herself on her lover's lips, kissing the full mouth almost reverently.

"I'm beginning to think we need to conserve water together more often,.." Natalia murmured softly against her lover's lips, sated and content. "Much more often."

Olivia just chuckled, agreeing completely.

It was quiet in Company, the usual Friday morning crowd having thinned as patrons dashed off to work after picking up a quick bite to go. Doris Wolfe sat at the counter watching her girlfriend chat with an older couple sitting in a booth by the window.

Olivia sauntered in and made her way towards the counter, sliding into the stool beside Doris and smiling happily at her.

"You look disgustingly chipper this morning." Doris turned slightly to greet her friend, and quickly assessed Olivia's mood. "Someone got some last night."

Olivia raised an eyebrow and simply smirked, denying nothing. After all, what would be the point?

"Someone around here should, don't you think?" Olivia couldn't help the teasing jab, grinning wider as Doris' eyes narrowed at her over the rim of her cooling coffee mug.

"Olivia, are you picking on Doris again?" Blake efficiently filled two take out cups of coffee,

popped the lids on, and quickly made change for the ten dollar bill Olivia slid across the counter.

"Heavens no!" Olivia grinned, dropping some change in the tip jar and pocketing the rest. "Would I do that?"

Blake paused and stared a moment in obvious disbelief before shaking her head and making her way back into the kitchen. Olivia and Doris quietly watched her leave and then turned to face each other again before giggling like two school girls.

"So?" Olivia prompted, taking a quick sip of her coffee cup.

"Blake still has no clue." Doris grinned happily. "It took some digging to find decent tickets, but that's why you pay your amazing assistant Keira so well." She had been planning the theatre trip to Chicago for a while now, wanting to surprise Blake as an early Christmas present. Enrolling Keira's help had been Olivia's suggestion, having great faith in her assistant's abilities to live up to her Beacon staff nickname, the Miracle Worker. "We have tickets for tonight."

"Tonight!" Olivia blinked. "That's fast."

"I know, but it was the best we could do on such short notice." Doris glanced back at the kitchen to see where Blake was. The coast was still clear so she turned back to Olivia. "I booked dinner reservations before the show and then we'll slowly make our way home after the show." Doris smiled softly, suddenly far away in her thoughts. "I can't wait to see her face."

Olivia reached out to squeeze Doris' arm. For all her teasing, she was genuinely glad to see her friend so happy. Looking over the mayor's shoulder she saw Blake dash out of the kitchen with a breakfast order and head straight for one of the busy tables.

"As much as I'd love to stay and chat I have to get going." Olivia grabbed both of her takeout cups from the countertop and stood to leave.

"Good luck with Natalia's family tonight." Doris said, waving her off, not wanting to be in either of her friend's shoes tonight for anything. Shaking her head, she took another sip of her coffee as the door closed behind Olivia. "You're going to need it, my friend."

"Hey there," Leyla looked up from her desk as her sister Natalia wandered into the daycare center of the Beacon, the electric door chime giving her fair warning of someone opening the door. "You look fantastic today. Did you do something different to your hair?"

"Um, no." Natalia flushed slightly and bit her bottom lip, flashing instantly to Olivia passionately washing her hair in the shower earlier that morning. "I-I was in a bit of a rush to get out of the house and just sort of let it do what it wanted, I guess."

"Well, whatever you're doing, keep it up." Leyla flashed another bright smile at her sister, who seemed to blush harder at her comment, before coming around her desk to take her squirming niece from Natalia's arms.

"How's my little Sweet Pea this morning? Are you gonna stay with me for awhile until your Papi comes?" Leyla tickled Francesca's wee belly, both women smiling at the girl's happy giggles.

"Are you sure you'll be okay at the farmhouse with the kids until Frank and Phillip show up Saturday morning?" Natalia asked pulling one of the baby's socks up higher.

"Please, it's an armed fortress. We will be fine." Leyla turned to her baby niece and dropped a

soft kiss to the closest chubby cheek. "Won't we, *m'ija*?" Leyla smiled as the small girl reached out and tugged on her hair. She glanced back at her older sister, growing concerned by the small frown she found there.

"What about you? How are you doing?" Leyla asked, watching Natalia continue to fidget with Francesca's clothes. "You're worried about Mama and Papa, aren't you?"

Natalia shrugged and looked down before sighing, nodding her head. For all the independence and security she felt with Olivia and the family that they had built together, Carmen and Hector Rivera were still her parents. For all their past drama, their intimidating hurtful ways, they were still very important to her. She couldn't help feeling deep down that they had the potential to love and accept her for who she truly was.

Leyla looked down and thought about how much she should say. They hadn't really discussed their parents much since she'd come to live in Springfield and with good reason. She cleared her throat and glanced back up at her older sister.

"Listen, we both know what Papa is like. His whole rampage forbidding me to see you, telling me that you and Olivia would corrupt me with your evil sinful ways..." Leyla rolled her eyes and sighed. "Well, it was the straw that broke the camel's back, and I was out of there as soon as I could call you to see if your offer was still open. And the whole time Mama never said anything, y'know?"

Natalia sighed, knowing her mother's silences sometimes said more than someone yelling at the top of their lungs. Leyla reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her sister's ear and smiled gently.

"My point is Mama didn't disagree with him, but she also didn't say anything bad about you either. She just looked out the window or started baking cookies whenever the topic came up." Leyla's lip twitched, knowing that the baking thing seemed to be genetic if Natalia's own habits were any indication.

Natalia blinked, thinking about Leyla's words and suddenly feeling a little better. Maybe there was a glimmer of hope after all.

"Ma-mi! Ma-mi!" Francesca squeaked, bouncing and reaching out for her mother from Leyla's arms. Natalia's heart clenched, her baby's simple words choking her up. It still thrilled her to hear her baby girl call her that. It made her think of Rafe at that age, with the same dark hair and big eyes. And her heart clenched again as she thought of her baby boy so far away at this time of year. She pulled her daughter back into her arms for another hug before she'd have to leave.

The door chime sounded again and both women turned to see Jonathan enter with little Sarah not far behind him.

"Hey there." Leyla couldn't seem to stop the smile that spread across her face, Natalia noted.

"Hey." Jonathan waved as Sarah suddenly raced over to the two women and tugged shyly at Leyla's pant leg.

"Yes, Sarah?" Leyla glanced down at the small girl grinning widely at her.

"Hi," Sarah said.

Leyla and Natalia laughed

"Hi, Sarah. Are you ready to spend some time with me today?" Leyla asked, pleased when the

girl nodded excitedly and glanced over at the center's stuffed toy box.

"What am I? Chopped liver?" Jonathan asked, mock hurt as he put his hand to his chest as if wounded and pouted.

"I think your daddy needs a goodbye kiss before he heads off to work." Leyla smiled at the man's antics. Sarah looked over at her father, a little torn between going to play with the toys or going to see him but finally running over to him.

Jonathan lifted her tiny form up into his arms and gave her a squeaky kiss on her cheek.

"Goodbye, my little princess twinkle bottom," Jonathan murmured into her dark hair, smiling as she squeezed him harder.

"Bye, Daddy," Sarah said. "Have good day."

Jonathan chuckled and nodded his head, his baby sounding so grown up all of a sudden.

"You too, baby girl."

Natalia's heart warmed at the sight of Olivia's nephew so in love with his daughter. Jonathan was a good man and a good father. She glanced over at Leyla who was watching them with a huge smile on her face. Natalia's eyes narrowed, realizing that her sister was quite taken with the man as well.

"I've got to go," Jonathan said, slipping Sarah back to the ground and gently swatting her bottom as she made a beeline to the toy box. "Thanks, ladies. I'll see you later, Leyla."

They both waved as Jonathan left, the door barely clicking shut before Natalia turned to her sister.

"Well?"

Leyla rolled her eyes at Natalia, before pulling Francesca to her.

"Say goodbye to your nosey mami, Sweet Pea." Leyla shook her head. She had been enduring teasing on all fronts as she and Jonathan had been trying for weeks to set up a date, both their schedules and a bout of stomach flu making it harder than it should have been. Natalia just grinned at her and leaned closer to her wiggling daughter.

"Love you." Natalia ran her fingers through Francesca's dark hair and kissed a pudgy cheek in goodbye and then turned to drop another quick kiss to her sister's cheek too.

"Love you too. And if you play your cards right with that one, maybe I won't be the only one getting lucky this weekend." Natalia couldn't resist before turning to go.

Leyla's mouth opened and closed, a little shocked at her sister's words. Olivia was definitely rubbing off on her big sister.

"Natalia!"

Natalia's laughter followed her out of the daycare center.

Doris crushed out her cigarette, dropping it into the tin in her purse and popping a mint into her mouth before knocking on the door to Blake's home. Her excitement grew as she stood outside in the late afternoon air, waiting for the door to open.

"Hi there!" Blake smiled as opened the door and leaned against it, just staring at Doris looking all nervous and adorable. "Come on in before you freeze to death."

"Thanks" Doris grinned and stepped into the warmth of the home. Pulling her leather gloves off and tucking them into her long dark coat, she noticed the quiet in the normally bustling household these days. "Where are the kids?"

"Clarissa is at a sleepover at Emma's and my mother is taking the boys out for burgers and a movie. She wanted to spend some quality time with them before she flies out on Tuesday to meet up with Ed in California," Blake said happily. "So I'm all yours."

"Perfect." Doris smiled knowingly, having already recruited Holly Reade's help before starting this venture. Blake's mother was actually quite refreshing to deal with, seemingly cut from the same cloth as Olivia and herself. She wasn't exactly sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but Doris did know that she'd have to remember to keep an eye on the woman. For now though they were definitely starting out on the right foot together. Grinning like the cat that ate the canary, Doris bounced slightly on her toes, anxious to reveal her plans. "Actually, I have a surprise for you. An early Christmas present."

"Really? For me?" Blake's eyes widened, her smile warming Doris' heart, and a few other body parts.

"For you, really." Doris pulled a simple white envelope out and handed it over to the surprised woman. With a little shocked laugh Blake opened it, pulling out two theatre tickets.

"Oh, my God. Tickets to see *Wicked* at the Cadillac Palace Theatre in Chicago! It's been sold out for weeks." Blake gasped. "I wanted to see it when the musical was first here, but my life was crazy at the time and I could never make it. And I just loved the book."

Blake looked closer at the tickets; clearly they were two of the best seats in the house. A lot of thought and effort had gone into getting these and it touched her that her girlfriend had gone to such trouble. The most Frank had ever done when they were together was get two-for-one coupons for the Applebee's in the next town over. And she had treated that time, if she recalled it correctly.

"I know." Doris said softly, grinning. "I remember your mentioning it was one of your favorites."

Blake looked up at that, pleased that Doris remembered. The woman was constantly surprising her now that she had finally decided to give their relationship a chance to grow. Stepping closer, she leaned forward and gently kissed Doris' lips. Pulling slowly away, she let her fingers linger on the mayor's flushed cheek and let her feelings seep into her eyes as they continued to stare at each other, the moment stretching out pleurably.

"Thank you," Blake said quietly, still lost in Doris' eyes.

"You're more than welcome," Doris said just as softly. "Now we also have dinner reservations in Chicago, so if you're ready..." She offered a lopsided grin as Blake blinked at her before dashing to grab her winter coat and gloves from the closet. They headed out into the cold, both women ready for a night on the town.

