

Episode 2.7: 'The Study of Butterflies'  
by CharmedLassie

## ACT ONE

Olivia Spencer awoke with a weight on her chest, as though she'd been fighting the urge to wake. The darkness of the room only enhanced the feeling that she was being slowly suffocated. On more than one occasion in the past she'd woken from a nightmare like this, unable to breathe from either fear or recollection. She forced herself through the sense of isolation with a few deep gulps of air and the discomfort faded. Automatically, she stretched an arm across the bed, just to touch Natalia and reassure herself, but the space beside her was empty. More than that, it was cold. On the frequent occasions Natalia slipped out in the middle of the night to check on the girls, she was always back under the covers within a few minutes, unless Francesca was awake and Olivia couldn't hear anything to suggest that.

Checking the digital clock display, she discovered it was nearing three thirty a.m. How long had Natalia been gone?

The darkness in the room was itself odd. Most nights Natalia left the door ajar, despite the baby monitor, using the excuse that they could listen for Emma too. On the rare occasions Olivia did wake in darkness, Natalia was always there – or her voice was filtering through the monitor as she quieted Francesca. It was soothing. But right now the only sound was her own uneven breathing.

Retrieving her dressing gown from the back of the door she fumbled for the knob. The glare of the landing light half-blinded her. She paused for a moment until she adjusted well enough to go downstairs. All the remnants of Christmas, the decorations and the lights, seemed muted in the silent room. Even though the television screen was flickering, the sound was turned down to an illegible murmur. Natalia sat rigidly on the sofa, staring with unblinking eyes at the set.

Padding across the room – being careful not to knock a dozen baubles off the Christmas tree as she passed it – Olivia gently sat down beside her. "Hey," she said softly.

It took a few moments for Natalia to recognize she was no longer alone. When she finally did, concern flitted over her face. "Did I wake you? Or Emma?"

Olivia shook her head. "You're quiet as a mouse down here. Couldn't sleep, huh?"

"Thought I heard Francesca, but she was sound asleep," Natalia explained. "I came down for a bottle just in case but..." A tired smile settled on her lips. "I sat down and forgot all about it."

Holding a hand against her forehead, Olivia asked, "Are you sick?"

As her partner began to protest, Olivia's eyes strayed to the coffee table. There, delicately placed on top of its envelope, was the last letter received from Rafe. It was full of Christmas greetings and painful apologies. Her insides released the knot of anxiety that had been forming as she drew her hand down to cup Natalia's cheek.

"How about we go back to that cold bed? Try and get some sleep before every girl and her dog – and, yes, I mean that literally – try and wake us up?"

The coaxing tone worked. Natalia went through the routine of shutting off the television and lamp for the second time that night then followed her upstairs obediently. As she wrapped her arms around her a few minutes later, Olivia tried to blot out the vacant

expression she'd caught in Natalia's eyes downstairs. After all, it was natural she'd want her son at the ceremony. The fact that couldn't happen – at least not in the human sense of being able to walk her down the aisle – was bound to hurt. They all just had to do their damndest to lessen the pain. He was there in spirit and thanks to the wonder of the Internet he wouldn't be completely away from it all.

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"Aspirin's on the top shelf," Jonathan said helpfully.

Anna Li shot him a look – placed somewhere between gratitude and annoyance – then searched out the relevant packet. Even the weight of the drugs in her hand felt like a relief. There was something about the kind of headache you woke up with that made it ten times worse than your standard work-induced stinker. Maybe it was the realization that the day under direction of Chief Cooper had yet to start and things were most likely getting worse before they got better – if they got better. She wasn't convinced Springfield possessed that ability.

Realizing Jonathan hadn't just made his remark and moved on she made the effort to focus on him. He was holding a basket crammed full of sweets and snacks, mainly of the child variety. "I thought you were a conscientious dad," she said, turning towards the checkout.

"Everyone deserves some treats now and then." He flashed her a boyish grin. "Anyway, who says they're all for Sarah?"

Resting her hip against the nearest shelf, Anna examined Jonathan's haul and smirked. "You like chips with rhinos on the packet now?"

"Who wouldn't? Except maybe Frank." Jonathan fell into step beside her. "So I er... I asked Leyla on a date. We went out."

That was hardly a surprise. Anyone with half a brain would've noticed the attraction between them that had been brewing for a while now.

"That's good," she said finally, having searched for something insignificant to say that wouldn't offend.

The headache had obviously taken its toll on her tone. His smile flickered. "You don't think so?"

"I'm not the one dating her, am I?" she retorted, reaching around into her bag for her purse. It came out all right, scattering coins everywhere. Jonathan dropped his basket and kneeled beside her to collect them.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Work," she said with a shake of the head. "Don't ask." Anna dropped her shoulders, frustrated with both herself and the cases she'd been working on nonstop recently. Finally, she realized it couldn't hurt to elaborate. He was mixed up in this like everyone else, wasn't he? "Since Edmund pulled his disappearing act everyone's been tense, and the ongoing corruption investigation isn't helping any."

"Has there been anything from him, any clues, hints?"

"You're supposed to be focusing on your life," she reminded him. "And your date," she added deliberately. "Are you seeing her again?"

"Sure," he replied, picking up his basket. "You could try being happy yourself, now you've got a pretty teacher hanging off your arm."

"I'm happy, thanks," she said as she tightened her grip on the aspirin. "And after I've had a few of these I'll be ecstatic."

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"Dad, I just told you we're busy," Marina complained as Frank led her out onto the street. "Grandpa needs me in there."

He looked up and down before he spoke. Aside from Doris Wolfe pacing the pavement across the road, they were pretty much alone. Turning back to his daughter, he said, "I'm going to ask you something, and I want an honest answer."

Marina's brow creased. "What's this about?"

"Yes or no," he persisted. "Will you be honest with me?"

He watched her carefully as she considered his words. He knew that he could be jumping the gun with this, that maybe someone else should be having this conversation. Perhaps he was too close but didn't he owe it to himself as a father to give her the opportunity to explain herself? You didn't convict someone behind closed doors, at least it wasn't the way he liked to do it. Besides, he forced himself to remember, this was only one aspect of many, the evidence mounting as it was looked particularly damning. He'd lost count of the number of conversations between him and Eleni when they'd tried to look at it all subjectively, completely in Marina's favor. It was almost impossible. But, out of all of it, this was the part giving him sleepless nights.

Finally, Marina touched his arm. "Of course I will, Dad. What do you want to know?"

"Did you help Edmund escape from the hospital?" he asked bluntly.

She stared back at him. "Excuse me?"

Frank forced himself to remain strong. He didn't want to believe this, he didn't want to ask the question but he had to. "Come on, it's simple enough."

His daughter turned away from him, shivering in the cool December air. "I can't believe you're asking me this. It's her, isn't it?" She glanced back accusingly. "Why do you believe her?"

"I believe in facts, that's all," he answered. "And, I have to tell you, some things are adding up badly. This isn't down to your mother."

"Sure it is," Marina snapped. "She put the idea into your head because of the way I've treated her since she turned up here like unwanted garbage."

"Marina!" he said sharply. "You won't talk about her like that in front of me, okay?"

Tears formed in her eyes. "I want things to be how they were before. She's screwing everything up. I hate her."

Frank glanced away momentarily and forced himself to come back to the main point. "You haven't answered the question," he reminded her.

Her eyes darted from side to side. Briefly, he wondered if he'd believe her if she denied it. She was his child; he at least had to trust her, didn't he?

"He was blackmailing me," she said finally, looking away. "I didn't have a choice, I'm sorry."

There was a lengthy silence. Frank looked at her, wondering how and why and when, but not caring enough to ask right now. The important thing was that his suspicions had been correct and he didn't know what the hell happened next. He couldn't stand there any longer. Turning, he began to walk away.

"Dad?" Marina's cracking voice halted him. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am," he said faintly. "Always. But parents can't constantly protect their kids, Marina. However much they want to."

He left her standing there and only glanced back when he was across the street. Her head was turned from him but he could still see the tears cascading down her face. Didn't she realize that it hurt him as much as it hurt her?

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Doris Wolfe inhaled deeply as she stood outside Company with her cell phone pressed to her ear. Her arm was beginning to ache from holding it up for so long, and she'd done two circuits of the block while listening to the ramblings in a conversation she positively felt no part of. For the sake of politeness and company solidarity, she allowed Beth and Mel to duke it out, knowing they sat right next to each other at the office. They were purposefully including her in this; she supposed they didn't have to.

"Alright, ladies," she cut in eventually, "we need to talk about this in person obviously."

There was a surprised silence on the line, as though they'd forgotten she was even there. Then Mel asked hesitantly, "Weren't you going out of town for a few days?"

Inwardly sighing, she kept her voice level. "It was only one night and it can be rearranged. We need to win this case; we're going to win it."

When she walked into Company a few moments later she was still debating how to broach the subject. Blake was pouring coffee for a customer but noted her presence immediately. The smile that slid onto her face flickered and died within the space of five seconds. Wincing, Doris stepped forward to meet her at the end of the counter. The fact she looked absolutely stunning in a simple brown shirt and pants combo wouldn't make this any easier.

Clearing her throat, she managed a throaty. "Hi."

They stared at each other for ten seconds then Blake reached for a fresh mug. "Coffee?"

"Please." As her girlfriend poured, she tried to go on, "About tonight - "

"Doris," Blake interrupted swiftly, "it's fine. I know what the look on your face means."

She felt her cheeks grow warm - she knew the implications of that statement as well as Blake did and being compared to Frank Cooper was not her favorite way to spend lunchtime. Her first impulse was to retort but she reined that in and instead watched the liquid level in her cup steadily rise. By the time Blake pushed the drink an inch towards her, she was calmer and raised her eyes reluctantly.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

A smile drifted across Blake's face. "That was really difficult for you, wasn't it?"

She shrugged, feeling the mood lighten a little. Her history with relationships, or lack thereof, hadn't prepared her for the etiquette in these situations. With Anna, the cop was as likely to be cancelling on her as the other way round. Blake was a much more reliable person. Well, these days anyway. Now she knew how crappy Olivia felt when she had to cancel on Natalia, and also why she didn't do it all that often.

"Keep looking guilty," Blake observed. "It's good for my morale."

Doris smiled ruefully. "It's work. I am sorry, you know?"

Blake met her eye. "Oh, believe me, I know. Guess that gorgeous restaurant you were talking about will still be there in a few weeks, right?"

"If you still want to go, we'll reschedule. I promise."

"Don't promise," warned Blake, surreptitiously stroking the back of her hand. "Could we have dinner tonight? Would you have time for dinner with me tonight?" Suggestively, she smiled up at Doris. "It would be a shame to waste the overnight sitter."

Finally, Doris relaxed. "Sure. What time should I order the takeout for?"

A playful expression slipped over her girlfriend's face. "I was thinking a little more adventurous than that."

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Ava Peralta let the door swing shut behind her and squinted around the sparsely-populated crowd. Her mother had the habit of standing out wherever she was so a cursory glance around the room settled that she wasn't there. She knew Doris often dragged Olivia to Ladies Night and when she hadn't found her at either the farmhouse or the Beacon she'd just thought...

