

Title: The Path of the Night  
Subtitle: "One may not reach the dawn save by the path of the night." Kahlil Gibran  
Author: ocean gazer

## PROLOGUE

January 4th

Anna shut the door of the observation room behind her and shook her head. From the way Frank and Eleni were huddled together nervously, watching their daughter through the one-way glass of the interrogation room, a person might think Marina was about to be hauled off to death row or something. Given the way things were handled in Springfield, it was unlikely the woman would ever even set foot in jail – especially considering that she was the police chief's daughter.

She rolled her eyes and then squared her shoulders, preparing herself for the task ahead. It wasn't the interrogation itself she was concerned about; it was the idea of trying to conduct it with the baleful eyes of her chief on her that was causing her stress.

Frank had protested the idea of bringing Marina in again for questioning – first arguing that she had been cleared as an Edmund-accomplice-cum-suspect, and then complaining that it would take time away from the work of finding Natalia. Anna hadn't disagreed with him on either count, since he was actually correct. She'd simply pointed out that they couldn't put aside every other case just to focus on Natalia, and reminded him that they were investigating Marina. Eleni had backed her up on that. Then Anna had brought out her trump card – even if Marina didn't know what Edmund was up to or where he was now, she might still have some knowledge, based on what he'd done in the past, which would prove useful.

With a soft sigh, she opened the door to the interrogation room and stepped inside, closing the door behind her and then taking a seat across the table from Marina. The younger woman glared at her. Anna folded her hands on the table top and regarded her for a long moment, just waiting.

As she expected, Marina couldn't contain an outburst. "I don't know why you brought me here. I've already taken your stupid lie detector test; you already know I'm not helping Edmund. I can't lead you to him, and I can't tell you where Natalia Rivera is."

Anna leaned forward slightly. "I know that. That's not why you're here. Marina, we know you helped DeSilva tamper with evidence on dozens of cases. That's a very serious matter." Watching carefully, she saw the younger woman flinch and then drop her gaze to the floor, and decided to press the point. "It's pretty clear that you're a dirty cop."

She waited a heartbeat, half-expecting an outraged protest. Instead, she could see a sick look on Marina's face. Anna gentled her voice a bit, well aware of the woman's parents in the other room. "We need to know why you did what you did, how Edmund was tied

in to that, and who else was involved. If you cooperate and tell us what we need to know, we're prepared to go easy on you. You might get away with no jail time and just losing your badge."

Not that she wanted the woman to walk away without consequences. But the reality was that most of the suspicious files she and Eleni had uncovered were small potatoes – cases where there was no question of the suspect's guilt, but the evidence had been shaky at best until the tampering. The only major, serious cases that had Marina's dirty fingerprints all over them were those directly related to Edmund Winslow. Still, they needed this all out on the table, to know just how deep the corruption went.

She shook herself out of her musings, watching with interest as Marina looked up at her. The younger woman tilted her head to the side, studying her, and Anna couldn't quite decipher the expression in her eyes, especially since her face was completely blank. But the uncomfortable scrutiny didn't last long, and then she could see the sudden flare of hope in Marina's eyes, the sudden mix of fear and relief.

"I wouldn't go to jail...I wouldn't lose my family...my son?"

Even though Anna already knew the answer, she shrugged slightly. "I can't make any promises. But cooperation would go a long way toward showing your good intentions."

She watched Marina sit up straighter in her chair. For the first time in recent memory, the aura of anger that usually surrounded the younger woman was gone, and Anna marveled at it. At that moment, she could see the best pieces of Frank Cooper shining through his daughter – his slow and steady presence, his kindness.

Marina's voice was steady. "It's a long story. Let me start at the beginning..."

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*"No, sir, I'm sorry. I don't speak Spanish and there's no one here right now who does. Please leave a name and number and I'll have someone call you back. Maybe they can help you with whatever case you're trying to get information about."*

Hector Rivera slammed down the phone and glared at his wife. She looked up at him, eyes wide and red. He wanted to yell, but it wasn't her fault the person on the other end of the phone was a fool, even if she was the one who insisted he call. "The clerk couldn't understand my accent and assumed I couldn't speak English. I will not leave my name and phone number lying around for the police. Who knows how they'd decide to use it, or what hours of the day they'd call."