The Fellowes Inn was a small, privately owned hotel that Olivia had booked them into for their little weekend getaway. She had told Natalia that it was a good opportunity to check out what similar types of hotels to the Beacon were like. Which was true, but in reality it was also one of the most romantic places she had stumbled across when looking for accommodations. Olivia wanted a haven for them this weekend before the hustle and bustle of Christmas and their wedding overtook all their time. Swiping the key card through the reader, Olivia pushed the heavy oak door open and entered the elegantly decorated suite.

"Wow, this is nice!" Natalia said from the doorway behind her. A small fireplace was along one wall and there was a large picture window to the right, overlooking the cityscape which was just starting to twinkle with lights. Both could be easily viewed from the large king sized bed that dominated one side of the room. A comfortable couch was nestled in front of the fireplace and a small dining area sat back to one side.

Their bags were already in the room, neatly placed near the chest of drawers. They had been brought up earlier when they had registered and dropped them off in the lobby before heading out to hit some of the shops that afternoon. Olivia dropped several shopping bags filled to the brim onto the plush-looking bed and sank down, enjoying the soft comfort it offered.

"My feet are killing me," She grumbled, kicking off her stylish winter boots with a thump as they landed on the carpeted floor.

"At least we were able to get a good start on our Christmas shopping," Natalia said sitting down beside her lover and lying back to join her on the mattress. "Oh, this is really nice."

Both women sighed happily.

"I don't want to move from this spot." Natalia sighed.

"Me neither," Olivia murmured before turning her head to take in the contours of the dark beauty's face. Rolling to her side she propped herself up on one elbow and glanced down at her lover. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Hmm..." Natalia tapped her lip and frowned, making a show of thinking hard. "I vaguely recall something this morning, but I had some water in my ears so I can't be sure..." She grinned up at Olivia, who was rolling her eyes.

"Why do I put up with this abuse?" Olivia murmured softly as she leaned over, dropping her lips ever closer to her intended target. She stared down at her lover's mouth, watching fascinated as Natalia moistened them with a slow lick of her lips.

"Poor Ms. Spencer, so hard done by." Natalia teased, running her right hand up and into thick honey-blonde hair. "Let me see if I can make it up to you." She gently tugged her partner closer into a slow tender kiss.

Pulling apart, they smiled at each other a moment before a small beep from Natalia's cell phone caught their attention, followed closely by a discreet chime from Olivia's BlackBerry.

"Where are your pills?" Natalia nuzzled along Olivia's ear, dropping a series of butterfly kisses there.

"In my makeup bag." Olivia kissed the tip of Natalia's nose gently, before lifting herself off of her lover and shifting away. Standing, she looked down at her fiancée wanting nothing more than to pounce on her seductive curves and never come out from under the covers. She sighed and checked her watch. It was getting late. "We should get dressed anyway. Don't want to keep your parents waiting."

Reluctantly, Olivia headed for their luggage as Natalia sat back up. Finding her pills, she grabbed them and made her way to the washroom. Watching the door close behind her, Natalia sighed.

“No, we don’t want to keep them waiting,” Natalia murmured, biting her lip, trying hard not to worry about what would happen tonight. Standing, she made her way over to the large window and stared out at the glittering lights of Chicago.

“Please, God. Give me strength…”

Act Two

The Cadillac Palace Theatre was gorgeous, decked out in all its old world glory and gilt, festively decorated for the holiday season on top of its usual opulence. The seats inside the theatre were plush and comfortable but that was hardly noticed as the audience sat with bated breath watching one of theatre’s greatest moments.

The stirring crescendo of the musical’s show-stopping song, *Defying Gravity*, grew in intensity as Elphaba, the green witch, rose up high above the stage, the tails of her long skirt flowing out and down to the ground. As the song ended, the lights suddenly went out, throwing the theatre into complete darkness. Thunderous applause burst forth from the audience immediately and the theatre house lights soon came up, indicating the start of the intermission.

“That was simply stunning,” Blake said, turning to Doris who was blinking from the sudden bright light. “The actress who plays the green witch is wonderful, but I would have loved to have seen Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth on Broadway. I have the soundtrack somewhere at home, I’m going to have to dig it out,” Blake said, flipping open the program to read some of the liner notes.

“Did you see them in *Glee*?” Doris asked. “Menzel was great as Rachel’s mother.”

“You watch *Glee*, too?” Blake glanced up, tilting her head slightly as she asked the question.

“Are you kidding? Sue Sylvester is my hero. I need to find me a tracksuit like that somewhere and wear it to the office one day before I leave for good. My image consultant would have a meltdown,” Doris joked as Blake laughed, pleased that they had something else in common. A comfortable silence fell as they just shyly stared at each other. Doris finally broke it, noticing the mass exodus had thinned a little. “Hey, would you like a glass of wine or something?”

“Sure, why don’t I come with you?” Blake reached down and grabbed her purse. “I’ll try to find the washrooms while you’re doing that.”

Together they followed the throng out of the seating area and towards a small kiosk set up to serve drinks. Finally, getting two glasses of white wine Doris made her way over to where they were going to meet again, finding Blake standing there perusing the play program. Her heart thumped a little faster at the look on the redhead’s face when she looked up to find her approaching.

“I’m not sure which was longer, the line up in the ladies washroom or the one at the bar,” Blake said, gladly taking a sip of her wine. “Dinner was lovely, Doris. How did you ever find that cute little restaurant?”

“An old friend who lives here recommended it to me.” Doris shifted a little closer, finding it hard to hear over the loud crowd swirling around them.

“How old a friend?” Blake frowned slightly as an irrational pang of jealousy suddenly shot through

her. She knew Doris had a robust love life before, in fact they both had. Actually most people in Springfield did, so much so that it seemed almost incestuous sometimes; but that wasn't the issue here. It was more that this mysterious friend was still in touch with Doris.

Doris caught the tone in Blake's voice and smiled softly. It was oddly sweet that Blake was being a little possessive of her. Reaching out, she ran her hand along the redhead's upper arm, trying to soothe any ruffled feathers that might be developing.

"Relax. We dated for awhile, years ago. It didn't work out but we stayed friends." Doris felt Blake shift closer, enjoying the affection. She reached up and tucked a stray strand of hair behind Blake's ear. "Anyway, she's started a therapy practice in Springfield and is in town a few days a week. We met up for lunch a few weeks ago at Terroni's down on Main Street, and she said it reminded her of the one we went to tonight."

The lights flicked off and back on again, signalling that the second act of the show was about to start. The crowd started to move around them as people started heading back to their seats.

"We should head back in." Setting their empty glasses on a nearby cart, Doris turned and shyly took Blake's hand, entwining their fingers. "After all, we need to find out what that wicked witch is up to."

"Indeed." Blake smiled warmly and squeezed Doris' hand, following her through the crowd.

The restaurant was busy, which wasn't surprising for the popular Chicago destination. It was a new hotspot, becoming known as a place for the rich and powerful to see and to be seen. Olivia had made the reservations with this in mind, wanting to impress Natalia's parents. She would never say as much to her partner, but she wanted to show the Riveras just how far the girl they had tossed to the curb had come.

Olivia realized that this was probably petty and that Natalia more than likely would have made her change the venue if she knew, but so what? If it did nothing more than to make Carmen and Hector Rivera feel off balance and out of their depth tonight, then it was worth it. Olivia wanted to make it very clear that they didn't want anything from the older couple, other than their simple presence in Natalia's life. And that was only because Natalia wished it.

"Olivia, they're here," Natalia murmured softly, an edge of nervousness to her voice. Olivia reached out and squeezed her partner's arm, the warm touch reassuring and comforting and just what was needed to settle her down.

"They're right on time." Glancing up from the menu she had been studying, Olivia watched the Riveras make their way to their table, following the hostess. Taking a sip of her ice water, Olivia watched Natalia rise from her seat and then did the same.

"Here we are. Rivera, table of four." The hostess smiled at the older couple and then quickly disappeared back to her station at the front door. Hector nodded his thanks to the girl and then held his wife's chair out for her as she sat, before they all settled down into their seats.

"I'm so glad you could meet us for dinner." Natalia smiled warmly at her parents.

"Well, we were certainly surprised to hear from you," Carmen said. Hector grunted in agreement, not really joining in the conversation as he looked around the restaurant.

"Nice place," he said grudgingly.

Olivia took another sip of her ice water and smiled as she noticed him recognize a relatively famous football player sitting three tables over. Score one for the home team.

“Yes, we’ve been meaning to check it out.” Olivia picked up her menu, subtly observing Natalia’s father sitting across the table from her. “Just to see if there is anything we can incorporate into the Beacon. Natalia is good at spotting what works and then adding it into our hotel business model.” She smiled softly at her lover, their eyes meeting and holding for a moment.

“How are the children?” Carmen asked, shifting in her seat, slightly uncomfortable with the tender look passing between the two women. Hector blinked and picked up his menu, quickly starting to look through it. His eyes nearly bugged out of his head as he noticed the prices.

Olivia moistened her lips and grinned to herself. Two points.

“They are doing great. Actually, Emma wanted me to give you this.” Natalia leaned over and pulled a red envelope out of her purse, handing it to her mother. She also took the opportunity to bring out a small photo album she had put together. “We have some Christmas presents for you both from the family too, and I wanted you to have this. It’s some more pictures of the kids and a few from Thanksgiving this year.”

“T-thank you.” Carmen blinked and reached out to take the album and card from her daughter. Natalia smile widely, watching as her mother opened it as her father continued to pretend to not be interested, all the while watching over the rim of his menu. The older woman paused on a shot of the girls, her thumb traced along Francesca’s wee face, as she lay fast asleep in Emma’s arms, holding her close on the couch, Shadow sitting by her legs. Carmen turned to another page, bringing it a little closer so she could see the shot better in the dim restaurant light.

“Is this Raphael? Oh, Hector, he looks just like Leo in this one,” Carmen said, flipping to the one of Rafe in his uniform, standing in a desert somewhere overseas. She leaned over and showed her husband, who finally put his menu down and paid attention.

“He’s a handsome boy.” Hector nodded in agreement, smiling softly at the picture of his grandson, obviously proud of his military service. “Your brother was pleased to know another family member had joined the service.” His smile dimmed as his thoughts turned to his eldest child. He handed the photo album back to his wife and tried to focus on Natalia’s words.

“How is Leo doing?” Natalia asked, knowing her brother was still struggling from what little information Leyla had been able to gather, but she was praying things were getting better on that front.

“He’s fine,” Hector said, suddenly frowning and sitting up a little straighter. Sticking his chin out a little, Natalia was struck at the familiar movement, recognizing a similar one in Francesca, when she didn’t get what she wanted. Hector ran a hand through his short dark hair and glanced over at his wife. “He is as well as can be expected, considering.”

Carmen sighed and closed the small album. Olivia watched both their movements, knowing there was more going on than they were willing to share.

“It’s been over a year since...” Carmen’s voice faded out slightly as she paused and then she met Olivia’s eyes, intensely staring at her. “Since his friends died in that horrible confrontation they had with the Taliban in Afghanistan. I don’t know, he’s just been so --”

“You worry too much woman. He just needs some time to adjust,” Hector said gruffly. “Anyone would be a little short and upset having to deal with everything he’s had on his plate.”