Well, it didn't matter. Knowing how loved-up Olivia Spencer was these days she was probably out doing something romantic for Natalia. Despite Ava's ongoing irritation at her soon-to-be stepmother, she had a grudging respect for Natalia. After all, she made her mother happy. God, she'd remembered seeing her unhappy when Natalia was gone and this was infinitely better than that, even if conversation did dry up at times.

Just as she was thinking she'd go back to the hotel and grab some dinner before maybe bedding down with a movie and a glass of wine, she spotted a familiar figure by the window chatting to a leggy blonde. At first she was convinced she was seeing things but, no, a second look confirmed that it was the younger, more irritating version of Natalia that she was watching. Half of her brain told her to back-off and leave it but she couldn't. She was still her mother's daughter.

Striding over, she forgot the pleasantries and immediately questioned, "What are you doing here?"

Leyla turned, annoyed at the interruption and – it seemed – especially because of who had made it. "I'm having a drink, what does it look like?"

Ava bristled. "At Ladies Night?"

"Oh, is that what it is?" asked the day care manager sarcastically. "The sign on the door didn't tip me off at all."

"Well, being able to read and generally be anything apart from a pain in the ass is obviously hard for you," Ava shot back then winced at herself. So much for their truce, huh?

The blonde Leyla had been chatting with cleared her throat. "Is this going to take long?"

"No," Leyla said instantly.

Ava glanced between them, her eyes settling on the leggy bimbo. "Depends how much of an experiment you wanna be. I could disappear right now, and you could have the most unmemorable night of your life. Or you could leave."

The look of outrage on Leyla's face was payment enough. She grabbed Ava's arm, possibly with the intention of leading her away, but the blonde had already made a swift exit after a moment of consideration. Ava shook off her captor.

"So I don't think she's a keeper," she said with a smirk.

Leyla glared at her. "Why did you do that?"

"This is where women come to meet other women," Ava replied. "I didn't think you were into that. Besides, aren't you dating Jonathan?"

"He told you that?"

"Of course he did. Or were you trying to keep it a secret? So it didn't interfere with your secret life over here maybe?"

"Ava, just butt out, okay? I don't understand why you're making this into something. I'm just having a drink. Or I was. I'm entitled to drink with who I want when I want."

"I wonder what everyone would think of you messing Jonathan around," said Ava. "He's my cousin, I'm entitled to be worried when he doesn't know what he's getting into."

"Everyone being your mother, I suppose?" Leyla retorted, a triumphant smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. "After all, you always go running back there when something happens that you don't like, don't you?"

Biting down on her tongue, Ava forcibly stopped her response. It wasn't worth it. Besides, she'd already had all the conversations with Olivia after the Cyrus debacle. She didn't particularly want another lecture, especially knowing that Leyla would probably spin this out of all recognition. The woman just really got to her; she couldn't hold it in sometimes. And, she reluctantly admitted, maybe she was doubly irritated at Leyla right now because she was Natalia's sister. But that didn't excuse her coming in here and messing with people, did it?

Knowing she had to have the last word, she pasted on the biggest smile she could muster and stared squarely at the woman in front of her. "Since you've scared off your date, I think I'll leave you to wallow in a drink. Don't drown."

She heard Leyla mumbling something as she walked away but she didn't turn around. She didn't know that she'd won this one, but she certainly wanted to believe she had for as long as possible.

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"It's pretty full," Blake said unnecessarily.

They'd been hit with the stench of bodies the moment they walked into the foyer. Every table seemed full; Doris could honestly say she'd never seen the restaurant this full. Was it that everyone in Springfield had suddenly decided to take a holiday from cooking for themselves during the boredom between Christmas and New Years or had the psychic word gone out that she'd be here tonight on a date? She felt a little apprehensive as she surveyed the mass of people. Part of her wanted to turn and suggest they get that takeout she'd suggested earlier to have at home but... no, she was past that. The reason she was getting out of politics was so she didn't have to turn and hide who she was. She was here with Blake, and she wasn't about to mess that up.

Clearing her throat, she stepped forward and alerted the harassed waitress to their presence. "Excuse me, I've got a reservation for eight. Doris Wolfe."

"Hmm?" The act of balancing words in her brain long enough to absorb them was apparently beyond the abilities of this particular brunette at the moment. She stood, mouthing silently to herself, then began to walk off. Doris was about to call her back when she returned of her own accord. "Sorry, I just have to take a soda to table five," she said as a confused frown crossed her face. "Or was it a coffee? Was it table six?"

"Go," Blake put in quickly, "we'll get a drink at the bar."

The young woman flashed a weak smile then wandered off, still muttering to herself about soda and table numbers. Doris glanced to Blake as they strolled to the bar. "You really think she'll remember us?"

"Who could forget that murderous look you just threw her?" Blake retorted.

Doris shrugged. "It's a gift."

"Can't argue with that," Blake said, stiffening as she caught sight of something over her shoulder. "Oh, this should be interesting."

Curiosity got the better of her and Doris turned around just in time to find herself face-to-face with Frank and Eleni, both dressed in clothes that suggested they were on a date. Trying to suppress the smirk she inevitably found wanting to stretch her lips, she began to fail miserably – until Blake elbowed her in the side.

"Frank, hi," her girlfriend said smoothly. "And Eleni, it's good to see you."

To his credit, Frank caught on pretty quickly. He looked between them, grasped the notion of a date, and promptly swallowed. Then he was all charm, presumably for Eleni's sake. Though, Doris thought to herself, the woman knew him. Which begged the question of why she was on a date with him in the first place. A disturbing image crossed her mind: had they perhaps...

"Ew," she murmured aloud without thinking. Three pairs of eyes abruptly focused on her. Far from being embarrassed, she swiftly went on, "Who told Springfield to eat out tonight?"

Frank immediately grabbed onto the lifejacket. "It is pretty busy. You guys have a table booked?"

Blake nodded. "Don't know about getting to it though. Everyone's rushed off their feet."

Thankfully, before anymore pointless small talk about the number of diners was required, the bartender scurried up. It took them a good five minutes to sort out their respective drinks and by then the haggard waitress was rushing towards them.

"Mr. Cooper? I've got your table."

Doris cleared her throat pointedly. "What about ours?"

The brunette visibly recoiled a few inches. "Um... we... actually..."

"What?" she pressed.

"Your reservation slipped through a glitch in the computer system, we haven't got you a table," was the concise and quick reply.

Wisely, depending on your viewpoint, the woman had put Frank between them. Her opportunity of snarling at the waitress having been extinguished, Doris took a steadying breath and glanced apologetically to Blake. "Sorry."

Blake shook her head. "These things happen." To Eleni, she said, "Enjoy your meal."

Doris felt his mouth opening before she saw it. Silently, she prayed for him to not make the suggestion but –

"Don't suppose," he said, halting the waitress in his tracks, "you have a couple of extra chairs do you? We could all squeeze in."

And there it was. Doris closed her eyes and tried not to think of the kick Olivia Spencer would get out of this story when she heard it.

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After fifteen minutes of waiting for Natalia to return from the bathroom, Olivia accepted something had waylaid her and reluctantly climbed the stairs, cursing every step she took away from the romantic little supper she'd set-up in the kitchen. It was only reheated soup and some of Natalia's delicious homemade bread but the candles really brightened up the kitchen.

Sure enough, she found Natalia in the dimly-lit nursery cradling a whimpering Francesca. The sound of their daughter in pain banished the selfish urges prodding at the surface and she immediately kneeled in front of them.

"More teeth?"

Natalia nodded. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to leave her. And I couldn't call you without waking Emma."

"Hey, that's fine," Olivia admonished. "I'll grab the medicine from the bathroom, might take the edge off."

Just as she reached the bathroom, however, Francesca let out a wail worthy of an opera singer. Olivia froze with one hand on the medicine cabinet but it was no good. There was the familiar thump of Emma jumping out of bed and in a few moments her bleary-eyed daughter appeared in the doorway.

"Is Francesca okay?"

Olivia tried to smile. Though, truth be told, fatigue and impatience were taking its toll on her ability to do so. "She's fine, Jellybean. Why don't you go back to bed and we'll take care of it?"

Emma had the beginnings of an argument on her face. If Natalia hadn't suddenly appeared in the doorway with Francesca clamped to her shoulder then a battle of wills would've most certainly been on the cards. As it was, Emma's head whipped straight around.

"You should be in bed," Natalia said softly, bouncing Francesca slightly in her arms. The little girl grumbled and wrapped a fist around several strands of silky hair. Wincing, Natalia disentangled herself then returned her attentions to their other daughter. "I'm sorry we woke you up, sweetie, but you really need to sleep."

"I'm awake now though," Emma complained.

"Well, you need to not be," Natalia said decisively. "One of us will read you a story," she added in a coaxing tone. "Who do you want?"

Before Emma had even spoken, Olivia had stepped forward to receive Francesca into her arms. "We know when we're not wanted don't we, Sweet Pea? C'mon, let's get some medicine into that little mouth of yours."

Natalia smiled as she was pulled out of the bathroom by Emma. A couple of minutes later Olivia was settled in the nursery chair with her eyes closed, gently swaying back and forth with Francesca. The gentle movement was rocking them both to sleep.

"Hope you know what you're interrupting, kiddo," she murmured. "I had a nice bottle of wine, classy food as well. And afterwards I was going to dazzle her with car brochures. When you're older you'll understand. A lot older," she said as an afterthought.

A voice from the doorway startled her with, "Oh, about forty?"

Opening her eyes, Olivia threw a mock-frown at her girlfriend. "It's rude to eavesdrop on private conversations."

"Has that ever stopped you from doing it?"

She shrugged, dislodging Francesca slightly. "Oops, sorry, Sweet Pea. You carry on." She looked back to Natalia. "Emma asleep already?"

"Erm... not quite. She wants hot chocolate."

Olivia groaned. "It's gonna be a long night, isn't it?"

A sultry smile crossed Natalia's lips. "You bet."

As she watched her partner vanish, Olivia pressed her lips briefly to Francesca's head. "And that's why we don't mess with your Mami."

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Doris had been on her fair share of screwy dates: a few fellow politicians hoping for extra-curricular activities that never materialized. Or the women she'd gone out who'd misinterpreted something... or everything. There had been one particularly humiliating

evening back in the old days where a straight-laced knitting-mad constituent had almost got the shock of her life. However, sitting opposite Frank Cooper while Blake nervously smoothed down her skirt and simultaneously fiddled with her hair was a new experience altogether.

She'd managed to have a hushed conversation with Blake as they were escorted to the table to ascertain she was alright with this. After all, she remembered the tangled history she already had with Eleni and throwing Frank into that mix could be a recipe for disaster. But Blake, eager to please, had just shaken her head and smiled tightly. No matter how excruciating this evening could prove to be, they were in it for the long haul. At first Doris had wanted to run in the opposite direction: surgery without anaesthesia would be preferable. But now, well, right now she was beginning to get into the spirit of the evening.

Leaning over, ostensibly to rearrange their cramped seating arrangements, Blake whispered, "Can you look a little less excited about this please?"

"Haven't a clue what you're talking about," she retorted. Snapping her menu open, she bopped Frank on the nose. "Oh, sorry!"

"Not a problem," he replied.

Eleni had buried her head into her own menu and hadn't noticed a thing. "Really don't know what I'm in the mood for."