He saw the glint of irritation in her eyes. "You were speaking perfectly good English." There was no reason to reaffirm that, but he nodded anyhow. Her expression turned sad. "But how will we know if there's news...about Natalia...or if there's anything we can do if we don't leave them a way to reach us?"

Hector walked across the room to sit in his favorite chair. His wife followed, sitting on the couch, Kleenex box still in hand. He sighed. "There is nothing we can do to help the police. They will ask us questions about her friends, her enemies, and all we can tell them is what they already know – she had a bastard child and is again flouting God's law by trying to marry a woman. She's chosen a path in life that's led her to this end."

He studied his wife, knowing she wanted to argue, knowing she knew better than to try. He continued, "Leyla will tell us if there's news about what happened or if she's been found. We don't need the police for that."

Carmen's voice was quiet, but brighter than it had been. "She's a good daughter. She will tell us what's happening. You're right; we don't need to contact the police."

Hector nodded and sat back in his chair. "Of course I'm right."

Watching Carmen, he saw the way the tears were bubbling up in her eyes again. He didn't like seeing her so upset. Speaking softly, he said, "We'll call her later this evening. We can ask what is happening and ask her to keep us informed. I know you would like to talk to her."

There was no mistaking the flash of surprise in her eyes and no disguising the note of bitterness in her tone. "I thought you told her not to bother coming back as long as she was spending time with Natalia and Olivia. She's barely spoken to us since the two of you had that big fight months ago, right before she moved down to Springfield."

He waved a dismissive hand in the air. "I was angry; she was angry. We are alike in that way; we understand each other."

Despite hoping his wife would drop the subject, he wasn't surprised when she sighed deeply and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "We've already alienated one daughter. What makes you think the same thing won't happen with Leyla?"

Hector shook his head. "Natalia brought her punishments on herself by her actions. It's different with Leyla. She has done nothing wrong." He leaned forward slightly in his chair, meeting Carmen's eyes. "Believe me when I say that no matter how angry we were with each other, it won't matter at a time like this. Let's have dinner and then we'll call her. You'll see that I'm right."

While she didn't answer in words, he could see the hope and love in her eyes at the thought of talking to Leyla again. He managed a smile and Carmen nodded in response, then got up and made her way back to the kitchen. He left her to her work and picked up his newspaper.

Natalia hadn't been part of their lives at all for nearly twenty years; he couldn't quite grasp how her being missing now was so much different in his wife's eyes. He cared for

his daughter, in his own way, and would never wish actual harm to come to her. At the same time, the woman who'd walked back over their threshold was a stranger to him; she wasn't his sweet, obedient little girl.

Uncomfortable with such introspection, he shook his head and turned his attention to the sports page.

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Anna settled back in her chair, running her hand through her hair. She had been talking to Marina for well over an hour now, and she had a pretty clear picture of what had been going on.

DeSilva had been a dirty cop for years and Marina had gotten mixed up with him when he helped her out on a couple of cases. She hadn't known he was working for Edmund until her own run-in with the madman – she'd planted drugs on a social worker for blackmail purposes, fearing that baby Henry would be taken from her. Winslow had gotten wind of it and started blackmailing her to help him. By then, she was in too deep to get out. Her big fear was that if she exposed Edmund, it would lead to her losing Henry; and losing her son was the one thing she couldn't risk. Marina and DeSilva were the only ones on the police force who'd been working for Edmund and the only ones who'd been involved in the tampering.

Closer to home, Marina didn't seem to know who Hung Li was and didn't know where the orderly had come from who'd helped with Winslow's escape from the hospital. She'd agreed to help with that only after Edmund said he'd let her off the hook and finally gave her the film negatives that showed her planting the drugs in the social worker's desk. It had seemed like her only chance to break free from him. Marina hadn't seen or heard from him since his escape.