“And he is progressing with the artificial leg,” Carmen added, glancing at her husband who buried

his nose back into his menu.

Olivia and Natalia exchanged concerned looks, as thoughts of Rafe and the very real possibility the same could happen to him raced through their minds. It was a sad reality that many returning vets had to deal with the loss of limbs, not to mention the emotional and mental problems from seeing combat.

The tense moment was broken as their server arrived and took their drink order, promising to return for their dinner order shortly. In the meantime, Carmen slid open the envelope from Emma, pulling out the handmade Christmas card, smiling as gold and silver glitter spilled out everywhere. There was a drawing of the farmhouse on the front of the card, colorful lights along the front porch and the whole family standing in front, including Shadow and Leyla.

Inside Emma had written:

*To Gramma and Grampa Rivera
Feliz Navidad!
Love and hugs,
Emma, Francesca and Rafe*

Below that Natalia had signed her and Olivia's names as well, and at the last minute, Leyla had broken down and added hers too. Olivia noticed Carmen's eyes grow brighter as tears welled, clearly touched by the card.

"This is just lovely." Carmen turned to Olivia and then Natalia. "How is sweet little Emma? Is she still helping you cook, *mija*?"

"She can make *arroz con habichuelas* better than *Tia Jo*," Natalia said with maternal pride.

"That's not hard, though," Carmen chuckled, as Natalia grinned along, both women turning to fill Olivia in on the joke. "My sister is a horrible cook." Olivia nodded and smiled too. Hector cleared his throat and Carmen glanced over at her husband, taking in his disapproving stare.

The uncomfortable moment passed as their server arrived with their drinks and took their meal orders before disappearing again. The conversation quickly turned to more generic topics, covering everything from what was happening in the old neighborhood, to how Natalia's aunts and cousins were all doing and before anyone knew it their food had arrived.

Under the table, Olivia reached out her hand and found Natalia's cold fingers, squeezing them to silently communicate how happy she was that everything had been going relatively well so far. The hard part was still to come though, and they both knew it. Natalia glanced over at her lover and smiled, squeezing her hand back. No time like the present she supposed.

"I'm glad we could get together like this before Christmas, and I hope we can continue keeping in touch," Natalia started, biting her lower lip as she tried to find the right words. Her eyes met her mother's and then moved to lock with her father's eyes. "I-I also wanted you to know that Olivia and I are getting married on New Year's, and we wanted to personally invite you both to our wedding."

The sound of cutlery clattering and patrons talking around them suddenly seemed quite loud, filling the stunned silence caused by Natalia's words.

"*Querido Dios, Natalia no ves lo mal que es esto?*" Hector asked, incredulous. Did the girl not see how wrong this was?

"Hector," Carmen hissed as a warning for her husband, looking around the bustling restaurant to see if anyone had noticed his raised voice.

"¿Ha perdido el derecho de comentar en mi vida hace mucho tiempo." Natalia spat back at her father. Olivia struggled to keep up with her limited Spanish, making out something about Hector's losing the right to comment on her life long ago.

"This is your fault." Hector glared at Olivia, eyes glittering with anger and disgust. Olivia threw her napkin down, ready to go toe-to-toe with the old man if needed. In fact she'd enjoy just that.

"No, Papa. Just stop," Natalia argued, trying to defend herself and her choices against her father's ignorance and anger. "This is no one's *fault*. It's just who I am, who I have always been."

"It is a sin before God, and if you were a good Catholic, you would know that. The laws of man are not the same laws of God." Hector all but growled at his daughter. He knew he should have taken Natalia aside and tried to talk some sense into the girl. They had talked about it one weekend in the summer; Leo had even been ready to help him organize it, but Carmen had talked them all out of it, scolding them that interventions were for addicts not homosexuals.

It made Hector crazy that he could do nothing about it; that he couldn't control what was happening to his family. And now Leyla was living in that den of iniquity too, being exposed to who knows what. There was only one thing that hadn't been taken from him. He could still speak his mind and tonight there would be no stopping him. He straightened his shoulders and glared at Natalia. It just seemed like everything had gone downhill since she had become pregnant in the first place. He leaned forward, his fist hitting the table in frustration.

"You have been nothing but an embarrassment to this family and our good name."

Silence fell around the table, Carmen even looking slightly stunned at her husband's harsh words. Hector was far from finished though as he turned his attention to his daughter's manipulative lover.

"And you, some catch you are. All flash and talk, no real substance, throwing your money around, sniffing after my daughters like a bitch in heat when they could have real men to take care of them." Hector leaned forward, snarling at Olivia. "What of my little Leyla, have you corrupted her yet?"

Olivia's eyebrows rose and her mouth opened in disbelief and then snapped shut. A dormant, yet familiar, dark fury rose from the pit of her stomach and she took a breath, ready to put the man in his place.

"What did you just call me?"

Olivia felt Natalia's warm hand on her arm, pulling her focus from the nasty bitter man sitting across from her. Turning, their eyes locked; and she saw the pain lurking in her lover's dark eyes. Now was not the time to rip the man a new one, despite how very much she wanted to.

Natalia, however, was not finished, and turned to glare at her father. He had insulted her and the woman she loved and even managed to drag Leyla into it. She had known this was not going to go over well, but this was uncalled for.

"Debería haber sabido mejor que pensar que se preocupan por nada pero el padre de ti mismo," Natalia said to her father. She ran a hand through her hair in frustration. How did he always manage to turn these things into being all about him? "This has nothing to do with you, Papa. I don't even live in the same city as you, or interact with the family here. You took care of that long ago, didn't you? I thought you should hear it from me personally. I wanted to look you in the eye

and tell you in person that I am marrying a woman, a woman that I love with all my heart and soul. And I prayed that you might want to share in our lives, to once again be a part of my family, and that is why we are here tonight. To give you that opportunity." Natalia leaned forward, her heart breaking as she spoke, but she needed to say the words, to make it real. "Clearly you have decided to throw me and my loved ones away again. Can't you just for once be happy for me or is your heart really as small as your mind, old man?"

"*Vigile a su niño la lengua,*" Hector said in a low dangerous tone, staring hard at his daughter as he warned her to watch her tongue. Anger glittered in his eyes before he turned to glare at Olivia. It was bad enough Natalia had a child out of wedlock, now somehow this woman had turned his daughter into a degenerate. How could his own child go against the teachings of the Church. How could they mock all that they believed in by getting married? What had he done to deserve this? He just couldn't understand what they were thinking. He shook his head and stood. "Let's go, Carmen. I've had enough of this farce."

Hector stormed off without even a backward glance, quickly disappearing out the front of the restaurant as several patrons watched him go. Carmen sighed and stood, looking over at Olivia, her eyes narrowing as if in judgment and apparent disapproval.

Olivia lifted her chin, staring the older woman down. If she wanted a piece of them too, Olivia was more than ready to protect herself and the woman she loved. They glared at each other a moment longer before Carmen finally nodded, a small sad smile eventually gracing her pinched lips.

"Hurt her, and you will answer to me," Carmen said, quietly making herself crystal clear. Olivia frowned, swallowing hard as she nodded. Staring a moment longer, Carmen finally stepped closer to Natalia, reaching out to cup her flushed cheek, murmuring softly to her daughter.

"*Ser feliz mi pequeña.*"

Natalia's eyes welled with tears and she nodded. Her mother smiled, tenderly kissing her cheek. Moving away she slid the photo album and the card into the small gift bag Natalia had put their Christmas presents into and then turned to leave, dutifully following her husband from the restaurant.

Olivia watched the formidable woman go, sagging in her chair a little in relief, before turning to see how her lover was holding up.

"Are you okay, baby?" Olivia leaned slightly, trying to catch Natalia's eye. "I'm so sorry it didn't work out better."

"It was about how I expected it to go with my father; but Olivia, don't you see?" Natalia wiped a tear away. "That was as close to a blessing as we're going to get."

"Are you kidding?" Olivia frowned, confused. "A blessing? He hates me; they both do."

Natalia leaned forward and reached out, needing the contact with her lover, their connection grounding her, reassuring herself that this was what mattered, not her father's bitterness and anger.

"No, *querida*, I didn't mean from my father; he is as cold and lost in himself as he ever was. My mother though, she told me to be *happy*, Olivia." Natalia shook her head, smiling sadly. "I don't think she hates you. In fact, I think my mother likes you very much."

Olivia sighed softly, not exactly believing that was the case. She squeezed Natalia's hand, both women needing the comfort of the other.

"Now let's finish our meal." Natalia sniffed, wiping any remaining moisture from her eyes with her thumb. She refused to let her father's vitriol spoil everything. She would take her victories where she found them and tonight her mother had surprised her, pleasantly so. Pouring a little more wine into both their glasses, she tried to focus on the bright side of the night's events. Maybe there was hope all.

Friday night in Company was busy with the usual hustle and bustle of activity - waitresses running back and forth, families eating together in booths and a steady stream of customers dropping in to pick up their takeout orders. Leyla leaned against the polished wood countertop, waiting patiently for their order to come up. Buzz burgers were the popular choice by unanimous vote, handily beating out both pizza and tacos. Emma and Clarissa were laughing and teasing each other as they sat huddled together a few stools over, playing *Animal Planet: Emergency Vets* on Clarissa's little pink Nintendo DS. Leyla smiled warmly at the two of them happily playing away. After all, what girl wouldn't enjoy a game where you fixed sick animals?

Blinking slowly, Leyla started to relax and stifled a yawn. It had been a busy afternoon in the daycare center and she was more than ready to plop down in front of the big screen and watch *Karate Kid* for the zillionth time with the girls. Maybe she could even talk them into checking out some Christmas cartoons or something too. Surely the *Grinch* had to be running on some channel somewhere.

Leyla shivered as a cold draft from the doorway of the restaurant hit her and she turned just in time to watch someone tall, dark, and handsome come through the door.

"Well, hello," she muttered under her breath, watching as Jonathan pulled the zip down on his bomber jacket and shook some snow out of his dark, messy hair. Following close at his heels was his daughter, bundled and wrapped up in her winter clothes, looking very much like a mini pink version of the Michelin Man. Jonathan nodded as he noticed her sitting at the counter almost immediately, a grin spreading across his face as they made their way towards where she was sitting.

"Hey," Jonathan said as he pulled Sarah's scarf off of her, sending the girl spinning a little, giggling the whole time. Leyla watched shaking her head in disbelief.

"Jesus, can she even breathe in there?" Leyla raised an eyebrow and smirked at the tall man. He laughed and shook his head.

"Yeah, Lizzie can go a little crazy with the clothes, but I like to send the little munchkin back looking exactly as I got her," Jonathan said, smiling as Sarah finally noticed Emma and Clarissa a few chairs away and excitedly waddled over towards her friends.

"So you're dropping her to Lizzie and Bill for the weekend?" Leyla asked, watching as Emma hopped down and helped her younger cousin open her coat and start to explain what the game was that they were playing.

"Yeah, even with the new baby, Lizzie wants her little girl around and I think it's good for Sarah to get to know her baby brother. I don't want her to get spoiled, and pick up that only child attitude you hear about." Jonathan rubbed at the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. "Besides we were isolated from everyone for so long, it's important that she spend time with the rest of her family too."

"Family is important. You often don't realize how much until it's taken away," Leyla said sadly, trying not to dwell on her own messed up situation with her parents and their long estrangement

with Natalia. She wished she had been able to be there for Natalia when she was younger, or to have her sister around to talk about silly stupid things growing up, like makeup and boyfriends. She shook her head to try to get the sad thoughts from her mind.