"Something soft and cool, a salad maybe?" Doris suggested. "Who wants steamy food in a place this crowded?"

Blake cleared her throat. "Not me."

As Doris innocently raised her wine glass to her lips, she didn't notice Frank was about to speak until it was too late.

"Oh, I think I can manage something hot," he murmured with a grin on his face.

It was all she could do not to splutter all over the fine tablecloth. A faint tinge settled on Eleni's cheeks and Blake looked petrified. Frank, however, seemed oblivious. He looked up from his menu with concern on his face.

"Doris, do you need a glass of water?"

Shaking her head, she patted her neck. "Drinking too fast, that's all. Speaking of which, we should get a bottle or two. Make a night of it."

Eleni nodded vigorously. "I'm with you on that. The wine, that is."

Doris masked her smirk. "Of course."

The four of them pondered the menu for several minutes. It was a good excuse not to talk, or so the other three seemed to think. For her part, Doris was considering how uncomfortable she could make Frank in the space of a short meal. Maybe they could even stretch it to dessert and beyond. It wasn't that she deliberately enjoyed antagonizing the man, but anyone had to admit he had it coming... just a little. She wondered how much of her distaste had come second-hand through Olivia. Before her entanglement with the Spencer-Rivera family, she'd mostly found him to be an incompetent irritation who occasionally put her off her coffee at Company.

"I think we'll split a large starter," Frank said suddenly then glanced anxiously at his date. "If that's okay?"

Eleni nodded. "Sounds good. Do you two know what you're having?"

Before Blake opened her mouth, Doris jumped in, "I think sharing a starter's a great idea. Don't you?" she added, raising an eyebrow at her girlfriend.

"Sounds good," Blake echoed hollowly.

Frank was looking around like a schoolboy. "Well, we'll need a waiter from somewhere. Wait, if I can just –"

"Watch the –" Eleni and Blake said simultaneously but it was too late.

"Wine," Doris concluded as the Merlot began to seep through the tablecloth, steamrolling towards Eleni. In his customary manner, Frank instantly tried to atone for his error, standing to perhaps block the flow of the tide. Either way, he didn't get a chance. Eleni backed out of his reach and he fumbled for a grip before his hands slid into the spillage. The tablecloth ended up lopsidedly hanging from the edge of the table while Blake sat poised ready to put her glass down.

Frank had reddened down to his collar. Suddenly the choice of a salmon shirt seemed a disastrous decision. Doris's lips twitched as the thought crossed her mind but she was swiftly admonished by an elbow in the side from Blake.

Standing, she muttered, "I'll get a cloth from the bar."

The air thinned as she battled over to the bar. Glancing over at the tableau after she reached the edge of the scum, she saw Frank grinning like a child as Eleni and a waiter fixed the damage on the table. Blake sat still clutching her wine glass looking about as comfortable as if she'd spiked her drink with sulphuric acid.

Finally coaxing a cloth out of the ragged bartender, Doris weaved her way back to the table and touched her girlfriend's shoulder lightly before leaning down to whisper, "Did I tell you that you look gorgeous tonight?"

By degrees, she noticed Blake's muscles relax. Running her fingers briefly along the exposed flesh below her ear, Doris then dragged herself away long enough to toss the cloth at Frank.

"Here you go, slugger."

The goofy smile on his face was growing. "Thanks."

Thankfully, they got through the starters without any more disasters. Well, unless you counted Frank feeding Eleni a mushroom which was about as nauseating an experience as you could get outside a delivery room. Blake's eyes were frequently fixed on something in the distance; Doris, unfortunately, couldn't tear hers away. It was like watching the mating ritual of an ostrich.

After the waiter had cleared the plates, Frank managed to draw his gaze away from his date.

"How's work, Doris?" He threw the question out casually but his eyes were as sharp as they ever got.

A sudden mistrust overtook her as she blinked at his audacity. If he was fishing for information her office held regarding the corruption investigation he needed a better reel. She'd assumed when they sat down that their jobs would be the unspoken black cloud hanging over the evening. If they discussed her work they'd discuss his, and that would never end well. The things she'd been calling Chief Cooper in private would pale in comparison to what she'd say to his face given half the chance.

Blake was shrewd enough to realize that. She cut in with, "Have you seen the beautiful little dress Natalia bought for Francesca for the ceremony?"

"Why, yes, I have," he replied. "It's adorable, isn't it? She's adorable."

"You're a very lucky man, Frank," Doris said in what she hoped was a conciliatory tone. Judging from the merest quirk of Blake's eyebrow, it didn't work. Hurrying on, she added, "And any girl would be fortunate to have you as a father."

Leaning closer under the pretext of getting her drink, Blake queried, "What are you doing?"

"Hell if I know," she whispered. "Frank, are you okay?"

Something that she couldn't decipher had settled over his face. Eleni touched his shoulder. "Frank, you've drifted off a little."

He glanced to her and she shot him an unfathomable look. Doris turned her head to Blake and shrugged.

"Sorry," Frank said finally, "I just let my mind go back to work, that's all. So much to do, you know how it is. Or maybe you don't anymore, huh, Doris?" he added with a derisive chuckle.

"I've hardly given up work," she said testily.

"I wasn't suggesting - " he began in a semi-conciliatory manner.

"Good," she interrupted. "Anyone for more wine?"

"Yes," Blake said instantly.

Doris signalled to the waiter who stumbled around three other tables before reaching them. After he'd rushed off again, she leaned back in her chair. The reference to work, and particularly the insinuation that she couldn't handle public office anymore, had angered her. So Chief Cooper thought she was searching for an easier life? Well, in one sense that was true, but she knew if she truly wanted a simple life she wouldn't be placing herself in direct competition with Alan Spaulding's favorite lawyers on a regular basis. This wasn't the easy option by any stretch of the imagination. She was giving up everything she'd work so hard to obtain. Or did Frank think she'd fallen into politics having taken a wrong turn? She sipped her drink and stewed for a minute or so.

"Any word on Edmund?" she asked innocently.

Blake exhaled. "Oh, boy."

Frank exchanged another glance with Eleni and shook his head. "Not exactly."

"Meaning no?" she clarified sardonically.

"Practicing for the courtroom, Doris?" Eleni interjected in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Can't hurt," she responded before looking straight back to an uncomfortable-looking Frank. "Well?"

He was growing red in the face again. Finally, with extreme difficulty, he shook his head. "No."

Doris let the word hover there for a minute. "Well done," she said sardonically. Then, as Blake's eyes bore a hole through her, she pushed her chair back. "If you'll excuse me for a minute..."

*What the hell was she doing?* Doris wondered as she rounded the corner and tried to comprehend precisely why she was making this evening quite so difficult. Sure, it was always going to be a little Springfield slice of hell, but she was going out of her way to make it uncomfortable. If she didn't know better she'd swear she was channelling Olivia. Leaning against the wall near the restroom, Doris chuckled to herself. Maybe that was it; maybe her problem was a diluted version of Olivia's. Add that to the fact that Frank was the police equivalent of a marshmallow, and she had her reasons right there.

However, she quickly realized as she saw Blake stomping towards her, that those might not be legitimate enough reasons for public inquiry.

"What are you doing?" her girlfriend demanded.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she murmured. "It just needed saying."

"Why, because this evening was going so well? I really think you should just..." Trailing off, Blake frowned at the slightly amused expression on her face. "What?"

"Well," she said slowly, "perhaps I got a little jealous?"

After a moment Blake pursed her lips. "You know, that's a really good try."

"I thought so." No need for Blake to realize quite how serious she was. Glancing around to check they were thoroughly alone, she leaned forward to kiss her lightly. She withdrew as she heard a masculine cough behind them.

Frank showed no embarrassment. "Doris, can I speak with you for a minute?"

She cleared her throat. "Sure. I'll see you back at the table, okay, honey?"

Blake distinctly rolled her eyes as she walked away. Doris turned her attention back to Frank.

"I don't care about you two," he said bluntly, "if that's what you're thinking."

"It crossed my mind," she admitted, not believing his denial for a second.

"So that's why you're bringing up Edmund? Just trying to cause trouble as usual."

"Hey," she said, grabbing his arm as he made to turn around, "you brought up the issue of work, Chief Cooper. You insinuated earlier I'd given up doing my job. You can question my work ethic and I can't do the same? I'm bringing up Edmund because somehow he managed to escape under armed guard on your watch. And now he's roaming around the country, planning how to ruin our lives next?"

Frank snorted and crossed his arms. "Come on, Doris, how are you even involved in this? You don't have to pretend you care anymore."

"He shot at me," she replied angrily, frustrated at the way her voice trembled at the words. She might be coping better these days but that didn't mean she was any less haunted by the events at Rick and Mindy's non-wedding. "You couldn't even be bothered to turn up until it was over, so don't even try saying I shouldn't be a bit pissed off."

"That isn't fair. No one could've predicted - "

"No, not when you falsely ID a body, huh, Frank? Oh, and as to why I care? I suppose that means I'm the only one who's bothered about the little family up at the farmhouse, does it?"

His eyes narrowed. Shaking her off, he stepped back. "I've got as much interest in catching Edmund as the next man. That's my daughter up there, in case you've forgotten. Not to mention Natalia and Emma."

"And Olivia," she reminded him testily.

His eyes flickered. "And Olivia. You can't make me worry more than I do."

At least in that she'd have to admit he was sincere. Doris inwardly growled at what she was about to say then squeezed her fingers into her palm as she did so.

"I guess that's something we have in common," she said grudgingly.

He managed a dry laugh. "Let's not pretend that's the only thing."

## **ACT TWO**

With the amount of wine Doris had consumed the previous evening, she looked forward to having brunch with Blake out at the farmhouse with their friends, especially if it contained massive amounts of coffee. At this point, she'd be happy with the caffeine mainlined into her system. The other option was laughter and she was getting lots of that.

"Oh, come on, you two!" Doris Wolfe said, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes.

The four of them were in the kitchen; Blake and Natalia sat stoically at the table while she and Olivia used the counter and fridge respectively for support. Olivia hadn't been able to keep the smirk from her face the moment she'd first heard about the double-date of the night before, but the tale of Frank accidentally headbutting a waitress after dessert seemed to have broken her. The infectious laughter had carried Doris along with it but so far their girlfriends were proving immune.

"Come on," Olivia repeated, glancing incredulously between Blake and Natalia and finally settling on her partner. "You have to admit, it's a little funny."

"Frank doesn't deserve to be laughed at," Natalia replied, though her voice lacked conviction.

"You two are just juvenile," Blake chipped in.

Olivia shrugged. "I'll take the compliment."

Doris moved behind Blake and placed her hands on her shoulders. "Just remember the moment he finally slipped."

"He slipped?" Olivia asked, barely holding in her glee.

"What she means is that she tripped him," Blake clarified.

"It was accidental! We were on the way to the parking lot and..." Halting the explanation, she shrugged. "Well, he was there and so was the floor I guess."

To their surprise, Natalia finally burst out laughing. A second, and then Blake joined her. Feeling that her job was done, Doris stepped back to lean against the counter. After a few moments they were all adult enough to talk again.

"So did you two just come over here to make us laugh?" Olivia asked. "Not that I object to the principle."