Anna's instincts told her that this was, indeed, what had happened, that Marina was telling the truth. It also fit with what Eleni had uncovered in the case files, in terms of what was done and who'd signed off on it. Of course, Anna also knew better than most just how Edmund worked – he discarded underlings like so much garbage when he had no further use for them. Only ruthless, unwaveringly loyal people like her father would be around for the long haul.

Unfortunately, Marina knew little enough about Edmund's habits and whereabouts, certainly nothing that would help them find where he might have taken Natalia.

Still, at least they'd wrapped up one of their open cases. But despite Marina's confession and explanation, there was one thing nagging at Anna. "So why did you let DeSilva tamper with your evidence in the first place? I mean, I understand that once it happened a few times, you felt like you were in too deep to just back out. But why did it happen at all?"

She could almost feel the wall drop back into place around Marina and she realized that this was the biggest reason the other woman had been afraid of exposure, bigger even than the possibility of losing Henry. She almost didn't press the point, not sure it really mattered. After all, they had her confession; they knew what had been done and who'd been involved. The reason why probably didn't really matter. And yet...Anna wanted to know.

"It can be off the record if you want, Marina, but it would really help if we knew your motive. I know you've lost your badge before; I can't understand why you'd risk it again by doing something like this. I mean, you were a shining star out of the police academy and your dad has always been an upstanding cop. Why mess up your record, your chance to follow in his footsteps?"

She didn't miss the tension flooding through the woman across the table from her or the mix of fear and anger in Marina's eyes. She opened her mouth to ask again, when the door to the room banged open. Anna glanced up, seeing Eleni and Frank burst into the room, in full-on protective parent mode.

They both spoke at once.

"She's already told us what we wanted to know," Eleni protested.

"You have no right to badger her like that, Detective Li!" Frank thundered.

Anna fought to keep her exasperation in check as she looked away from the parents to the daughter. She noted that Marina was halfway out of her chair and smiling at Frank and Eleni.

"Mom, Dad...I..."

But neither seemed to pay any attention to their daughter, Anna noted, since they were too busy advancing on her. She looked at them for a moment, shaking her head at the unprofessional display, and then shifted her gaze back toward Marina. Or, more accurately, where Marina had been just moments before.

Anna swore under her breath and zigzagged past Frank and Eleni to race out the door after Marina. She ran down the hallway, finally catching up to the other woman in the waiting area near the main entrance. She caught Marina by the arm and spun her around gently, aware that the room was full of people. She pitched her voice low, noting in her peripheral vision that Frank and Eleni had caught up with them. "Come on. Let's go in the back and wrap this up."

Marina wrestled out of her grasp, not bothering to keep her voice down. "I'm finished, Detective. I've answered all your questions and I'm leaving."

Anna shook her head, mentally giving up. Apparently Marina misread her gesture,

though, since the younger woman advanced on her all of a sudden, anger blazing in her eyes. “Okay, fine; I didn’t answer your last question. You want to know why I did it... why I turned into a dirty cop? It was because I was trying to live up to everybody’s expectations! My dad was so proud of having his daughter be a cop, but how could he continue to be proud of me when I couldn’t close my cases?”

Anna took a step back, filled with a sudden surge of sympathy. She murmured, “Not every case ends up being rock solid. We do the best we can with what we find.”

If anything, her attempt to be soothing had the opposite effect. Marina laughed bitterly. “Well, that wasn’t good enough for Frank Cooper’s daughter. I asked DeSilva for help and saw how he managed to have such a high close rate on his cases. I had to stand out... I had to do whatever I could to make my dad proud...to make him notice me. And if that makes me a bad person, then I guess you should probably throw me in jail, because I would do it again just to see the pride in his eyes once more.”

With that, Marina burst into tears and ran out of the police station into the snowy day beyond. Frank ran after her, while Eleni turned on her heel and practically raced back down the hallway. Anna was left standing alone, feeling like she finally had the last piece of the puzzle in place, and understanding all too well where the police chief’s daughter was coming from. She didn’t condone the choices the younger woman had made, but she could understand why she’d made them.

Anna glanced around the room again and shook her head at the hastily averted gazes and the heads bent together, whispering. Just great. She’d learned enough about Springfield to know that by this time tomorrow, everyone in town would know what had happened.