Jonathan, meanwhile, had started to place his order with the waitress behind the bar. Leyla smiled softly. He was a good father, and she was impressed that he cared so much about how his daughter related to those around her. He could have easily turned into a paranoid bitter man, after hiding for all that time, wanting to protect his child. Instead of being overprotective though, Jonathan was quick to let his daughter experience the world around her.

Suddenly from behind them, they heard a shout and then a loud crash. Turning quickly both adults saw that Sarah had perhaps experienced just a little too much of the world around her, as the waitress coming quickly out of the kitchen had somehow missed the little pink blob and tripped right over her, the tray of food balanced on one hand crashing on the floor with Sarah and the waitress ending up tangled together in a heap on the floor.

Silence descended on the room and then an earth shattering wail started from the bottom of the pile. Sarah's scared cries were muffled slightly by winter clothing and the waitress lying across her.

"Oh, baby." Leyla was there in a flash, having the advantage over Jonathan by being just a touch closer to girl. She quickly moved the serving tray to one side and carefully navigated herself around broken plates and scattered bits of food to get to the child. Emma and Clarissa stood to one side, both girls transfixed by the spectacle of the whole thing.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Buzz shouted as he quickly made his way out of the kitchen, stopping in his tracks at the mess in the middle of his restaurant.

"She's gonna get in trouble now," Clarissa whispered, afraid of what her mother's boss would do to poor little Sarah.

"No, Leyla will protect her," Emma said back, confident in her aunt's ability to take care of things.

"Oh, no." Buzz murmured and quickly rushed to help his waitress up from the mess. He didn't even want to think about the paperwork he'd have to do if she was hurt on the job. Meanwhile, Leyla had finally lifted the crying girl up and into her arms, holding her close as she wept.

"Sshh, it's okay. You're okay." Leyla shifted Sarah's weight to her other arm, bouncing slightly to move her higher, as Sarah's little arms wrapped around her neck.

"Em...Emmm...Emma!!!" Sarah finally sobbed out, her bottom lip quivering. "Emma was going to get hurt an...an...an..."

"Breathe, baby. Slow deep breaths." Leyla ran circles across the child's back, to calm her down as Jonathan wrapped his strong arms around both of them. Finally, Sarah seemed to relax, and leaned into her, nuzzling into the crook of her neck.

"You know what, I think a trip to the little girl's room is in order, what do you say, sweetheart?" Leyla said as Sarah shyly nodded her agreement, wiping at her left eye. "We'll get you all cleaned up and you can tell us all what happened then. Okay?"

"Okay," Sarah said quietly. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay. It was just an accident." Jonathan's heart nearly broke at the sad look on his baby girl's face. Leyla nodded towards the washrooms and Jonathan watched as she and the three girls all traipsed off to the bathroom together, amazed at how easily she had handled the entire situation.

Buzz hustled out from the kitchen with a yellow bucket and a mop, and started to clean up the food. Sweeping up the broken plates and food into a garbage bag, he quickly slapped the mop down onto the tiles and started washing the slop up.

"Sorry Buzz, I'll pay for the damages," Jonathan said, but Buzz just waved him off.

"Don't even start, it was an accident and luckily only a few plates were broken." Buzz quickly splashed the mop back into the bucket, wrung it dry and threw it back down onto the floor for a second wipe down. "How's Sarah, did she get hurt?"

"No, she's just more scared by it all," Jonathan said sinking back down onto one of the stools by the counter. He wondered now if taking her to Lizzie's tonight was a good plan, maybe being somewhere safe and familiar would comfort her more after the accident.

"She probably thought the world was crashing down around her." Buzz dumped his mop back into the bucket and shook his head. "Poor little thing, I hope she'll be okay."

Glancing up both men were surprised to see Sarah suddenly come skipping out of the washroom, with Emma and Clarissa close behind. Leyla followed them out, and smiled as the waitress popped out of the kitchen, waving that her order was ready.

"I guess that kid of yours bounces back pretty well." Buzz thumped Jonathan on the back and smiled before disappearing back into his kitchen to look for his wet floor signage before someone else fell.

"Hey, we're up. I guess I'll see you guys later," Leyla said, brown bag in hand and the most delicious smells coming from inside.

"Um, listen. Are you interested in maybe going out tomorrow night?" Jonathan asked. "I know we've been trying to meet up, and I was only able to get Lizzie to confirm she wanted Sarah for the weekend this morning or I would have asked sooner..." Jonathan took a breath afraid he was rambling in his nervousness. Why was this part always so hard?

"Sure, I'd love to." Leyla smiled, zipping her jacket up. "Call me with the details." Bending down she kissed Sarah's head. "And you have a great time with your mom. I bet she'll love to hear all about how you saved Emma from getting run down by that waitress.

Sarah grinned and nodded her head. "I'm a super hero."

"You sure are, baby." Leyla stood and smiled, ruffling the fine dark hair. "Come on girls before our food gets too cold." The girls followed her to the door and she waved back at Jonathan and Sarah.

"I like Leyla, Daddy," Sarah said as her father picked her up into his arms.

"You do?" Jonathan said, as his daughter nodded her head vigorously. "Well, Daddy likes her too." His eyes followed the seductive curves of Leyla's form through the frosted window. Oh, yes, Daddy liked her a lot.

"They were so gay for each other," Doris said, taking a sip of her excellent merlot. The small pub was relatively close to the theatre. It had been snowing rather heavily as they exited the show, and Blake had suggested a beverage to warm them up a bit before heading back to Springfield. That had been an hour ago.

"You see lesbians everywhere." Blake rolled her eyes. "The witches were friends, not a couple."

"Give me a break. The whole thing is a love story between those two women." Doris snorted in disbelief. "Did we see the same show?"

"Apparently not." Blake stole a fry from Doris' plate popping it into her mouth.

"It's probably because the green witch wore a hat. It's the perfect disguise, every time," Doris mumbled to herself. "Hey!" She complained as Blake snagged another one, smiling as she merely stuck out her tongue in response.

"So anything new with Dinah's case?" Blake leaned back, watching Doris fidget, playing with a sugar packet on the tabletop. Doris sighed and shook her head.

"We got her out on bail no problem. I know Judge Garrison and his wife quite well, so I wasn't very worried about that, even if Philip hadn't stepped up with the funds. What we need to work on now is discrediting her confession. Mel has been poring over case studies to see if there is any precedent. So we'll see." Doris shrugged her shoulder and tossed the sugar packet back into its little holder with the other ones. She lifted her wine glass and swirled the dark red liquid a little before glancing over the rim to find Blake staring at her. "What?"

"Nothing," Blake said, smiling at the restless woman, who clearly needed a cigarette but was trying to hold back. "I have faith in all of you. I know you will take care of her as best you can." As her deceased husband Ross' daughter, Dinah was still family as far as Blake was concerned, even if they hadn't always got along. She tilted her head as Doris became quiet.

"I like this," Doris finally said, taking another sip of her wine. She looked up and met Blake's eyes, as the redhead just waited for her to elaborate. "I like spending time with you, doing things together. I value your friendship and trust, Blake."

Blake smiled and ran her hand along Doris' arm, stroking back and forth before tangling their fingers together on the tabletop.

"I owe you an apology too, I think," Doris continued. She had thought about this a lot since her date with Anna. She knew on some level that she had hurt Blake by going out with her ex-lover, and she didn't want that to linger between them. "My date with Anna Li..."

"You don't have to say anything." Blake shifted away, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, I do." Doris smiled sadly. What a confusing mess that had been, but at least she had figured out that Blake was what she wanted. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry if that hurt you. I knew you were interested in me, but I was afraid ..." Doris grew quiet, not finishing her thought.

"Afraid of what?" Blake glanced up. "Me?"

Doris moistened her lip and nodded.

"Afraid of messing up our friendship. I don't have a whole lot of friends, you know." Doris grinned, taking Blake's hand again. "But also I realized how much family was coming to mean to me. I need something more in my life than just some stranger in a bar. I need someone I can trust and who believes in me, too. Does that make sense at all?"

"It makes perfect sense to me." Blake grinned and nodded. "So consider your apology accepted."

Blake's cell phone chimed on the tabletop and she reached for it.

“Oh, it’s my mother.” Blake scrolled down to read the text as Doris took another swallow of her drink. “She says the roads are getting bad and is wondering when I’ll be home.”

Doris frowned and turned towards the window of the pub, noticing that the snow was still coming down pretty hard. Blake glanced up at the flat screen over the bar, a weather report scrolling along the bottom of the screen in flashing red.

“Oh, that doesn’t look good.” Doris turned to see what Blake was looking at. It looked like things were quite messy on the roads.

“We should probably get going. It’s a long enough drive back to Springfield, we don’t want to get stuck in the middle of all that.” Doris waved at their server to bring the bill. Before long, they both had their jackets on and were headed out of the pub and into the cold Chicago night.

The snow fell heavily around them as they slowly made their way to the underground parking lot where Doris’ car was.

“I had fun tonight. Thank you for my Christmas present,” Blake said, sliding her gloved hand into Doris’, both women enjoying the warmth the simple move had produced.

“You’re welcome. It was my pleasure.”

Blake pulled on Doris’ hand, bringing her closer. Their breath mingled, the white puffs swirling together before Blake moved nearer still, stopping a hairs breadth from sweet full lips. There would be no rushing Doris this time; she could be patient and would wait for the woman to come to her.

She wasn’t disappointed.

Their lips touched, gently at first, cold from the air and then warming as they pressed against each other. Around them big fluffy flakes fell, landing in their hair and on their coats; but they were completely oblivious. Slowly, they pulled apart, their eyes locking.

“The weather is getting worse; maybe we should stay in the city? Go back to Springfield tomorrow...” Doris let the decision rest on Blake’s shoulders. If they were going to take their relationship to the next level, she wanted it to be right for both of them.

“I-I...” Blake’s eyes widened, and then she blinked. This was it; did she want to take the next step? Was she really as ready as she thought to take a walk on the wild side, to take a chance with Doris? She looked deeper into Doris’ eyes and knew her answer. Decision made, she smiled and pressed her lips softly against hers once more.

“Hell, yes.”

Eleni wandered through the halls of police headquarters, the quiet sounds of the late shift echoing around her. She had finally finished her report for the coroner from a recent hit-and-run downtown and was just going to drop a copy in Frank’s internal mailbox when she noticed the lights were still shining brightly in his office.

Stepping into the open doorway, she tapped lightly and smiled as he looked up from his computer monitor.

“Hey, you’re here late,” Eleni said, walking into her ex-husband’s office.

“So are you.” Frank’s eyes travelled down the woman’s sleek form. She looked gorgeous even dishevelled and tired from a long day at work. “What’s that?”

“Hit-and-run report.” She dropped the folder on the Chief’s desk and plopped down into the chair opposite him. “We’re still waiting for paint analysis to come in, but we’ve got most of what you’ll need to help the investigation.”

“Okay, good.” Frank nodded as he started to flip through the file.

Her eyes dropped to the framed photo on Frank’s desk. Marina, Shayne and Henry were all smiling at the camera, the picture perfect little family, except it was a house of cards built on sand.