"No, actually," Doris answered as she smoothed down her shirt in a vain attempt to stop herself smiling. "We were wondering what your plans were tonight. You haven't mentioned anything."

Olivia glanced to Natalia, apparently at a loss. "Um, plans?"

"Last night of freedom," Blake elaborated. "Don't you want to let loose?"

The hotelier crossed her arms. "Don't look at me when you say that."

"Sorry, force of habit. Seriously, though," Blake went on, "you must have something planned."

Natalia shook her head. "Just a quiet night with the girls."

Doris groaned. "You can't."

"Why not?" Olivia questioned.

"It's tradition," she argued. "You've done it every other time you've been married I'm sure."

Natalia chuckled. "She might have a point there."

"Zip it, you," Olivia warned then she looked back to Doris. "You, too, for that matter."

She wasn't fazed. "It's tradition," she repeated. "You've got to spend the night apart getting absolutely drunk before you get shackled."

"We're already shackled!" Olivia retorted then grimaced at Natalia. "Honey, I mean that in the good way. You know, as in shackled to... the best thing that ever happened to me?" she concluded lamely. Doris rolled her eyes and repressed her snort.

Natalia threw her a mock glare and moved to put the kettle on. "Honestly, you know, we don't want a fuss. Every time you make a fuss about something in this town it seems to blow up in your face."

That was a sobering thought but Doris didn't appreciate losing the battle. "Is this the last time?" she questioned.

"Hey!" Olivia admonished. Then she murmured, "Yes, of course it is."

"Good," Blake replied, "then you're out of excuses, ladies."

"We haven't got a babysitter," Natalia pointed out hopefully.

Doris smirked. "I think I know just the man."

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It was just another painful day in Springfield PD.

Frank Cooper massaged his forehead as he read through the latest report Anna had dropped onto his desk. It was for an aggravated burglary; something he thought he should really care more about than he did, but his mind was permanently stuck on other things. He glanced across his desk to the photograph of Francesca there and managed a small smile. But seeing his smallest girl reminded him of the bigger one and... well, he didn't like where that path led him.

A knock on the door disturbed him. He stayed silent, half-hopeful whoever it was would take the hint, but then it opened without ceremony. When he saw Olivia and Doris step over the threshold, he wasn't surprised.

He pasted on his best smile, trying not to remember the smirk on the politician's face as he'd picked himself up from the pavement the previous night. Though he supposed if she decided to call him on that then he could drop into conversation that Eleni hadn't left his place until this morning. No, he was too much of a gentleman for that, but Doris Wolfe was nothing like a lady in his eyes. Unfortunately, the rules still applied.

"What can I do for you two ladies?"

Uncharacteristically, Olivia looked reluctant to talk. Doris nudged her into speech with a well-placed elbow.

"Um, I wanted to ask you a favor actually."

*Now why did that make him nervous?* He gestured for them to sit down. "Sure, go ahead."

"I was wondering if you were, um, free this evening. Tonight." Olivia crossed her arms, as if this was a real struggle for her. "Natalia and I would be extremely grateful if maybe you could babysit the girls for us."

Frank released his breath. "Is that all? I thought you were about to confess to a felony."

"Is that a yes?" Olivia asked.

"Of course, it is. I'd love to do it." The idea sounded like heaven as a matter of fact. If he was up at the farmhouse looking after two kids then he absolutely positively could not be dragged into a field in the middle of nowhere to look at a pile of manure that some idiot mistook for a body. "What time do you want me there?"

"Six," Doris put in quickly.

Olivia shot her a look. "If that's convenient."

"Not a problem. I'll see you tonight."

Business done, both women got up to leave. Doris smirked at him before she left, no doubt trying to remind him how ridiculous he'd looked the night before with his head on the sidewalk. Honestly, Blake could see who she wanted and he wanted her to be happy but her judgement was about as good as... well, Natalia's.

Olivia lingered behind as the mayor vanished. "Thanks, Frank. I mean it."

He just nodded and held his ambivalent expression until she was out of the door. Then he tried to refocus on the report in front of his eyes. Now that he could look forward to an evening with his daughter, he felt like getting this case cracked before dinner time.

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Josh looked up from reading to Colin as Reva entered the living room, twirling around in a red dress and looking every bit like the cat that had just licked out of the cream bowl.

"How do I look?"

"Stunning," he said sincerely. "But too happy."

"I'm happy for Olivia," she retorted.

"Mmm hmm," he murmured, willing to leave that be.

Unfortunately, Reva didn't seem inclined to do so. As she put on her earrings she reminded him, "Jonathan could easily have Colin tonight. You could come. I know you wouldn't be the only ex there, if that's what you're worried about."

"It's off-putting to have the person officiating the ceremony at the bachelorette party."

"Precisely," Reva replied.

Josh smiled softly and wondered if he should possibly send Olivia an SOS message before she got to Towers. Then he was reminded by a sharp nudge to his side that he was in the middle of explaining something to a very sleepy young man beside him.

"I'm staying in," he said firmly. "I'm teaching Colin how to plan the foundations of lower level buildings."

Reva paused midway through putting her coat on to scrutinize them. "Okay, boys, you have your fun and I'll have mine."

"Play nice," Josh called after her as she left a few minutes later. He was certain he heard a chuckle follow her from the house.

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"Why did I let you talk me into this?" Olivia queried as she and Doris stepped into the foyer of Towers. "And I bet I look like crap."

She was wearing a green dress that she didn't particularly like and if her make-up was perfect it was by some divine intervention. Francesca had decided it was time to scream the house down five minutes before she left, and, of course, Natalia had gone first. The grouchy look on Emma's face was matched only by Frank's befuddlement as he was almost thrown a struggling toddler. Olivia had briefed him on everything new within thirty seconds and she hoped the dazed expression on his face was no indication of

whether it had sunk in or not. She was half-tempted to give him a call and just... No, that was crazy. Natalia was supposed to be the one with separation anxieties. Olivia Spencer was the tough momma.

"I didn't talk you into it," her friend replied. "I didn't give you a choice, as I recall."

Olivia swept her hair back over her shoulders. "Which is the only reason that I'm here, just so we're clear."

"Oh, we're clear," Doris said. "I don't know what you're so worked up about. It's just a couple of drinks, that's all. No lewd behavior allowed. Well, not from you anyway."

She suppressed a smile. "I'll tell Blake you said that," she returned as she heard the door open behind them. Turning, she saw her eldest daughter striding in. "Ava, hi. You look great." It was no lie. She was in a slinky black number that Olivia couldn't help but eye jealously.

Ava gave her a quick hug. "No need to sound so surprised. Where are the rest of the unlucky losers?"

Olivia cast Doris a glance. "Don't tell me you made people come."

"How else was she supposed to get them here?" Ava quipped. "Actually, you'd be surprised who wanted to come. Let's get a drink."

Ushered towards the bar, she was shocked to see Reva waiting for her, accompanied by none other than Phillip. Although quite concerned about what had possessed Reva to come, she glanced to Phillip first. "You do know this is a bachelorette party?"

He grinned amicably. "You know, I do believe Doris mentioned that on the phone."

"And you're here because..."

"Well, let's just say it's a mission of mine not to let you mess your life up anymore. Call it a philanthropic urge."

Olivia fixed him with a stare for a few moments. "Or a crack to the head. I think we need some wine over here."

Doris chuckled and pulled over a bartender. Meanwhile, Olivia turned to Reva.

"And what are you doing here?"

"Making sure." She left the rest unsaid, though Olivia certainly grasped the implication. It never hurt to confirm you weren't about to be usurped again.

Settling back on a stool with a glass of wine, Olivia let the initial conversation wash over her. Her mind was across town with Natalia at Company. Although it was – dare she say it – sweet of Doris to insist on this, she'd much rather be at home. Preferably in bed, though the location was negotiable. She smiled into her drink. Hell, even the activity was negotiable. She could sit through *The Little Mermaid* for the five thousandth time and not mind right now. Perhaps she'd draw the line at willingly changing diapers, but that was human nature more than anything else. Nope, she was well and truly domesticated.

"You know, I think we lost her."

She glanced up at Doris's comment. All four of them were staring at her knowingly and in a manner that made her want to toss something at them. Clearing her throat, she settled for reaching for the wine bottle. "Is it my fault you're all boring?"

Ava clutched her chest in mock-pain. "Ouch, Mom."

Reva let out a snort. "Don't try pretending you weren't wishing us to the other side of the planet."

"Would I do that?" Olivia asked. "Deny it, that is?"

Doris raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I don't know. You're very down at heel these days. Natalia only has to think the word "jump" and you stand to attention."

Olivia placed her glass down delicately. "That's fighting talk, Wolfe."

"Well, at least you're listening to us now," her friend shot back. "I was going to ask Reva and Phillip if they had any little stories to share. If that's the most fun to be had, I want to hear it."

Ava inhaled deeply and smiled. "This'll be fun."

"You know what I find highly amusing," Phillip said after a moment, "and, believe me, I'll regret bringing it up, but three of you have technically been my stepmother at some point."

Olivia felt like burying her head in her arms. "Can we discuss any of my other marriages?"

"Forget the marriages," Ava said conversationally, "what about everything else?"

Throwing her a look, Olivia pointed out, "Don't think I'll forget you started this. When it comes to holding Francesca while she throws up tomorrow..."

Ava laughed. "I'll leave that to Frank, thanks. Which reminds me: Frank, Buzz, Buzz, Frank?"

"Don't," she warned.

"There's Josh," Reva put in.

"Bill," Ava added.

"Jeffrey," went on Reva.

Olivia turned her glare on Doris. "I blame you for this."

"Hey, I'm still recovering from the reminder that I was married to Alan. Besides," she continued, gesturing to Phillip, "aren't you missing out a vital piece of history here?"

Phillip cleared his throat and suddenly became very interested in his shoes. Olivia knew his concerns. No matter how long they let them heal, the old wounds were still there deep underneath the surface. Yet he'd done so much for her recently. God, if you'd asked her three years ago if she could've invited him to her bachelorette party and wedding without being held at gunpoint, she would've laughed. Actually, if you'd have told her she'd be marrying a woman, the former wife of the man she'd chased after and

ended up being given his heart... Ouch, the more she thought about it the more of a headache she got. Turning her attention back to Phillip, she nudged him roughly.

"Well, this one actually gave me a keepsake." As he raised his eyes apprehensively, she went on, "Emma is the best thing I ever got out of a relationship. Unfortunately, that means I can't really hate you."

"And the dancing on my grave?" he asked innocently.

She sniffed. "Delirium."

Doris gestured for another bottle of wine. "Any other misdemeanors you want to confess to, Spencer?"

It was Reva who suggested, "What about that time you ran me over?"

Olivia snorted. "You stepped in front of my car. And you admitted that, so don't even try it."

Reva just smiled. "Does Natalia know that?"

Ava grimaced. "Back to your corners, ladies. And you can stop drinking so fast," she added.

Olivia looked up in surprise. "God, I swear Natalia puts you up to this. It's bad for my heart, yes, but in moderation a drink or two is not going to hurt me. And, damn it, once in a while a girl needs a drink. Especially when, you know, she's getting married in the morning." A smile twitched over her lips unbidden. Realizing she was being watched, she cleared her throat and tried to remember her original point. She couldn't.