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Olivia fought the urge to pace as she stood outside Father Ray’s office, waiting for him to finish up a session with one of his parishioners. Not for the first time, she thought about turning on her heel and leaving. Not for the first time, she reminded herself that she couldn’t.

At long last, the door to his office opened. Mrs. Elliott walked out and Olivia grimaced. The sour church lady wasn’t one of her favorite people in the universe, and she knew the feeling was mutual. She exchanged a saccharine smile with the old bat, and then squared her shoulders and approached the open door. She knocked, even though Father Ray was expecting her, and caught the jerk of his chin that invited her in.

Shutting the door behind her, she took a deep breath and approached his desk, sitting down in one of the chairs in front of it. He didn’t look too pleased to see her, but his tone was mild. “I have to admit that I didn’t expect to see you here. Given that you only come to church to please Natalia, I didn’t think you’d seek out any sort of religious guidance.”

The words raised her hackles, but she forced down the reaction. She refused to give him

the satisfaction of seeing her rattled by his veiled insults. “Let’s not play games, Father. You know I’m not here for any of the ‘guidance’ you’re likely to give. I’m sure you know exactly why I’m here.”

She watched him closely and saw him frown in confusion, his response too immediate to be feigned. “Actually, Olivia, I don’t. Unless you think I had something to do with Natalia’s disappearance...”

Her question was blunt. “Did you?”

He scrubbed his hand over his face and she was struck by how tired he looked. “No, I didn’t.” He suddenly straightened up in his chair and met her eyes. “Olivia, you know I’m disappointed in the way Natalia has turned her back on the church, and you know I don’t approve of her relationship with you. But surely you know I would never do anything to hurt her.”

The words were out of her mouth before she could think about them. “I know you wouldn’t.”

It was true, though she hadn’t really thought about it before. While she disagreed with his counsel and didn’t appreciate the way he tried to meddle in her partner’s life, she did know he cared about Natalia. She sat back in her chair and reorganized her thoughts. “Listen, Father...that’s not why I’m here. I want to know if you managed to scare Natalia into having second thoughts about the ceremony.”

He shook his head and opened his mouth and she quickly interrupted before he could say a word. “I know you’re going to tell me that what you talked about with her is confidential. But that’s a bunch of bulls...bullcrap.”

She leaned forward in the chair, anger flaring along her spine, and glared at the priest, not missing the way he glared at her in return. Her tone was acid. “You already violated your whole priest-parishioner confidentiality thing by talking to the police. So don’t even try and pretend that you can’t talk to me. Frank told me what you told him...that Natalia didn’t want to hear what you had to say and that she asked you to leave. Is that the truth, or was that just to cover your own backside?”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could call them back. This whole conversation was a bad idea. He’d never tell her what she most needed to know, and she wasn’t sure she could keep from slapping his usual smirk off his face. She pushed out of the chair, getting to her feet, ready to leave the room. A simple statement stopped her.

“It is the truth. Natalia didn’t want me there, spoiling her special day.”

She sat down with a thud and stared in shock at the priest. Father Ray looked down at his hands, folded on the desk top, and shook his head. His voice was quiet. “Much as I wish

she had regrets about the path she's on, much as I wish she would listen to my counsel, I can't let you believe a lie. I wouldn't be much good as a man of God if I did."

Almost unable to believe her ears, she simply sat gaping as he continued, "She had no doubts about the ceremony, and almost glowed every time she said your name. She was a little nervous, but nothing out of the ordinary for a...a bride on her...wedding day. Her only concern was what had happened to make her sister so late."

Olivia felt a weight lift from her shoulders. It didn't ease her worry one bit about what had happened to her partner, but it helped to know that the priest hadn't managed to invoke any doubts and fears. At least she knew Natalia had been happy and excited in what might have been her final hours...

A chill walked down her spine at the thought and she felt the burn of tears. She would not cry in front of the priest. She fisted her hand, digging her fingernails into her palm, letting the slight pain center her. She stood again, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Thank you for being honest, Father. It...it means a lot."

He looked up at her then and she saw the sorrow in his eyes, knew he was worried about what had happened to Natalia. At least they had one thing in common. He said, "You're welcome."