“We should talk about what we’re going to do,” Eleni said, regretting her words as a haunted look suddenly came over Frank’s face. “We can’t just sit on this. It’s your career that’s on the line too.”

“I know, I know,” Frank ran his hands through his dark hair, pulling the floppy locks out of his eyes. “I just need some time to think, to figure out what’s the best way to handle this.”

“Well, you can’t sweep it under the rug Frank. It affects too many people,” Eleni said sadly.

Frank leaned back in his leather chair and sighed as he stared up at the ceiling. It hurt too much to deal with Marina right now. His thoughts turned to his other daughter, and he smiled as he once again looked down to meet Eleni’s concerned gaze.

“Hey, would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow night? I’ve got Francesca for the weekend, and I know you both love spending time together.” Frank smiled hopefully. It would be the perfect opportunity to hash this out between the two of them and figure out a game plan. It would be great just to spend time with each other, like the good old days. “What do you say? I’ll make my famous spaghetti and meatballs.”

Eleni smiled softly, ready to decline the offer but hesitated. She remembered a particularly hot summer day and a *Lady and the Tramp* like moment on the rooftop of their old apartment building with Frank’s famous spaghetti and meatballs. Frank had been buff back then, his body one of the things that had attracted her to him. God, they had been so in love. It had been messy and sweaty and hot and she had found tomato sauce in the most surprising places the next day, but it had been such a good time. Grinning, she shrugged and made her decision.

“Sure, why not. It’s been a long time since I’ve tasted your meatballs,” she said as she stood, slowly making her way to the door again. “Now go home, before you make yourself sick.”

“Yes, dear,” Frank teased as he started to power down his computer. Standing he pulled his jacket from the back of his chair and flicked off his monitor. He laughed as she rolled her eyes and left.

“Good night, Frank,” Eleni called out as she disappeared down the hallway.

Shutting off his lights, Frank closed his office door and locked it before heading home. Whistling happily as he headed down the hall, the Chief was suddenly looking forward to a nice quiet weekend at home.

“This place reminds me of the Beacon,” Blake murmured a little nervously, sinking down onto the king sized bed. She glanced down as Doris’ hand traced along her leg. Doris had great legs

actually, toned with really nice thighs. Not that she'd noticed. Well, not much anyway. Blake swallowed hard and looked back up to meet Doris' amused eyes.

"You didn't hear a word I just said, did you?"

"Uhh..." Blake blinked, her mouth opening and closing as she struggled for what they had just been discussing.

"I said that I can see it." Doris looked around the room and then back at a pale looking Blake. "Hey, relax. We don't have to do anything. I just want to spend time with you. Okay?" Doris tucked a stray strand of hair behind Blake's ear.

"So much for all my bravado and research." Blake smiled softly and stood, making her way across the suite to look out the window at the swirling snowstorm outside. It matched the swirling emotions stirring deep inside. What if she didn't like it? What if Doris didn't like it, if she did something wrong or weird or who knows what...

"Hey, stop thinking so hard," Doris whispered softly, slowly standing herself and walking towards the redhead. She wrapped her arms around Blake, feeling her tremble ever so slightly. "Are you sure about this?"

In that instant she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this was it, that for all her blustering and teasing, this was what she wanted, who she wanted. The person she wanted to try to figure out how to build a life with. Everything else would work itself out. Taking a deep breath Blake shifted, and turned in Doris' arms.

"I don't want some character from a book or a play," Blake offered a lopsided grin. "I don't need someone who's worldly and knows all the tricks, or some caped crusader to save the day." She brought their joined hands up to her mouth and softly kissed them. "I just want you."

"God, Blake..." Doris murmured, her eyes closing, hot tears threatening to fall. "I want you, too." Opening her eyes again slowly, she found Blake staring at her; and she swallowed hard. The air suddenly seemed thick, filled with electricity.

Blake smiled before leaning forward and silencing Doris with an achingly tender kiss. Her arms slipped around Doris' waist before claiming the full lips over and over again with bruising kisses meant to chase all doubts from the other woman's mind. Pulling away slightly, her hands tangling into thick hair, she smiled up into the slightly dazed eyes before her. "And, for the record, I've never been more sure of anything."

Doris smiled softly, trailing the back of her fingers across Blake's flushed cheek, and then continued until they were buried in Blake's hair. Pulling her closer, she crushed their lips together possessively, claiming the redhead for her very own as they kissed.

Blake's eyes fluttered shut and she just felt. She felt the fullness of Doris' lips on hers, the gentle swipe of a tongue against her lower lip, the soft puff of air against her cheek as she sighed against her skin. A shiver ran down her spine, and it wasn't from nerves.

It was desire, pure and simple.

"You are so beautiful," Blake whispered. Doris stilled in her arms, as if she had said something wrong and fear rose in her mind, stirring her insecurities. "I-I'm sorry..."

Doris leaned back to look into her eyes and shook her head, placing one fingertip on Blake's plump lip to stop her from continuing. Her finger trailed down, slowly tickling its way across pale skin before moving to the buttons of her blouse. Slowly, she unbuttoned them, one by one

revealing glimpses of her flesh and her dark lace bra beneath.

Doris studied Blake, who was watching the movement of her hands intensely, before slowly glancing up to meet her gaze. She looked terrified and excited all at the same time, and Doris couldn't stop the smile that spread across her lips. Her expression became serious again, and she reached out to take Blake's hands in her own before turning them over and placing a gentle kiss into each palm.

"I want you to touch me, Blake," she said softly, before moving the redhead's hands to her body. Blake exhaled as she felt the warm skin, trembling slightly. "It's okay, there's no right or wrong, there's just the two of us." Doris moved their hands together across her heated flesh, bringing them slowly up to cup her breasts. The action parted her shirt completely and Blake gasped softly, enjoying the view.

"Doris..." Blake's voice was uncertain and a little breathy and probably more than a little horny. Doris grinned then and leaned forward to nibble a tender earlobe.

"Shhh, I know. I've got you." Doris placed butterfly kisses along the fine hair at her temple. She slid a finger under Blake's chin and tipped her face back up, their eyes locking, searching the depths of each other. "Just...touch me."

Tearing her eyes away, Blake glanced down to take in the deliciously tempting swell of her girlfriend's breasts covered by delicate lace, followed below that by the long planes of her stomach. She brushed tentatively with her thumbs, the movement causing Doris to gasp with pleasure, her nipples growing erect beneath the material, pressing against her. Squeezing ever so slightly, she wanted to explore more, so she dropped her hands to run over the ridges of her ribs. The slight shiver beneath her fingers gave her the confidence she needed to slide even lower, across her belly, swirling the tips of her fingers around her navel and along the waistband of her pants.

Doris moaned softly, the sound vibrating deep inside her chest as her blouse was pushed off her shoulders and down her arms, the material falling to the hotel floor with a whisper. Blake lowered her head and kissed her collarbone, before dipping even lower, her lips skimming across her stomach.

Blake suddenly noticed a hand in her hair, stroking gently at first and then clutching slightly as she swirled her tongue around the sensitive rim of her lover's navel before sucking gently. Pausing for a moment to take it all in, she pressed her cheek to Doris' smooth belly.

"You're so soft..." she whispered almost reverently. She heard Doris chuckle quietly, her stomach moving as she did. Blake smiled too, and let her fingers play across the ticklish skin, watching as it twitched under her slow movements. Finally, she moved back up the center of Doris' body, finding and capturing her lips once more. The kiss soon turned demanding, almost urgent. Pulling apart their eyes locked as they panted, trying to catch their breath.

Blake ran her hand back down to cup a lace covered breast, squeezing gently as she explored, feeling the nipple harden even more against her palm. Doris sucked in a breath and arched closer.

"I want you. All of you," Blake murmured, their eyes locking. "Teach me; show me how to touch you."

Blake just had time to register Doris' naughty smile before her lips once more captured and claimed. Slowly they undressed each other, with whispered words of encouragement and suggestions, eventually ending up tangled together on the bed. The feel of naked skin sliding and pressing against each other for the first time pulled a low moan from both women.

Blake raked her eyes down Doris' naked body, taking in the gentle curves and valleys, noting the passage of time on both their bodies. Instead of being worried about her looks for a change, she couldn't wait to explore her lover's body. Taking her sweet time, her mouth travelled along a long elegant neck and over full, lush breasts. She smiled to herself as an impatient Doris guided her hand to her sex, holding her tightly against her.

"God, you're so wet," Blake gasped, her fingers stroking through the heat of her lover's body, thrilling at the sound that was ripped from Doris' throat. She did that; she had made her lover cry out in passion. She was so responsive to her touch; it was a little overwhelming.

"So good," Doris rasped as Blake's weight settled on top her. "I knew you'd feel so, fucking, good. Oh, God!" She just caught Blake's grin of mischief as she felt herself slowly penetrated, filled intimately and claimed by her lover's touch. Doris bucked against her, gasping in surprise, lost on a wave of sensation, as Blake began to move. She was suddenly everywhere, sucking and nipping her way down her body, as if mapping it for future reference, all the while building a steady rhythm that she was helpless to do anything but follow along. She willingly remained trapped beneath her, writhing with need.

"Mine," Blake growled, as her partner's hips began to arch off the mattress to meet her thrust for thrust. She shifted, and added the extra strength of her thigh between her girlfriend's legs.

Doris made a small sound at the back of her throat, one that Blake definitely planned on hearing again someday, as she curled her fingers and found the spot that her lover couldn't resist. She made a sympathetic groan as Doris throbbed beneath her before claiming her mouth again, kissing her hard. Doris' body started to tense, building to her peak, her body straining to pull her lover deeper.

"Look at me," Blake murmured against kiss swollen lips, pleased as Doris' eyes snapped open at her soft request, desperately trying to focus on her words but clearly too near her release to speak. "I want to watch you come for me, baby."

Doris bucked against her hand, Blake's words driving her impossibly higher. All Doris could do was nod and gasp for more air before she was rewarded, her clit slowly circled by an insistent thumb. Their eyes locked and held, and Doris felt as if her very soul was exposed, overwhelmed by the woman making love to her. Her body suddenly responded to the intimacy and she came hard.

"God, Blake!" Doris cried out, her breathy cries echoing in her lover's ears as she thrashed against her and then slumped to the mattress in a twitchy, spent heap. Blake just laughed softly, pleased with herself, as she gently pulled herself from her lover's heat.

As her racing heart slowed, Doris blinked up at Blake, the redhead's indulgent smile warming something deep inside as she moved her hands along her body again. Blake snuggled closer, burrowing against her neck, as Doris reached up and put her arms around her, holding her tight and breathing her scent in. Her fingers lazily traced along the redhead's back, and she sighed happily content.

"I thought you said you hadn't done this before," Doris said, her voice a little raspy.

"Well, I have had sex before, and I know what I like so I just went with it. I'm a quick study, I guess," Blake said, suddenly a little self-conscious. "So, it was okay?"

Doris snorted and looked at her girlfriend. Was she serious? It was the best orgasm she'd had in years and it was only the first time the other woman had been up to bat. She was about to say as much when she saw the worry in Blake's eyes.

"It was perfect," Doris whispered, running the back of her knuckles along Blake's lips before pressing a soft kiss there. "You're perfect."