"It was the alcohol consumption," Doris supplied finally.

Reva looked amused. "Are you actually nervous?"

"No," she said instantly. "You can't be nervous about something you're so sure about. Besides, we've felt married for the last year. Longer. This is just a party so everyone can get drunk. Everyone else," she corrected with a soft smile. "It means a lot to Natalia that so many people want to celebrate with us. And she'd be completely happy if... Well, let's just say we might have to do it all again in a few years when Rafe's around."

"And hopefully," Phillip put in, "it'll be legally recognized then as well."

Olivia shot him a grateful smile. "Amen to that."

Doris coughed. "Can I make a toast?"

"No," she replied.

Her friend proceeded regardless and held up her glass. "To a drunken wedding, to the fact that Natalia hasn't seen sense yet and," she went on, despite Olivia kicking her, "to family."

They all raised their glasses. "To family."

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This wasn't so bad, Natalia supposed.

As far as bachelorette parties went you probably couldn't get a more sedate group than her sister, Blake, Mel and Beth. Well, Leyla might prove to be a bit of a handful as the night wore on, but she wasn't worrying about that right now. Instead she just reclined into the booth and listened to Mel and Beth discussing something work-related while she pondered how Frank was getting on back at home. It wasn't that she didn't trust him with the girls, far from it. It was just that, since Edmund's rampage, Emma had been a little difficult to predict. The help she'd got from Anna in basic martial arts had built some of her confidence back up, but Natalia's heart still tightened whenever she allowed herself to think of those nightmares her little girl had slipped into after the shootings. If something like that was to happen when she wasn't there then she'd feel horribly guilty about it.

She also wondered what kind of night Olivia was having. According to Blake, Doris had managed to convince Reva and Phillip to go, along with Ava, of course. Knowing Olivia that could end in a black eye and jail for the night. Perhaps she was being pessimistic, but it felt the right way to be at the moment. If she let herself be cautious about everything, then maybe nothing would go wrong.

"You look bored," Blake said anxiously, pushing a glass of wine into her hands.

She smiled. "No, no, I'm fine. Just...worried about Frank."

"Oh, he'll be fine. Emma can tell him what to do."

"Mmm, that's what I'm worried about," Natalia replied. Noticing her sister was being unusually quiet, she touched her arm. "Are you okay?" she asked softly, shooting her a reassuring smile.

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?" Leyla replied lightly, though her eyes still seemed vacant.

"You just seem quiet, that's all," Natalia responded pensively.

"I'm fine. Look, this is supposed to be your night. You could at least crack a smile."

Natalia quirked an eyebrow at her sister even as a grin crossed her face. "Now, why does that sound like an order?"

Leyla thought about it for a millisecond. "Maybe because it is one?" She clapped her hands, regaining some of that energy that had opened the Beacon day care and made Natalia wince once in a while. "Right, ladies, we're letting my sister down here. We came out tonight to celebrate, not to get stuck in work conversations and worry about the kids we left at home."

Natalia cleared her throat. "It's just - "

"Just nothing," Leyla interrupted. "Tomorrow you can be the dutiful mother - and wife, if you insist but I'm not open to details. Now I'm gonna ask Buzz for a bottle of something bubbly and you're all going to smile and pretend you like it. How's that?"

Blake nodded for the group and Leyla slid out of the booth. Natalia shrugged and murmured an apology. Mel, however, waved it away.

"You know what? We've been way too work-orientated tonight. Consider the subject dropped." She glanced to Beth. "Right?"

"Definitely. But I don't suppose we want to talk about Olivia either?"

Natalia threw them all a sharp glance but couldn't keep up the momentum. Somehow her stomach had decided to do a selection of triple somersaults all of a sudden.

"You look green," Mel commented, startling her from her thoughts. "Are you sick?"

"Worried about tomorrow?" Beth supplied.

"No, no, absolutely not," she said firmly.

Beth looked sceptical. "Really? Before my wedding I was... Well, I wasn't a nervous wreck but I was nervous. I suppose it wasn't helped by the fact I had my head stuck in law books until I was almost dragged down the aisle," she said with a self-deprecating grin. Looking over at Natalia, she placed a hand on the younger woman's arm. "But I still say, it doesn't matter how well you know somebody, things change all of a sudden when there's an insignificant piece of paper involved."

"Or not, in our case," Natalia said, stifling a sigh. Maybe if it was legally recognized then her father wouldn't be able to discharge her from her family again. She let that thought pass, having talked it over with Olivia she knew his opinion didn't matter. In fact, all she needed to do was look at Olivia doing the simplest task, feeding Francesca or helping Emma with her homework, and she knew she didn't want anyone with bigoted opinions anywhere near her family.

"No," Beth conceded after a moment, probably seeing something on her face, "but you've got more that bonds you together than the average couple on their wedding day."

She thought of the house deeds with Olivia's name etched on them and her share in the Beacon. It couldn't be denied that her life was intrinsically entwined with Olivia's now, come what may. They had pieces of paper scattered all over the place, not insignificant but true reflections of their lives together. Tomorrow was an affirmation of that, but that was all it needed to be. It wasn't making any new statement about how happy they were – how happy *she* was.

"I know Olivia really well," she answered finally. "To the extent that I've wanted to kill her on several occasions."

Blake touched her arm. "That doesn't make you overly special."

She chuckled. "Okay. But I've had motive and opportunity, and I still didn't do it."

"Alright, that does make you special," Beth conceded.

"Coming through," Leyla announced, returning with a tray of glasses and a bottle perched precariously at the center. "What are we talking about?"

"Killing Olivia," Blake answered.

A grin settled on Leyla's face as she returned to her seat. "Is it a game?"

Natalia swatted at her, trying her best to look annoyed but failing miserably. "Nobody is talking about killing my girlfriend."

"Fiancée," Blake corrected.

Reddening, Natalia pointed out, "That was just a slip of the tongue."

They all took great pleasure in that and, despite the resolve, conversation quickly turned to Olivia. Blake had plenty of stories which she reluctantly volunteered. Eventually, Natalia got into the spirit of the evening. She forgot to worry, forgot to wonder about the potential war going on up at the farmhouse between Frank and Emma. For a few moments she even forgot to be sad about Rafe not coming to the wedding. Then, during a lull in conversation, it came back to her and she felt a wave of guilt and sadness wash over her.

Without ceremony, she excused herself to go to the bathroom.

As she scrubbed the tears from underneath her eyes and looked at herself in the mirror she had a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*. Hadn't she been in a similar situation all that time ago, though it was sickness and not tears plaguing her back then? And now... Well, now she had the family she thought she'd wrecked. Despite everything, the odds being stacked against them, here they were, the night before their wedding.

A faint thrill of excitement swept through her. She was going to stand next to Olivia in front of all their friends and commit herself to her, to their family. There were going to be smiling faces all around, none of those blank stares she'd feared so much thanks to Father Ray and his meddling. Although Rafe couldn't be there in person, he'd be watching and she was so thankful that he'd finally accepted the family they were. Although tomorrow wouldn't change a thing in reality, it was a public symbol, and she was honored that Olivia Spencer even wanted her to be there.

Taking a deep breath and wiping her face clean, she left the restroom and plunged straight into Buzz who was clearing a table near the door.

"Sorry, sorry," he said quickly. "My fault."

"Actually, I ran into you," Natalia responded with a grin.

"Well, yeah, but you don't call a woman clumsy the night before she walks down the aisle. It's impolite." He paused and glanced at the younger woman affectionately. "Are you doing okay, you nervous?"

"No, I feel like I should be, but this is the most natural thing that's ever happened to me. It might not mean anything to the rest of the world but it's my way of showing Olivia that I'm... that I'm not going anywhere," she finished with difficulty. There was a lump in her throat. "I'm so happy and I'd just like everybody to know it. I've been through some terrible stuff in the last few years, but I'm where I want to be now. Does that sound selfish?"

He exhaled rapidly. "You are about the most unselfish person I know. And I'm proud to know you. Now, go on, go have a good night. You can bet Olivia's doing the same."

"With Reva and Doris around?" Natalia queried.

Chuckling, he patted her shoulder. "Okay, you win."

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Frank Cooper was almost asleep.

Emma had put a film on before he'd finally managed to persuade her that the reason she couldn't keep her eyes open was because she was tired. She was excited, bless her, and no amount of cajoling would get her to admit it. She was trying to be a grown-up but

still harbored the dreams of a little girl. Hopefully she'd stay like that for a while because once she decided she wanted to be a proper grown-up, Olivia and Natalia would have a war on their hands. Mentally, he braced himself for when Francesca hit that age as well. Now that would be an experience judging by her current dexterity with a spoon and mashed potato.

He'd agreed to go to the ceremony tomorrow partly because he thought he should. Any lingering doubts about Olivia's sincerity in her feelings had long since vanished, but there was no doubt it could get a little awkward sitting there watching them make vows to each other. He vaguely recalled Olivia being in the same position at his wedding. At least this time there was no chance of Natalia running out: someone would have to pry her away from Olivia these days. No, he'd go and he'd pretend to be comfortable with it, but that wouldn't stop him hoping an urgent call came in halfway through.

As he was pondering those points, he heard a crash outside in the yard. Neither Olivia nor Natalia had taken their cars so he was immediately on high alert. It was only just past ten anyway – he didn't expect them home for a while yet. Going to the window he saw a pair of taillights disappearing into the distance and felt the old familiar worry creep up on him.

Then the back door banged and he rushed through to the kitchen only to come face-to-face with what he assumed was an intruder. Briefly, he glanced around to see if there was anything he could use to defend himself then he caught sight of his prowler.

"Olivia, you scared the hell out of me!" He placed a hand on chest, trying to calm his galloping heart rate.

She frowned and closed the door behind her. "I do live here."

"No, I just expected you to be out longer, that's all."

"Yeah..." She sighed deeply. "When Reva moved onto a blow-by-blow account, literally in some cases, of my life I thought it was time to call it a night."

Frank barely suppressed his smile. "Right. Do you want me to stick around or..?"

"God, no, go home. Thanks for watching them. Emma get to bed okay?"

"Eventually, yeah."

She chuckled. "Right, no elaboration needed. Francesca?"

"Slept like a log since I put her down."

Olivia seemed faintly impressed. "You've got the magic touch."

It was a genuine compliment. He smiled and then went to retrieve his coat from the living room. When he returned, it was to find a red-faced Natalia trying to sneak in as well. Olivia had taken a seat at the table and quirked an eyebrow expectantly.

"What are you doing home?" she asked.

"Um..." Natalia looked caught then her face cleared. "Well, I could ask you the same thing."

"Can it," Olivia advised.

Grinning, Natalia looked to Frank. "Emma get to bed okay?"

"After a struggle."

"Not again. Francesca?" she went on with an anxious look on her face.

It was easier just to repeat himself. "Slept like a log since I put her down."

"Wow, impressive there." As Olivia began chuckling, Natalia glanced over. "What?"

"Nothing. Anyway, I was just seeing Frank off."

He cleared his throat. "It's been a pleasure. I'll see you both tomorrow."

As he let himself out into the cool air he had to smile to himself. He might not agree with the way it happened, but he had to admit it, those two were made for each other. Eleni crossed his mind and his grin grew. Perhaps things had worked out the way they were supposed to after all.

### **ACT THREE**

Once more, Olivia woke up alone. She didn't much like the sensation before but today she was at least hoping for a little cuddle or... something before. She pouted until she realized that Natalia couldn't see her so it was pointless. With that in mind, she grabbed her robe and went in search of her errant partner.

The younger woman was not with the girls who were both fast asleep; nor was she in the bathroom. The radio was on in the kitchen though; Olivia heard it as she crept down the stairs. Resolving to be as quiet as a mouse, she padded across the carpet and through to where Natalia was focused solely on the stove. She didn't even hear her come in.

With a triumphant smirk she swept over and grabbed her around the waist. "Hey."

"Aargh!" Natalia spun around, almost jabbing a fork through her arm.

Olivia swatted it away. "Watch what you're doing with that."

Her partner's face was radiant. "Well, if you sneak up on women with dangerous weapons, you can expect to get hurt. Especially today. Someone might think you were looking for a way out."

"Never." Pulling her close, Olivia dropped a lingering kiss onto her lips. When she drew back she was feeling lightheaded. "The girls are still asleep; we've got plenty of time. What d'ya say?"

Natalia stepped back, leaving a safe distance between them. "Nope."

Olivia groaned. "Why the hell not?"

Natalia grinned at her partner's frustration. "The look on your face right now is priceless, you know that?"

She decided to try a bit of blackmail. "You know, I woke up and you weren't there again. That's not good for a girl's ego at the best of times, but on her wedding day..."

"On her wedding day, she should wake up alone," Natalia replied, "because on the wedding night..."

Olivia thought about that for a long minute. "Okay, I can live with that."

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"Natalia!" Olivia yelled from the foot of the staircase. "What are you doing up there?"

"Never you mind," was the muffled reply.

Pausing, Olivia dropped her head to one side and considered climbing – no, running – up the stairs to see precisely what Natalia was doing, but one sidelong glance at Emma pouting on the sofa beside Francesca warned her otherwise. They were already running late as it was. She'd promised Ava she'd be at the Beacon twenty minutes ago and she still had to drop Francesca with Frank. It was something to do with the snooze button on the alarm clock and a warm body nestled beside hers, she was certain. If they couldn't even make it to their own wedding because they couldn't get out of bed, then maybe they were guaranteed a long and happy life together. Suppressing her smirk, she was about to call goodbye when Natalia appeared at the top of the stairs in a fluffy bathrobe.

"You were gonna say goodbye, right?" Natalia questioned.

Surveying her shrewdly, Olivia deduced there was nothing different about her appearance. She hadn't even showered yet. She cleared her throat to remove the connotations of that from her mind.

"Of course, I was."

Natalia leaned her hip against the wall. "Come up here and say it then."

"Back in a minute, Jellybean," Olivia muttered, practically leaping up the stairs two at a time. The disgruntled sigh that came from her middle daughter didn't make her feel at all guilty as she edged Natalia back towards the bedroom.

"Wait," Natalia said sternly. "No, you don't. You have to get to the Beacon, you have to get ready and look absolutely gorgeous, so that you don't embarrass me today."

"Oh," Olivia said with mock surprise. "I'm likely to embarrass you?"

"Well, it wouldn't be unusual," Natalia said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "The amount of time it takes me to keep you from completely humiliating yourself on a daily \_"

Olivia cut her off with a short sharp kiss. Drawing back, she realized it hadn't done either of them any good. The blood had rushed up to Natalia's cheeks and she was sure her own expression resembled a hungry tiger. Which, to be fair, wasn't too far from the truth. Putting an inch of distance between them, she composed herself – but barely.

"I can't wait for tonight," she said huskily. "A honeymoon without the kids. Just you, me..."

"That's only if we both make it to the ceremony," Natalia retorted.

The younger woman was always better at pulling herself back together, no matter how distracted she was at any given time. One of the many irritating things about her, Olivia decided at that moment.

"Okay, we're going, we're going," she said sullenly. "Emma'll probably drag me down the stairs by my ankles if I don't anyway."

"She's looking forward to looking absolutely adorable, that's all."

"Mmm hmm, but heaven forbid we use that word. She's not adorable, she's not cute. She's growing up too fast, that's what she is," Olivia concluded with a heavy sigh.

Natalia just smiled. "We'll deal with that another day, Momma Bear."

Olivia threw her a look. "I'm sure. Shouldn't Leyla be here by now?"

"She wanted to check in at the Beacon. I think she was a little scared of the boss to be honest," Natalia added innocently.

"She's getting wiser," Olivia answered.

Leaning forward, Natalia planted a chaste kiss on her cheek. "Go on, get out of here. I'll see you in a few hours."

Holding her gaze, Olivia murmured, "Promise?"

"You bet," replied her partner. "I heard there was cake afterwards so..."

Olivia edged closer. "Always a reason."

Natalia nodded and let their lips drift towards each other. "Mmm hmm."

"Mom!" Emma's irate voice rose from downstairs.

Growling, Olivia backed towards the door. "The interrupting she gets from Frank."

"Go," Natalia said softly, "I'll see you soon."

The look in her love's eyes remained on her mind until well after she'd started the car and set off with the girls into town. She just had to pray that a pesky wedding and subsequent reception wouldn't quash the full meaning of a honeymoon. Casting her eyes heavenward, she tried to remind God she'd been really good lately and He owed her one for making her squirm through Natalia's last wedding. She sincerely hoped He was listening.

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"Damn," Leyla muttered as she checked her watch. One little trip to the store to buy a celebratory bottle for Natalia and now she was running way behind schedule. She sincerely hoped Olivia had set off already with the girls because another icy look from her direction and she might just speak her mind. Or, you know, not, because she valued her face the way it looked. While she couldn't deny Olivia loved her family, she had to admit she was scary about it at times.

Adjusting the bag on her arm, she was about to set off across the road when she noticed a figure crossing to meet her.

"Anna, hi," she said, somewhat surprised the detective had approached her. They hadn't had much to do with each other since she'd come to town.

"Are you getting ready for the ceremony later?" Anna asked when they met.

"Yeah, I'm actually late. Got a feeling Olivia will kill me for it later. Are you coming?"

The officer shook her head. "Unfortunately, someone has to hold the fort. Anyhow, I heard you had a date with Jonathan."

Leyla repressed her sigh. "So did half the town by the sound of it."

Anna chuckled. "It's tough to keep things secret around here."

"Any idea where I can buy a set of muzzles?" she asked, trying to keep the frustration from her voice.

"Not off the top of my head. But if you find any let me know – I could do with a few at the station."

With that, Anna smiled and walked on. Leyla watched her go then turned slowly to continue walking herself. This dating-in-a-small-town thing was becoming a little annoying. She liked Jonathan, she liked Sarah. She just wasn't sure she wanted to commit to anything with every set of eyes in town focused solely on them. In Chicago the only people she had to avoid if she wanted an easy life were her parents and their friends. Now though it seemed she couldn't move for people waiting to get involved.

Suddenly she had an unwavering urge for a jolt of caffeine. Checking her watch, she grimaced, but nevertheless began walking speedily over to Company. She'd get it in a takeout cup.

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"Have I told you how gorgeous you look?"

A shiver ran through Doris at the words though she endeavored to play it completely cool. Still, judging from the smug look on Blake's face, she failed in that respect. She wasn't prepared to completely relinquish control, however, and steadfastly studied the vase of flowers on the table in front of them. They'd been tasked with checking everything was in order and waiting for Natalia's arrival. Obviously, her organizational skills at Rick and Mindy's wedding-that-didn't-happen had been remembered in some quarters. Olivia was already dressed, looking pretty damn good, with Ava and Emma keeping her company.

"Are you going all shy on me?" Blake asked.

Doris smirked. "Just mentally counting how many times you have said it. I'm coming in at five," she added.

"That's fairly low, considering," commented her girlfriend.

Feeling her composure slip, Doris had no choice but to press her lips briefly to Blake's soft cheek and then turn away. Anymore than that right now and she knew where they'd end up. Reaching out, she fluffed up the flowers.

After a pause Blake took the hint and distanced herself, albeit slightly. "It's romantic though, isn't it?" she went on eventually. "When you think of all they've gone through and they actually made it to this point. I wasn't convinced at first but... They're quite cute together."

Doris bit back a snort. "Don't let Olivia hear you say that."

"Oh, she's a softie now."

"And you'll tell her that to her face?"

"No," Blake conceded with a shrug, "from a distance and with a wall between us, maybe. But I still maintain that they're sweet," she persisted.

Doris let out a dry chuckle and tried not to consider the implications of the statement. "These flowers are nice, aren't they?"

"Beautiful." Blake's breath was abruptly on the back of her neck. "But you don't really care about flowers right now."

"If anything was below standard today, Olivia would dice everything around her into little cubes. It's self-preservation. Besides, these are beautiful."

"At this moment you're too interested in them."

Reluctantly, and knowing she didn't really have much of a choice, Doris turned to face her. There was a knowing glint in Blake's eye, one that surprisingly stung her. On the one hand, she didn't want Blake to get any ideas; on the other, she didn't like to be thought so little of.

Taking her hands, Blake asserted, "There's no need to look so worried. I'm talking about Olivia and Natalia, that's all."

"I didn't think it was anything else," Doris lied smoothly. Then, seeing the flicker of disapproval cross her girlfriend's face, she asked hesitantly, "After Ross, do you really see yourself wanting to get married again?"

"Well, I do like weddings," she answered after a moment. "But there are other ways to show commitment. Just so happens that Olivia and Natalia want the wedding, the symbol. Considering all they've had to go through to get to this point, it's understandable. And it'll help Emma and Francesca in the long run. It's right for their family. Plus, Olivia likes a good party."

"And you don't like the idea of dressing up and getting all the attention?" Doris said innocently.

Blake nudged her with a big grin. "Well, I didn't say that. But I'm not steering my life towards that. I'm trying to enjoy the time I've got with Clarissa and my boys. And you," she added, inching forward. "Maybe I'm taking a page out of Olivia's book, doing things differently than I have before."

There was a lump in Doris's throat. Squeezing Blake's hand, she waited until it had disappeared before she answered, "Well, that's all right then."

Drawing her into a deep kiss, Doris enjoyed the contact for as long as possible. When her cell phone buzzed in her pocket, she groaned as she pulled back.

"If that's Olivia with some reminder for flowers, I'll..." She trailed off as she actually read the message and a smile slipped onto her face.

Blake gazed at her expectantly. "What? What is it?"

"Ashlee wanting me to offer them her congratulations. And reminding me not to muck this wedding up." Putting the phone away, she glanced to her girlfriend. "Now, would I do that?"

Not even thinking about it, Blake answered with a grin, "Yes."

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Josh had to smile as he edged into the huddle of men. "Guess I'm in the right place here."

Buzz chuckled. "It wasn't on purpose. We just sorta drifted together."

Bill was leaning against the wall with his cell phone in his hand. His brow cleared as he read a message and he popped the phone back into his pocket. "Sorry," he explained, "just checking on the family."

Phillip patted him on the shoulder. "Quite right."