Kissing her cheeks and tracing along a delicately arching eyebrow, Doris felt her energy returning and moved to once again take Blake's lips, sinking deeper into her lover's mouth, their tongues dueling and playing together. She didn't even think Blake realized she had started to roll them over until her backside hit the sheets. As her weight settled between the redhead's legs, Doris quickly discovered just how ready she was for her.

Rolling her hips, Doris dragged her thigh against her lover's center, soft needy moans hitting her hard as she desperately began to explore her tempting body. Sweet kisses roamed across her flushed skin, fingers tickling and teasing her breasts to rock hard tips.

Blake's mind swirled with sensation, enjoying every moment. Making love with a woman was the same, and yet so very different. There was no rough stubble scratching against tender skin, no hard muscles, and other things, pressing against her. She didn't feel like she had to rush to try to keep up or worry about pleasuring her partner. There was absolutely no need to worry about getting pregnant, which was refreshing. Instead there was this incredible feeling of being taken care of, nurtured, aroused and tormented and made to feel like she was the center of Doris' universe.

They took their time, slowly building the desire. Kissing and cuddling had helped to settle her nerves, but Blake was becoming impatient. What she craved now was Doris's touch to sooth her soul.

"You are so amazing," Doris whispered into the darkness, before moving along Blake's torso, trailing fingers tickling along soft breasts, palms rolling against stiff nipples. Blake arched into the warm touch, wanting more.

Doris finally seemed to take the hint, her hand wandering down to where her lover's legs met, finding her folds swollen and slick, Blake shifting to spread herself a little wider for her. Happily, she teased the stiff clit with the pad of her thumb, grinning indulgently as Blake arched up to meet her, gasping as if trying to catch a deep breath, followed by thick moans of pleasure.

"Please..." Blake whispered on an exhale, slow and steady. She felt everything so intensely, responding so subtly to Doris' sure touch, her body inviting her with every movement. They both groaned with pleasure as Doris pressed deeply into her, their bodies dancing back and forth together.

Blake arms snaked up around Doris' neck, as if needing to feel even closer. Picking up the tempo of her thrusts, she felt Doris angle deeper, panting desperately into her ear, rocking in and out of her harder. Before she knew it, she felt her body tighten, clenching greedily around Doris' buried fingers. Her back arched and finally Blake came hard, releasing a deep guttural cry as she shuddered against her.

Tangled together in a heap, exhausted and spent, they kissed and nuzzled each other softly, their thundering heartbeats slowing. Doris shifted her larger frame to one side, keeping Blake close as she quieted in her arms. Holding each other, they curled up together in the soft blankets, touching softly. They lay breathing for a bit, gathering strength and comfort from each other.

Doris ran the pad of her thumb across full lips and dipped her head to kiss her lover once more. Blake was so damn beautiful like this, all carefree and happy, that it made her ache inside.

"Sleep for a while now," Doris murmured, as Blake's eyes started to droop. Reaching out, she pulled the heavy quilt from the bottom of the bed and dragged it over the top of them. Finally

settled down, Blake wrapped herself around her and nuzzled into the crook of her neck, sighing happily. Doris ran her fingers slowly through Blake's hair and watched her fall asleep, the simple pleasure filling a hole that she didn't even know had existed inside.

Outside the window, big happy flakes fell slowly to the ground...

Several hours later, Blake stretched and reached out in the darkness, her hand grasping along the hotel nightstand until she found what she had been looking for. Grabbing Doris' cigarettes and lighter she rolled back under the covers, grinning as she heard her new lover groan and stretch beside her. Doris pushed the blanket down and snuggled closer, dropping soft butterfly kisses along Blake's shoulder.

"Doin'?"

Blake shivered at the soft touch of her lover's lips sliding along her skin, distracting her. Slipping a cigarette out of the pack, she flicked the disposable lighter a few times until a flame sparked to life. Bringing it to the tip of the cigarette, she inhaled deeply as the tobacco and paper caught, bringing the smoke into her lungs and feeling the rush of nicotine hit her system. Exhaling slowly, Blake sank deeper into the comfort of her lover's embrace.

"God, I needed that..."

"What the hell? Since when do you smoke?" Doris frowned, stealing the cigarette from Blake's mouth and staring at her like she had grown a second head. Popping the cigarette between her own lips she took a deep drag on it herself as Blake grinned beside her.

"Well, technically for two weeks in high school. My boyfriend smoked, and so I thought I'd be cool too but luckily I didn't get hooked, and then we broke up so I stopped." Blake trailed her fingers lazily through Doris' hair, straightening the tousled locks a little bit. "I know I give you a hard time about it, and I do think you should stop, but sometimes though, when the mood strikes, I'll light one up if I've been drinking a lot or after really good sex..." Blake nipped playfully at Doris' earlobe, enjoying the shiver it caused in her lover.

Doris snorted and shook her head as her lover chuckled softly.

"You constantly surprise me, Marler."

"Good." Blake chuckled sleepily and snuggled closer, her eyes getting droopy with every passing second. Yawning, she gave up the fight to stay awake. "Just don't tell my mother about the smoking, 'kay? She'd kill me..."

Doris watched as Blake drifted off to sleep snuggled up tight next to her, as she finished her cigarette.

"Don't worry. All your secrets are safe with me."

Act Three

Saturday morning arrived bright and early and after a lazy morning of snuggling in bed and a wonderful breakfast in their suite, it was time to hit the stores. Before they knew it, lunch had also come and gone. Finally, they had exhausted the usual shopping centers around Chicago.

"I think this is the place here," Olivia said as she slowly drove down a relatively busy Chicago

street. They had decided to explore Boystown last, taking their time to experience what it was like in the well-known Chicago gay district. Olivia pulled the folded map she'd printed off to find Miss Kitty's, the adult sex shop that they had been checking out online and seemed to have a wide selection for them to look at.

Natalia kept her eyes peeled for a parking spot and soon they were out in the cold afternoon, walking down the street. Several couples walked past, hand in hand, walking various dogs or simply wrapped up in each other. Olivia smiled and reached down for Natalia's hand, feeling like she was suddenly free to show affection in public for her partner. A little shy about it at first, Natalia straightened her shoulders and smiled back at her lover, oddly touched as Olivia slipped both their hands into the pocket of her long jacket, keeping her warm.

Pushing the door open to the cheerfully decorated store, with rainbow flags and Christmas lights everywhere, they stepped inside Miss Kitty's. Olivia nodded as she glanced around the tastefully designed store, which was certainly not hurting for customers. It wasn't at all like the store she'd been to in Springfield. That was more a lingerie and dress store with a naughty back room for toys and such.

Behind the cash register was a kindly-looking older woman with spiky short hair, who nodded at them as they entered and then went back to helping the next customer who walked up to the counter. Natalia started to relax a little. She had entered a sex shop and hadn't been struck down by lightning, so far so good.

"How are you holding up?" Olivia murmured as she browsed along a shelf, looking at some bumper stickers and dream-catchers with various slogans and rainbow motifs.

"I'm good. How about you?" Natalia glanced at the back of the store, seeing that it was one of the more popular areas of the store. And most likely where they would find what they were really looking for.

"Oh, you know me." Olivia blinked as she came across a rack of collars and leather vests. Her mind immediately pictured Natalia standing in their bedroom in black high heels, a thong and a leather vest, slowly licking her lips as she snapped a collar tight around her throat. Smirking to herself, she took a moment to enjoy the wave of heat that flowed through her at the thought. Putting a collar back on its hook, she cleared her throat self-consciously. "I'm cool as a cucumber."

Wandering deeper into the store, they both started to check out some of the other items on display as they slowly made their way to the back as they looked at some clothing. Natalia made a bee-line for the book section as soon as she discovered it. Olivia lost her in the crowd after that.

Pausing at a table display, Olivia smiled and picked up a familiar silver box. It was still pretty heavy just as she recalled. Suddenly, a very familiar voice spoke from behind her.

"Olivia?"

Olivia's eyes widened as she dropped the box back onto the table as if it had burned her.

"This can't be happening to me again," she muttered under her breath, looking over her shoulder to find a smiling Blake Marler standing there.

Frank pulled onto the gravel driveway of the little farmhouse and quickly parked his car beside a boring looking rental car. He was a little curious about whose car that could be, especially with Edmund and his henchmen still out there. Carefully, he made his way to the back door of the

small house and turned the handle, entering the home, just like he always used to. Walking into the kitchen, Frank found Emma busily helping to prepare something along one counter, her iPod blaring away as she worked.

Tapping the girl on the shoulder, Frank was stunned that Emma yelled and practically jumped out of her skin with fright. Before he knew it, Emma spun low, her leg pushing out as she kicked Frank's feet out from under him. Losing his balance, he wobbled for a moment almost catching himself and then he fell, landing soundly on his ass. He didn't even have a second to move, as Shadow came rushing out growling at him, ready to protect her family.

Holly Reade and Clarissa came running in; Holly just barely keeping her laughter inside. "There's this wonderful invention called a doorbell Frank. Maybe you should try it sometime."

Frank glared at his ex-girlfriend's mom, a woman who still scared the crap out of him.

"Oh my gosh Uncle Frank, I'm so sorry," Emma apologized worried that she had hurt the old man. Shadow continued to circle him, her fur on edge as she sensed something wasn't quite right about the man.

"Don't worry about it, Emma." Frank rubbed his ass, just knowing there was going to be a bruise there by that night. "You've got some good moves there."

"Miss Li is a great teacher," Clarissa spoke up, smiling at Emma. "I hope she'll let me come with Emma soon too."

"Looks like you might have some new recruits for the force, Frank," Holly said, pouring herself another cup of coffee from the carafe. "Lord knows, it needs all the help it can get."

Frank glared at her. He never did like the old curmudgeon anymore than she liked him. Luckily, Frank heard the happy giggle of his daughter and sure enough, he turned just as Leyla came into the room with Francesca in her arms.

"Pa-pi!" Francesca squiggled in Leyla's arms, reaching out to her father.

Frank sighed and took his baby girl into his arms. At least someone around here was happy to see him.

"Blake?" Olivia turned in disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

"I love this store." Blake came closer, picking up another vibrator from the sale table. "This stuff is great; in fact, they have more in the back."

"Y'know, we really have to stop meeting like this." Olivia blinked, convinced she was having a serious flashback. Over Blake's shoulder, she saw Doris and Natalia making their way towards them, her lover clearly blushing at something that had been said.

"No." Natalia shook her head, trying to make the other woman understand. "I was just reading and trying to figure out what the..."

"That's okay, really. There's no need to be embarrassed. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do." Doris smirked, her smile growing wider as they joined Blake and Olivia. She locked eyes with Olivia, enjoying this little reunion immensely. "Found her checking out the *Joys of Lesbian Sex* book. I think I know what Santa's going to be sticking in her stocking this year, the gift that keeps on giving." Blake swatted Doris on the arm, as they both started to giggle.

"What are you two doing here?" Olivia asked, trying to change the topic before Natalia blushed to death before their very eyes. She took note of how closely the two women were standing. "I thought the play was last night."

"It was." Doris bounced a little and slipped her arm around Blake's waist, pulling her closer. "We ended up staying over, the weather was a little messy for driving, and Blake's mom was home with the boys so..."

Olivia exchanged a glance with Natalia, raising an eyebrow at this latest development. It was a big step for both women to finally take. Natalia's smile widened as she realized what had happened, and she squeezed Blake's arm, happy for her friend.