"Oh, he's only doing it for your benefit," Buzz joked. "And you," he went on, looking at Josh, "aren't you supposed to be running this show?"

He exhaled. "I don't think anyone besides Olivia is running this show. She wouldn't deign to have me conduct the ceremony if she could do it herself."

"Well, that's true enough," replied Buzz.

"Olivia's certainly independent," Phillip said wistfully.

"Feisty," Buzz added.

"Unpredictable," Bill put in.

Josh pondered his contribution for a moment. "Stunningly beautiful?"

"That's a cop-out," said Buzz, shaking his head.

"Or maybe Olivia's behind you and I'm just the smart one," Josh answered.

Buzz spun so fast that he nearly knocked Bill's re-emerging cell phone from his hand. Phillip stifled his laughter as Josh raised an imaginary glass to his fellow exes.

"To Olivia and Natalia," he said. "And let's hope everything runs smoothly because if I know one thing it's that when you push Olivia Spencer to the limit, weird and wonderful things happen."

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"That had better be set up properly," Doris warned, smirking as Frank almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of her voice. She'd noticed that he'd been fiddling with the laptop again, much to the amusement of the man on the other end of the connection. Judging from Rafe's raised eyebrow, he thought as much of Frank's technical skill as she did.

Frank spun around. "It is. I was just adjusting things."

"If you break it, Olivia will strangle you with her bare hands," Doris said with a smirk; she wouldn't mind watching that.

"Um, actually," Rafe piped up through the speakers, "I think she'd have to get in line."

Gulping, Frank just nodded.

Doris clamped a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You're looking a little hot under the collar there, Frankie. Need a glass of water?"

Rafe cleared his throat. "He was going to get my baby sister for me to take a look at."

Frank gratefully took the out and fled towards where Buzz and Lillian were fussing over Francesca. Doris turned back to the screen ruefully. "Spoilsport."

"We guys have to stick together, especially with you and Olivia around." He paused. "How's Ashlee doing?"

"You probably hear from her as much as I do," Doris answered with a smile as she thought of her daughter. "But she's good, she's doing really well."

The smile that spread over his face was enhanced a few seconds later when Frank appeared with a squirming Francesca in his arms. As Rafe cooed over the web link, Doris had to conceal her sentimentality. It wasn't good for her image.

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"It's too tight," Emma complained, tugging at her dress.

Olivia glanced over to Ava for help, who happily consented after applying her mascara. Swapping places with her eldest daughter in front of the mirror, she stepped back to watch the scene play out. Emma had loved the dress when they'd bought it; adored it ever since. There certainly wasn't anything wrong with it now, except that perhaps it looked duller under the lights than it would at the ceremony. Her insides interrupted her with a flutter and she forced herself to return to the matter at hand. The fact that Natalia would be on her way now should be irrelevant.

"Look," Ava was saying, "you can't argue with me. You look beautiful, okay, Em? You're gonna be the prettiest girl out there and you'll do a great job."

"What if I forget to do something?" the girl asked softly. "Or what if I fall over or –"

"If that happens," Ava cut in, "then you pick yourself up and carry on. And everyone'll be proud of you for doing just that. Sometimes things go wrong and the best thing you can do is carry on. If you stopped every time something went wrong, you'd never move."

Perhaps that was why Ava had needed desperately to go to San Francisco, Olivia mused to herself. Catching her eldest daughter's eye in the mirror, she smiled. Ava met her gaze briefly then looked back to her sister.

"You look beautiful," she repeated, "and you'll make everyone proud. This is just about you being a part of Mom and Natalia's day because they love you so much. And if you'd really rather just sit in the back row and watch everything, that's fine."

Emma had paled slightly. "But I'd miss it!"

Ava grinned. "And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

With a flourish, Emma turned from the mirror. "Mom, are you sure I look okay?"

"Stunning," Olivia agreed unhesitatingly. "Do you need the bathroom before we start?"

After thinking about it for a millisecond, Emma nodded and fled the room. Releasing her breath into a half-laugh, Ava plopped down into a chair and studied her own reflection.

"You look beautiful, too," Olivia said quietly. "In fact, you look absolutely amazing."

Ava waved away the compliment. "So do you."

"Well, I trot it out for the big occasions," she quipped.

"Are you nervous?" asked Ava, ignoring the statement.

Olivia thought about that for a second. All right, her insides had been fluttering a little, she mused, but was that nerves or just plain happiness? She didn't have any reservations. She and Natalia had been living in a type of marriage for longer than either of them had realized. This ceremony wasn't going to change anything but it was a symbol, a signal to the world that they were together and solid as a rock. Everybody had to like that or just plain old get out of her life and her way.

"No," she answered finally. "I'm too sure to be nervous."

Apprehensively, she wondered whether to broach the subject of Ava's recent confrontations with Natalia or just leave it alone. At the end of the day, she could easily see both sides and raising the issue five minutes before she walked down the aisle could be disastrous. Ava was here because they were a family now, whatever the difficulties. Olivia knew that her daughter could be stubborn at times, occasionally combining both her mother's and father's obstinacy. She was just relieved it hadn't led to a fracture so serious that Ava had walked away from the ceremony. Having as many family members here as possible was important to Natalia. And, Olivia quietly admitted to herself, it didn't do her any harm either.

By the time Emma had returned from the bathroom, she and Ava were completely ready to go. Olivia looked at herself in the mirror, hardly believing this was the woman she'd become in just a few short years. Kissing both her girls impulsively, she let out a determined sigh.

"Let's do this."

Ava chuckled. "Don't we need Natalia for that? Doris said she'd come get us when she arrived. So sit down and be patient."

"Oh, yeah, because that's my greatest quality."

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Blake surveyed the multitude of people ahead of them and tried not to let the worry that was creeping at the edges of her mind expand into anything more. She focused on checking who'd turned up and who had politely declined the offer. Most of Olivia's exes had accepted – Bill, Buzz, Phillip – and Frank was there for Francesca's sake. Blake briefly wondered whether the expensive photographer Olivia had hired knew the minefield of photo opportunities he was letting himself in for. Reva was near to the front with Colin at her knee; Beth was reassuring Peyton vigorously about something or other; and Rick was anxiously checking his pager every two seconds as though he was

expecting to be called away. Knowing Rick, he probably was. Blake's eyes settled on her mother talking to Clarissa animatedly and smiled at the fact Holly had decided to stick around for the wedding. While the wedding really wasn't something the boys were interested in, and they'd been removed from boredom accordingly, it was nice that Clarissa had someone else to share her excitement with.

For a few minutes Blake tried to concentrate on the fact that everybody looked happy to be here. That idealism was quashed, however, when Doris stomped down the aisle looking thoroughly concerned.

"There's no sign of them."

Blake chewed on her lip. "Leyla was supposed to be bringing her, right? Maybe they're stuck in traffic."

"Everybody else is here," Doris pointed out.

"Well, she'll be here soon then," Blake said decisively. "We just have to stop the natives getting restless." Spotting Frank juggling his cell phone and Francesca while Buzz chatted happily away to Lillian, she rushed over to grab the toddler. "Here, let me."

He grinned gratefully. "Thanks. She's picked up this habit of squirming like I don't know what."

Crouching down, Blake set the little girl against her knee. Francesca suddenly became very interested in pulling at her hair, something Blake could tolerate for the time being.

"I don't suppose you've heard of any accidents or anything," she asked Frank carefully. "Anything that could be holding up traffic?"

He looked up and caught her meaning. "Have you tried calling her?"

"Yeah," Blake admitted, "but there's no answer. Although those dresses aren't big on pocket space, so she might not have it with her."

It suddenly occurred to her that she was making excuses and avoiding the one thing she was too reluctant to say aloud. Standing with Francesca, she held the girl close to her cheek, inhaling the soft baby powder smell that was endemic around toddlers. Just the action helped soothe her nerves. Glancing over to Doris, she caught her eye and saw her own anxiety reflected there. Then her girlfriend's gaze slipped to something over her shoulder.

Her heart leapt as she turned – then plummeted at double the speed.

There was Leyla, completely underdressed for a wedding, looking petrified. Seeing her, Jonathan nudged Sarah from her seat and stood up. Somehow the idea that all eyes were on her did the young woman no good.

Doris was the first to speak. "What's going on? Is Natalia okay?"

Leyla was gnawing on her lip. "I don't know."

Frank was on his feet now. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"What's happened?" Jonathan asked, more gently.

Looking over gratefully, Leyla addressed her next words to him. "I was really late getting to the farmhouse. I lost track of time and somehow... Well, anyway, when I got there the door was open and Natalia wasn't there. I checked every room and the garden and the shed and everywhere I could think of but she just wasn't there."

An icy feeling was settling in the pit of Blake's stomach. "Was her car still there?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes," Leyla said with her voice breaking. "And her dress was still in the closet."

"Maybe she went out to see if she could find you," Doris suggested weakly.

"On foot and leaving the door open on her way out?" Blake murmured.

Frank already had his phone to his ear. "Anna, I need you at the farmhouse straight away. I'll meet you there." Clamping his phone shut, he put a hand on Leyla's shoulder. "I need you to come with me, tell me absolutely everything, okay?"

A crowd was gathering around them – Phillip, Reva and Mel being faces Blake picked out immediately. Josh looked particularly concerned at the forefront. Jonathan whispered something to Reva then prodded Sarah in her direction.

"I'll come with you," he said to Leyla.

Frank didn't seem to care about the entourage. Turning back to Doris, he said, "I'll call you when I get to the farmhouse. Hopefully it's all a mix-up, but I don't think you should let Olivia know until we're sure what's happened."

"That could take weeks," Doris argued.

"Okay," he snapped, "do you want to be the one to tell her?"

"Tell me what?" a voice behind them asked.

With her stomach suddenly turning to quicksand, Blake turned in the direction of Olivia, Ava, and Emma. All three of them looked absolutely stunning, a sense offset by the absolute panic in Olivia's eyes. She glanced around all of them and settled her gaze on Frank.

"Is Natalia okay? Has there been an accident?"

He squirmed under her glare. "We don't know. We don't know where she is."

## **ACT FOUR**

This wasn't happening. It just wasn't happening.

Somehow she'd heard the words but they hadn't sunk in. How could they not know where she was? That was a ridiculous idea. The farmhouse was barely a few miles up the road; it wasn't exactly a lot of ground to cover. She suddenly felt sick. Here she was standing in front of this mass of people, all of them looking straight at her, and she couldn't comprehend what was going on. Bizarrely, she was stuck in a moment from the past. Glancing sideways to Blake, she tried to ask a question but couldn't.

They couldn't find her, she told herself. Well, was she all right? Leyla was here, looking petrified. Had something happened that she knew of, but wasn't telling? Was there an

accident she didn't want to own up to? Or had Natalia maybe told her something, given her a message to pass on? Just like she had with Blake all those months ago...

"No," she said forcefully, more to herself than anyone else. "She wouldn't."

Doris gripped her arm, understanding her straight away. "Of course, she wouldn't."

"She's not at the farmhouse," Frank explained, "but her car's still there, so that's a starting point. I'll meet you there, if that's okay?"

She felt herself nod. After a moment he turned and pushed through the throng. Now there was just a herd of insignificant faces staring at her. A thought suddenly struck her hard.

"Francesca..." she murmured.

"Shush, she's here," Blake said.

Taking her daughter, Olivia buried her face into her soft hair. She vaguely heard Doris telling people to back off. The next time she looked up she was faced only with a select few faces – Doris, Blake, Phillip, Buzz, and Ava who was clutching Emma tightly. The majority of people were spilling from the room. She wanted to call them to come back, explain that it was a mistake and Natalia would be walking through the door any minute. She'd be bitterly disappointed if they all went so soon. But she couldn't articulate the words; she just watched them all go.

"Where did Leyla go?" she asked with a shaking voice.

"Frank took her with him," Blake replied, "Jonathan, too."

"I... I need to get home," she murmured, eliciting a squeal from Francesca as she held her too close. "I need to see."

"I'll drive you," Doris answered.

"I'll sort things here," Blake put in, reaching for Francesca. "Why don't you leave her here with us?"

"Yeah, we'll keep her safe," Buzz added.

"Rafe's on the laptop on a video connection," said Doris quietly. "Tell him there's been an unspecified delay. Um, we'll call back if we can?"

"Sure thing," he answered.

Olivia was grateful but her brain was barely functioning. She looked to Phillip, hardly knowing why. His face was set in a fiercely determined expression which softened slightly as she met his gaze.

"I'll bring Emma and Ava home for you, okay?" he said. "But you go. We shouldn't hold you up."

She didn't need any further encouragement. As she rushed down the aisle with her dress flapping at her legs, she just tried to repeat her new mantra.

*It's a mistake, that's all. A mistake.*

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Doris barely knew how she kept control of the car on the drive to the farmhouse. Her mind was just as active as Olivia's, if not in quite so much turmoil. She supposed she knew exactly what was going through her friend's head; she wanted to speak and dispel her anxieties as much as she could but that'd just bring about fresh ones. If she assured Olivia that Natalia wouldn't just not turn up, then she inevitably told her that something terrible had happened.

Her hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel as she turned up towards the long driveway. She didn't like this feeling of helplessness that was overtaking her, probably no more than Olivia did.

The yard was already a tangle of police officers and Springfield residents. Olivia jumped out of the car and stomped straight over to Frank by the door.

"Okay," the hotel owner snapped. "Now you tell me what's going on."

Anxiety was etched on his face. "The door was open. Not just unlocked; ajar. But not deliberately, I don't think. Leyla said it was barely noticeable."

"There's no way –" Olivia was barely managing to keep her composure as her life threatened to crumble around her.

"I know that," Frank interrupted her. "Eleni's on her way over."

Doris studied him a moment. "You're going all out on this awfully quickly," she observed. "What happened to waiting more than half an hour before panicking?"

"Edmund happened," he said shortly. "I'd rather we kicked up a real stink and found her safe and well than wait and..."

He didn't have to finish the sentence. From the look on her face, Olivia had concluded it in her head. There was an excruciating pause while something else passed through her mind, then her eyes regained focus. Her lips even pressed together in that old formidable manner Doris remembered being on the receiving end of more than once. Briefly, she wondered how long Olivia could keep up the pretense for. They all glanced over as Phillip pulled up with Ava and Emma both visible in the car.

Turning urgently back to Frank, she asked, "Can I have a look inside? Just to see if there's anything out of place."

He nodded. "Don't touch anything."

The three of them proceeded inside to a house that felt eerily cold. It was just the connotations of Natalia's disappearance; Doris was sure of it, but it didn't make the feeling go away in a hurry. Judging from the way Olivia's eyes passed easily over the kitchen, everything there was as she'd left it a few hours ago. Doris followed her and Frank into the living room where Olivia immediately stopped short.

"Did Leyla mention making tea?" she asked coolly.

"No. She said she came in, looked for Natalia and left," Frank replied.

Doris looked at the two cups and their position on the table. The handles were both pointing towards the door, as if someone had placed both of them down and they'd remained untouched. Sure enough, both of them were full practically to the brim.

"So, she had a visitor," Doris murmured then looked to Frank. "And she let them in of her own accord."

He shook his head. "Let's wait until we've got forensics before we jump to that conclusion." He turned to Olivia and asked, "Do you want to look upstairs?"

She visibly shuddered. "I need air."

Doris took her arm and steered her towards the door.

Back outside Olivia walked straight past her daughters then did a double-take. "Where's Francesca?" she asked, suddenly panicked.

"Blake's got her," answered Doris. "She's perfectly safe. If you want her here, I can –"

"No," Olivia interrupted. "She's better off away from this."

For a lengthy moment she stared into space then she asked, in a heartbreakingly soft voice, "Is this it? Has she gone again? Has Father Ray come along and persuaded her to walk out on me again?"

Doris exchanged a look with Ava who was gazing miserably at her mother's back. Neither of them wanted to speak, so it fell to Frank to slip a hand onto Olivia's shoulder.

"She wouldn't leave," he said, "not now, especially not today. I know that for a fact, Olivia, so don't argue with me. She wouldn't leave Francesca, think about that if nothing else. And," he went on after a moment of deliberation, "she wouldn't leave you either. Much as I hate saying it, you two are perfect together and the perfect parents to my little girl."

There was silence then a rustle behind them which went unnoticed by both Olivia and Frank. Doris, however, saw Ava try in vain to keep hold of Emma as she tried to flee. Phillip was already jogging after his daughter and, sensing Olivia didn't really know she was there in the first place, Doris went after them.

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Right now Phillip felt about ready to implode. This was Rick and Mindy's wedding all over again; he felt completely out of control and it drove him crazy. Of course, he could take his frustrations out on Frank for making his little girl feel like a spare part, but that'd no doubt hold up the investigation a little bit.

He found Emma at the edge of the lake, gazing listlessly at a lone duck twirling around on the water. Phillip slowed down as he felt someone come up beside him. To his surprise, it was Doris.

"We can toss a coin on who gets to slap him later," she said by way of explanation then she gestured to Emma. "Shall we?"

At first they couldn't get her to look at them. When she did, it was clear she'd been trying to stop herself crying. Phillip felt his insides splitting as he hugged her.

"Sweetheart, it'll be okay," he found himself lying.

She shook her head. "When she comes back, she'll be coming back to Francesca. It's just like the last time, isn't it? She's gone and doesn't think of me at all."

"Emma," Doris said firmly, "that's not true."

"But Frank said –"

Phillip cut in, "He's Francesca's daddy, isn't he? Of course, he thinks of her right away. But that doesn't mean you're any less important to Natalia. I know for a fact that she loves you as much as she loves your sister."

Emma didn't look convinced. Just as he was wracking his brains for something else to say, Doris kneeled down beside them and looked Emma square in the face.

"Can I be honest with you, Em? Are you grown up enough to handle that?"

She nodded hesitantly. "Yes."

"Good," Doris said smoothly. "Okay, you know that Frank is a really good man, don't you? He's a police detective, he likes looking after people, and he's good at it sometimes."

Phillip noted the addendum and repressed his snort. Emma, though, was hooked on every word. He hoped Doris had some clue of where she was headed or this could do more harm than good.

"Frank is a really good man," she repeated, "but he's an idiot sometimes. Everyone's an idiot sometimes, but Frank's really good at it."

Emma chuckled through her tears. "Is he?"

"He just doesn't think when he opens his mouth, that's all," Doris answered. "I mean, you know when you're at school and someone says something, and you really want to say something back?" Emma nodded. "Well, I bet Natalia tells you to think before you say something, right? Because she wants you to grow up properly, and think about what you should say and what you shouldn't."

"That's right," said Emma carefully.

"Well, Frank needs someone to tell him not to once in a while," Doris concluded. "If he had he would've remembered to mention you. And if your mom hadn't been so upset, she would've set him straight right away, I promise you that. But she's upset at the moment, and she'll need you to be as good as you possibly can be."

Emma had listened very attentive. The cloud washed over her face, only to be replaced by a fresh one. "Where is Natalia?"

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Olivia felt that, if for a moment, she stopped then she'd stop completely. The number of times she'd circled the driveway was incomprehensible, but no one seemed in a rush to halt her progress. Once in a while she caught the eye of Ava helplessly watching her by the cars, but no one said a word. Eleni had arrived a few minutes earlier and was swiftly being briefed by Frank. It felt bizarre to be leaving her fate in the hands of those two but right now she didn't think she was capable of anything else. Being useless had never been her forte.

Finally, she felt the presence of Doris behind her. Turning she found her holding Emma's hand. Her daughter looked positively catatonic. Kneeling down, she clutched her in a

massive hug and tried to tell her it was all going to be all right. Looking up at the anxiety etched on Doris's face, she knew she couldn't make that promise. Her insides suddenly made an effort to split. She just pulled Emma closer and hoped it'd pass.

When Frank cleared his throat beside her, she was instantly alert. Standing, she took Emma's hand and instinctively moved closer to Doris. She also felt Ava approach behind her and slot a hand onto her shoulder.

"Well?" she pressed.

He held up a transparent bag containing a small bracelet caked in mud. "Is this Natalia's?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Yes," she said shakily. "Where did you find it?"

"Trodden into the dirt by the porch. It's possible the kidnapper doesn't even know it came off."

She stood a little straighter. "Don't we need to rule everything else out first?"

Frank looked uncomfortable. "That's a secondary concern right now."

"No. No, it isn't." Her grip tightened on Emma's hand. "I want you to do this properly and if that means checking with everyone who she might've gone to in order to – to get away, then you're gonna do that, okay?"

He rubbed at his forehead. "Sure I am. Who would you like us to talk to first?"

"Father Ray," she said instantly and with venom. "And if he claims ignorance, pull the cop card for God's sake. He can stop hiding behind that damn collar and start telling the truth."

"Mom," Ava murmured, "he's got nothing to tell. This isn't like the last time."

She turned to half-face her daughter. "If that's true, then that's what he'll say."

After giving Frank a short list of people to talk to, she gestured Phillip to come over from where he was hovering by the car.

"You don't have to stay," she said.

"Well, I figured Emma could get some stuff together –"

"No," she interrupted, "she's not going anywhere without me right now."

His soft eyes met hers. "That wasn't my intention. All of you are welcome to stay for as long as you want."

Before she could debate that in her mind, she finally saw Leyla slinking away from the farmhouse. Pushing past Phillip, she broke into a run fast enough to grab her viciously by the arm. The younger woman tried to shake her off, but to no avail.

"Why the hell weren't you here when I left?" she demanded. "You were late. To your own sister's wedding day, you were late."

Tears were glistening in Leyla's eyes. "I got delayed. It isn't my fault."

"Really? Because I'm looking at this situation and I'm thinking it is your fault. I'm actually thinking I want to wrap you around a pole right now."

"Mom!" Ava said sharply with a gesture towards Emma.

Letting go, she backed away a few inches and felt instantly ashamed of herself. If Natalia could see her screaming at her sister, as if she was the one to blame... She turned around and glanced across to the apprehensive faces watching her. Emma looked scared; Ava concerned; Phillip was sporting a determined expression she didn't want to cross; and Doris wore an impartial mask that was cracked in several places. Behind them, Frank stood with his eyes closed. When he finally opened them, she stared squarely at him.

In a steely level voice, she said, "Find Edmund before I do, or you'll have another body on your hands."