"I had suggested that we should do some shopping before heading home, and I always visit Miss Kitty's if I have time," Blake said, leaning closer to Natalia. "The owner's brother is one of my better selling mystery authors."

"Come on, girls. Time's a'wastin' here," Doris said starting to herd the group towards the back room. She didn't want to miss this for the world. Blake, meanwhile, grabbed Natalia's arm and started walking straight for the back.

"They've got these great dildos. There's this one that glows in the dark that's a lot of fun..." Blake nattered on, oblivious to Natalia's look of panic.

Natalia coughed slightly and glanced back over her shoulder at Olivia, silently pleading for help, before she was dragged by Blake through a small knot of customers and disappeared from sight.

"Just don't," Olivia said to a smirking Doris, her mouth open and ready to comment.

"Oh, come on, this will be fun. I'm just a little surprised to find you looking at toys. I figured little Miss Pure-As-The-Driven-Snow would have refused to even set foot in a place like this," Doris said as they slowly made their way through the store.

"Actually it was kind of Natalia's suggestion. She wants to be a little more...adventurous." Olivia grinned, thinking that she was a very lucky woman indeed.

Doris and Olivia stepped into the back room just in time to see Natalia's face

"It's like a buffet," Blake rambled on as they browsed through all the various sizes and shapes on display.

"I guess the question is, just how big is your appetite," Natalia teased back, as she reached out and tentatively touched a purple silicon one, very large and would be relatively realistic looking, if it wasn't purple. To one side was displayed some very pretty glass dildos, almost works of art. "Glass? Wouldn't that break?"

Olivia stepped forward at that point, slipping her arms around Natalia's waist and kissing her temple.

"Find anything you like, sweetheart?" Olivia asked softly. Natalia just shrugged and leaned back into her lover's warmth. "You know, even if we don't find anything, that's okay. You're my ultimate sex toy anyway," Olivia said, nipping lightly on Natalia's earlobe. Natalia's beaming smile was reward enough for all the torment she was enduring today.

Blake walked up beside them, with a red cock in her hand. Olivia wondered which level of hell they had managed to get trapped in.

"Olivia, doesn't this remind you of the one we found in Springfield last year." Blake smiled, turning the stiff piece around in her hand to judge the girth of it.

Natalia stilled in her arms as Olivia closed her eyes.

"You've gone toy shopping before? With Blake?"

"Uhm...I can explain." Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to find the right words, a blush starting to form on her cheeks.

Natalia turned around and waited, arms crossed, her foot tapping on the floor.

"Y'know I always thought it was a little weird you'd never tried one before," Doris said.

"So not helping here, Wolfe," Olivia growled at her friend, who merely smirked at her.

"You mean you haven't seen the red one yet?" Blake asked Natalia, a little incredulous. "It was a real nice one, and at least this big..." She stretched her hands out wide, just as Doris reached out and grabbed it, interrupting her train of thought.

"Sorry we gotta go." Doris pulled the redhead away behind her, before she was killed in the crossfire. "Oh, look a purple one with two heads! Come on." Blake wisely grabbed Doris' hand and fled before things got ugly.

"And while you're at it, just where is this infamous red model that the two of you bought together?" Natalia tilted her head, waiting for an answer. Olivia hung her head in defeat, and started to explain the situation.

"We didn't buy it together, I bought it. For me to use. All by myself. And it's not that I haven't dabbled with them on occasion, but I was so...on edge and you smelled so damn good... and then the whole yoga downward dog thing just tipped me over the edge." Olivia fidgeted and sighed as she turned to her lover and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, before looking her in the eye to explain. "What I really wanted was you, so very badly. But I got flustered when I ran into Blake at the toy store and then...well, I ended up tossing the damn thing out. I didn't want a poor substitute for the real thing, and I decided you were worth the wait. Every. Agonizing. Second."

Natalia smiled softly at her partner's words, and gently leaned in to kiss her sweet lips.

"Forgiven?" Olivia asked quietly. She didn't mean to upset her partner.

"Nothing to forgive," Natalia said, laying her hand on Olivia's and she meant it. She had just enjoyed yanking Olivia's chain, and the added bonus of actually getting her to blush over something, was priceless.

"You know, we don't have to do this if it's too much. We could see if Philip's library is available for a little naughty librarian action again, or if I have the office sound proofed and we could..." Olivia grinned as Natalia swatted her on the shoulder.

"Sound proofing? I am not that loud." Natalia grinned at their old joke, both of them knowing that she was in fact a little vocal in the bedroom at times. "No, I think I've found something we'll both enjoy on the honeymoon. It'll be the gift that keeps on giving." Natalia smirked, enjoying herself. "Besides I've already found the perfect something. You," Natalia said softly, their eyes meeting and Olivia fell in love all over again.

"However, I would like to pick up that big purple one Blake and I were looking at," Natalia shifted closer, whispering in her lover's ear. "Because I can't wait to fuck your brains out with it..."

Natalia smiled and patted Olivia's cheek before moving away to make their purchase. Olivia blinked, stunned for a moment as her mind flooded with images before she finally rushed to catch up to her lover.

"Will that be Visa, MasterCard or American Express?"

The date was going well, as they sat at a small little sushi place on the outskirts of town where they eventually decided to meet. Leyla swirled her white wine enjoying some dessert and the stories Jonathan was telling of his life back on San Cristobel.

"So my mom looks at Auntie O and just pushes the pumpkin pie, whip cream and all right into her face." Jonathan laughed at the memory.

"Oh boy, did your mother survive that unscathed?" Leyla knew that Olivia was a pussy cat most days, but certainly still had her claws and knew how to use them. Her sister Marissa sounded a little similar to Olivia in some ways. Leyla would have liked to have met her.

"Yeah, she and Olivia were fine. That was the way they were with each other. They would argue like cats and dogs one minute, get it out of their systems and be the best of friends the next. She really missed Olivia when she moved to America from the islands." Jonathan popped the last bit of his sushi into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "I did too."

"The place sounds lovely. Maybe I can go with Natalia and Olivia the next time the family all goes." Leyla caught the waiter's attention and ordered a coffee. "We never got to travel much when I was kid. There was no money for it, but also my dad was a hard ass. My mother hid in her Church commitments and my father tried to control us all with an iron fist."

"So living with Natalia must be really big change for you." Jonathan leaned forward. "Not only are you free to do as you wish, but you get to know her better."

Leyla smiled thinking of how Natalia's return into their lives had signalled her new beginning, a fresh start that she was going to grab onto and take. She didn't mind hard work and Natalia was a good person, despite everything her father and brother had spouted at her all those years.

"I sometimes think that because of Natalia's teenage pregnancy and her being thrown out, that's why my father was so over protective of me. For a long time I was very angry with Natalia, for leaving me behind. Now though I see that she had no choice in the matter, just like I had no choices while I lived under their roof."

Leyla leaned forward and took a sip of her wine, deciding now was as good a time as any to bring it up, and hopefully it wouldn't scare the handsome man sitting across from her away.

"I just want to be upfront with you. I'm not looking for any sort of serious commitment or relationship. Don't get me wrong, I love Sarah and enjoy spending time with her so it's not that, and I'm not scared of it. With my father and brother being so over protective, I've never really had a chance to date much. So I'm taking the time now to go out and meet people and see what's out there." She studied his face to figure out what he was thinking, hoping some of it might show in his expression.

Suddenly, Jonathan smiled, almost relieved. "I know exactly what you're saying. I was in isolation

for so long, hiding with Sarah that I almost forgot what dating is all about. I'm not looking for anything serious either. Just someone to have a good time with and maybe a little bit more."

Leyla leaned back in her chair. They apparently were both on the same track.

"So friends with benefits and we'll see where we go from there?" Leyla asked, just wanting to be clear.

Jonathan grinned and nodded, as he flagged the server for their bill.

"Feel like dancing?"

Leyla smiled and nodded her head enthusiastically. This looked like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

A warm cozy fire crackled in the small fireplace in the Fellowes hotel suite. Olivia sat on the bed with her laptop open, searching the Internet, while Natalia was reading a lesbian romance novel she'd picked up at Miss Kitty's. Safely tucked away in their bag was their special purchase from that afternoon. Once the owner of the store found out that they were friends with Blake the woman was thrilled and really helped them get what they needed. They would be heading back to Springfield with a training dvd, instructions and the necessary paraphernalia. She even threw in a packet of edible undies for free when she found out it was for their honeymoon.

Natalia smiled, thinking of how many ways she was going to kill Blake for embarrassing her so thoroughly today. A chime from the laptop caught her attention and Olivia's happy laugh.

"Ok, I think we've got our hotel in Paris booked for Valentine's weekend," Olivia said from the bed, doing a little seated happy dance with her arms above her head.

Natalia grinned. She had loved the idea of going to Paris for their honeymoon, but the timing of their wedding and getting the Beacon under control while they were gone would be tricky at New Year's. So the honeymoon night would be in a suite at the Beacon and then they would take a trip to France over Valentine's weekend.

"Any luck on the flights yet?" Natalia asked, opening her book up again and starting to get lost in the story while trying to listen to her partner.

"No, not yet, but it's still early to book flights and get a good deal. "Olivia glanced up from her screen and took in the sight of her lover, lounging peacefully in the wingback chair by the fireplace. The amber light from the fire made her skin glow with an even darker tan. God, she was beautiful. She felt a familiar tightening in her lower regions, the sharp pangs of desire washing over her.

Natalia glanced up in time to see the hungry look in her partner's eyes. She could almost sense that she was about to be ravished at any moment. Smiling seductively, she waited as Olivia closed her laptop and put it on the nightstand beside the bed before making her way across the room to her side.

Running her fingers through the soft dark hair, Olivia sighed softly and dipped her head to place the first of many kisses on the woman's lips.

On the nightstand a cell phone rang, the first few notes of *Tie a Yellow Ribbon* floated through the air. That ringtone was used for only one person in the family.

Groaning as she pulled away, Natalia walked over to the phone and answered it, "Hi Rafe. How are you, baby?" Natalia's voice always seemed to change when she spoke with her son. Olivia watched her sink down onto the thick mattress and start to speak with him, her face always so happy to have any kind of contact with him as he was stationed overseas.

Olivia had a bad feeling about getting Rafe permission to come to their wedding. The military had been dragging their feet about letting him go, and she was beginning to think it wouldn't happen.

"Oh, Rafe. No." Natalia frowned at the obvious bad news. She nodded again, not that he could see her, but it was a habit she had. "Ok, we'll definitely save you some wedding cake."

Olivia moved over to the bed and lay down beside her lover, knowing that this was going to hurt Natalia that her son would miss her wedding.

"So soon? Ok, thanks for calling. I love you." Natalia barely had the phone snapped closed before the tears started to fall.

"I'm sorry, honey." Olivia opened her arms as Natalia rolled into her embrace, snuggling together. "Well, we knew it was a long shot. He's overseas and it's hard to get permission to come home for Christmas and a wedding."

"It still sucks." Natalia pressed her nose into the crook on Olivia's neck, inhaling deeply, trying to calm herself down. "I just wanted all my babies here with me..."

Stroking long fingers through the dark hair, Olivia tried to comfort her lover as best as possible, rocking her softly as she cried.

The evening had started out so well, with little Francesca and Eleni playing in the living room as Frank toiled away in the kitchen making meatballs. Dinner was excellent and Francesca was a good girl all evening, even settling down to sleep quickly.

The downhill slide had started with a simple question from Eleni, asking if Mallet had seen Marina yet. It had all spiralled away from there, with Frank getting his anger up about how if Mallet had just stayed with Marina, none of this would be happening. Eleni, of course, put the blame squarely on Marina herself.

"Damn it, Eleni. She's our daughter," Frank sputtered, his arms flailing at his sides.

"I know, Frank. And we will support her and love her regardless, but we can't just sweep it under the rug and let her get away with it," Eleni said extremely calmly, almost resigned to the fact that this did not look good for Marina. Not at all. "We each took an oath to uphold the law. And you are the Chief of Police, for Christ's sake. Grow a set."

Frank looked a little shocked at her and then spun away to pace.

"I'm also her father, first and foremost." Frank looked away, staring out his small apartment window, hands thrust into his pockets as he pouted. "And you're her mother. How can you be so heartless?"

"I'm not. My heart is shattering as surely as I am standing here beside you." Eleni's eyes began to shine with unshed tears. "But we also taught her right from wrong, and if she has chosen the wrong side and has broken the law, then we must follow our beliefs and uphold the law." Eleni's lip trembled, and before she knew it, she was crying.

Frank moved closer, pulling her into a hug taking comfort that he wasn't alone in this. Holding her close, he dropped soft kisses to her forehead, tears flowing from his own eyes. Looking up, Eleni reached out and captured a tear on her fingertip. Frank swallowed hard, and he hesitated a moment before dipping his head and gently kissing his ex-wife.

Eleni shifted in his arms, a little surprised by the sudden display of affection. She knew she should pull away, that this was probably not the smartest idea either of them had had. And yet she stayed right where she was, kissing him back.

Reaching between them, Eleni lifted her hand and slowly began to unbutton her blouse. Frank wiped the tears still welling in her eyes away with his thumbs before tracing along her cheek to rub the pad of his thumb across her full lips. She glanced down and reached for his shirt, starting to tug his shirt out of his pants and working his belt loose.

"Eleni, are you sure?" Frank asked softly.

Eleni smiled and nodded. "Tonight, I need the father of my child in my arms, reminding me that there is still hope out there and that only love can save the world."

Dipping his head, Frank nodded and smiled gently, before capturing her full soft lips and escaping together into the night.

Only love could save the world, indeed.

Act Four

Sunday morning in the Marler household was frantic like usual. Standing in the kitchen, Blake was making scrambled eggs and bacon while her mother was putting on the coffee.

"You know, I'm glad you talked me into coming back for Christmas and the wedding," Holly said, tossing in several scoops of coffee into the filter and sliding the compartment closed. Blake licked some milk from her thumb and nodded in agreement.

"Me too, mother. With the boys home again, it will be nice to have you here too. A big family Christmas." Blake broke several eggs into a bowl and started to mix in the milk.

"And depending if Ed can sell his place in California quickly, we may even have a Springfield home of our own by then." Holly poured water into the machine and hit the little red button to start it going. "Ed was talking about moving back here since so many of our family members are living here again. We could easily make Springfield our home base while we continue to travel the world."

Upstairs there was a loud thump and then silence, followed closely by footsteps thundering down the hallway and down the stairs. The twins dashed into the kitchen and skidded to a stop.

"Um...we didn't do it," The boys said almost in unison.

Blake continued to stir her egg mixture into the heated pan and then turned to the boys.

"If you broke something or knocked something over then clean it up. If you two are old enough to get into enough mischief to get kicked out of school, then you are old enough to clean up after yourselves. Now, go on, scoot," Blake grumped. She'd had enough of their antics and this was going to have to stop. Poor little Clarissa didn't feel at home in her own house.

The twins looked at each other and turned, reluctantly heading back upstairs to take care of whatever the problem was.

"I'll be up in fifteen minutes to check on what happened. So get a move on," Blake said gruffly, pleased as the boys picked up their pace dashing back upstairs. Holly pulled two mugs out of the cupboard and scooped two sugars into hers and one into Blake's.

"Those boys remind me of you, Blake, when you were their age. You were always getting into adventures, with a nose for trouble." Holly poured out the coffee and added some cream to both mugs, stirring before handing Blake her mug. "I think you'll do just fine with them. You're ready, I can see that now. And maybe with a little help along the way..."

Both women glanced up as Doris tapped lightly on the kitchen window and waved before making her way past to the front of the house.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind. I asked Doris to join us for breakfast." Holly's eyes twinkled with mischief as Blake's narrowed.

"I see where I get the nose for trouble from..." Blake grumped but slid an arm around her mother's shoulders and smiled, pleased that her mother and Doris seemed to get along.

"You know, I never did like that Frank Cooper sniffing around you..." Holly couldn't resist one last poke before dashing out of the kitchen to let Doris in.

"Mother!"

Holly's laughter floated back through the house, warming Blake's heart. Her house was quickly becoming a home.

Buzz and Lillian sank down into the corner booth at Company, surprised to see Eleni there, with little Francesca in her arms.

"Hello there," Lillian said warmly. "Did you kidnap Francesca?"

"Nope." Eleni laughed and poked the girl's belly making her giggle and squirm. "Somebody's daddy went to go get the highchair from the storage room.

"I'll go see if he needs a hand," Buzz grumbled, half terrified of what kind of mess his son would leave the storage room in after hunting for the chair.

It didn't take long and both men returned with the high chair, with Frank slipping the baby into it easily before sliding into the booth beside Eleni.

"She is so adorable in that outfit, Frank," Lillian said as she started to look through the menu.

"Eleni got it for her last week," Frank said proudly, as he reached across the tabletop and squeezed her hand. Buzz and Lillian glanced at each other. Something had definitely changed since the last time they'd eaten with Frank.

"Are you two..." Buzz finally out right asked. He was getting too old to beat around the bush.

"Pop!" Frank squawked, and Eleni blushed but smiled softly, squeezing his hand.

"We're seeing how things go, but yes." She smiled at the older couple, before turning and

meeting Frank's happy gaze.

Outside on the sidewalk, Marina paused and stared into Company. Inside she could see her family gathered together in the corner, happy and warm. Jealousy raged deep in her soul and she turned to leave.

Frank stood to go get more coffee refills and saw Marina, turning to leave. Dashing to the door, he quickly made his way out into the cold to speak with her.

"Marina, wait!" Frank waved, pleased that his daughter turned and waited for him to catch up.

"What? I need to get home," Marina said angrily. It was a good enough excuse to get out of there, the pain of the perfect happy little family eating away at her.

"What the hell is going on with you, sweetie?" Frank asked, honestly wanting to know. Maybe if she could tell him herself, he could fix it or help her make it better. But he couldn't do that if he didn't know what was going on.

"Maybe I should ask you the same thing. You seem awfully cozy with Mom these days. The perfect little family with your new daughter. Out with the old and in with the new, right?" Tears threatened to fall, the pain of it all hitting her harder than she expected. The pain of her parent's divorce cut deep still after all this time, and it had put her into a tailspin for years, thinking it was somehow her fault and then realizing that it was her mother who had forsaken her family for her desires. For a woman who had such traditional ideals growing up, Eleni had done her fair share of bed hopping with Alan-Michael Spaulding.

"Y'know what, Dad? Do your little retread of a romance with Eleni. You can do better, no, you have done better in the past, but whatever." Marina threw her hands up in frustration. "I'm done. I have my own family to take care of now."

"Marina, honey, don't be like that." Frank shifted in the snow, as he shivered in the cold without his jacket on, the slush at his feet making it worse. "Talk to me."

"I don't even think I know who you are anymore," Marina said sadly.

"I could say the same about you," Frank said, his voice holding a thread of warning. He knew what she had done; Lord knows what she was doing now. His own daughter mixed up in stuff that he was afraid to dig deeper into.

"I've got to go," Marina's voice broke slightly as she wiped at her eye with the back of her hand, turning to walk back down the street, the snow softly falling around her.

Frank stuffed his hands deep into his pants pockets, his heart breaking with each step she took from him. He turned and opened the door to Company, stepping into the warmth and love waiting for him there.

Fluffy white snow covered the city, hiding the dirt and shadows under a pristine layer of white. Olivia had set their alarm in time to surprise Natalia with one last treat before heading back home to their happy little family. Staring up at the stone spire of Holy Name Cathedral on State Street, Natalia thought it seemed as if it stretched clear up into the sky. Massive bronze doors with The Tree of Life on it greeted them as they entered the huge Gothic revival architecture style Church.

The inside was even more stunning than the outside, with vaulted ceilings and statues and gilt everywhere. Natalia's spirit seemed to soar inside such a huge place of worship.

"Thank you, querida," Natalia said as they slid into a pew and stared around the Cathedral. "I love coming here. I used to visit all the time when Rafe was little. How did you know?"

"I didn't. I just thought that you might like to go to Mass and this one looked like it would be fun to check out." Olivia smiled shyly as Natalia took her hand and squeezed.

"Well, I love this surprise very much."

They looked up and around the Church as it filled up with parishioners coming to Mass.

Natalia flipped through the handouts and then they both sat back and waited for the service to start. "You know, it's going to be a great Christmas, even if Rafe can't come and is stationed on the other side of the world. Family is important and even though he won't be with us physically I know in all our hearts he will be there."

"And we'll still have Leyla and Ava home with us. It's going to be fantastic." Olivia tried to make Natalia feel better, knowing that Rafe's phone call from the night before was obviously still troubling her. "I just wish your parents had come around a little bit."

Natalia sighed, nodding her head in agreement. The weekend seemed to be full of disappointment.

"It's upsetting that they just don't seem to want me in their lives. My father just can't seem to get in his head that we are not the enemy here, his control issues and homophobia is the problem." Natalia glanced around at all the people sitting in the pews around them, wondering just how many of them would hate her if they knew about whom she loved. "I know he doesn't understand our love, but all I can do is hope and pray that with time things will change. And someday we will be married here, in this Church."

"Oh, honey, I don't think so," Olivia disagreed. She wanted to believe that to be true, but she doubted that she would ever live to see that day.

"No, really. I know our marriage vows wouldn't be recognized by the Catholic Church or the state of Illinois for that matter," Natalia said, smiling softly. "I have faith that someday we will stand here before God and man, and we will renew our vows. Times change, people change. Sometimes we don't like the changes and it's hard to accept. And sometimes change takes longer than we want it to." Natalia looked up at the altar as the pipe organ began to play the processional hymn, the notes vibrating deep inside her chest. "I have faith."

Olivia blinked and looked over at her fiancée, wishing not for the first time that she had such faith in a higher power or even in her fellow mankind. She didn't need it though, as long as Natalia was at her side, she was content to believe in her and their future together.

"And I have faith in you." Stretching out, Olivia took Natalia's hand, entwining their fingers together and squeezed, feeling a peace and quiet joy flow over her. It was more than enough.

A heavy metal door creaked open, allowing a lone figure to step into the small space. The cement floor was covered in a dingy film of dirt, cinder block walls and a ratty looking quilt in a heap on the floor in the corner. It would be of little help keeping out the cold and dampness of the room. A cockroach crawled over the stained quilt, disappearing quickly under the edge of it to hide, apparently missing the comfort and familiarity of the earlier darkness.

The place wasn't perfect, but with some adjustments it would do. A cruel smile appeared, slowly

spreading wider as the decision was made.

Yes, it would do nicely.