Then, as if it was too uncomfortable for them to have such common ground, he raised one of his ample eyebrows and a smirk appeared on his face. "You do know, of course, that I will never stop praying for her to find her way back to the path of righteousness, that I will never stop praying for her lost soul."

Despite the situation, Olivia felt an answering smirk pull at her lips. It definitely helped to be back on familiar ground with the man. "Of course you won't. Just like I'll never stop giving her reasons to stay with me and choose our family as her path." She rolled her eyes at his long-suffering sigh, but sobered up quickly. "First, Father, just pray that she comes home safely."

He managed a small smile. "I already am."

Not sure how to respond, she settled for a quick wave before she turned and opened the door, walking briskly down the hall. He could be a thorn in her side for the rest of her life if his prayers helped bring Natalia back to her.

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Edmund giggled maniacally as he stood over the fire and watched the layers of snow melt off his sleeve. He heard a "harrumph" from the other room, but ignored the verbal equivalent of eye rolling in favor of watching the icy crystals shrink and die under his gaze. He liked the way it made him feel to know that he alone determined whether the snowflakes would melt or stay intact.

Before long, the snow was gone and he was too warm in his coat. He walked across the room, shrugging out of the garment and slipping it onto a hanger. Glancing into the other room, he smiled at the sight of Hung Li meticulously going over a set of plans Edmund had drawn up for the next target on his list. He knew his associate would find and eliminate whatever flaws and obstacles he'd overlooked in his enthusiasm for his task.

Edmund walked back over to the fire, smiling like the cat who'd eaten the canary. It was so good to be rid of those bumbling Springfield cops and once again be working with a professional. Granted, DeSilva and Marina had served their purpose, but they both lacked the kind of cunning and callousness he needed. He'd been all too happy to cut the final strings tying them to him once he was free from that damned hospital.

He growled under his breath at the memory of that damned bitch – Spencer's little whore – holding a gun on him. Who knew the town saint had it in her to go all Rambo? She was clearly paying for her holier-than-thou attitude now, though. He growled even more at the reminder that his nemesis was actually the one who'd shot him. One of these days, Jeffrey O'Neill would suffer dearly for that. But Edmund had other prey in his sights right now. O'Neill was going to be his last target – the icing on his revenge cake, so to speak. The mere thought made him burst into laughter again.

As the old adage said, revenge was a dish best served cold.

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## ACT 1

January 10th

Olivia stood at the top of the staircase in the farmhouse, looking down at the people gathered in her living room. Actually, they didn't all fit in the living room; she knew from an up-close-and-personal perspective that the crowd spilled over into the kitchen as well. Someone – probably Doris, Phillip, or Josh, though she still didn't know for sure – had decided there needed to be a potluck at her house to show the town's support for her, to show that they'd be there for her while Natalia was missing.

As always, the thought of her lover being God-knew-where, enduring God-knew-what made her stomach tie itself in knots. She'd thought it was hard to endure the uncertainty when Natalia ran away after finding out she was pregnant with Francesca. This kind of uncertainty was a million times worse. A broken heart would heal. But if her lover was taken from her forever, against her will, Olivia was afraid she'd die, too, her heart smashed and mangled beyond repair.

A glimpse of a dark head snapped her away from her spiraling thoughts and brought the faintest hint of a smile to her face. She usually didn't have a whole lot of faith in Frank Cooper's investigative abilities. But in this instance, she was actually impressed with his

tenacity and determination to find Natalia. Best of all, she knew it wasn't in an attempt to play the knight in shining armor and get his lady love back. He'd finally moved on, and she could honestly say he was happier with Eleni than she'd seen him in a long time. His interest in finding the missing woman was twofold – one, because he cared about her as a friend and the mother of his child, and two, because when push came to shove, he really did want to protect and serve the people of Springfield.

She had to admit that Jonathan, Remy, and Anna were equally dedicated. Not because they knew Natalia well; Remy was the only one who'd spent much time with her. And not just because it was their job. She could see it in their eyes when they talked to her, could read it in their faces when they took extra time to keep her updated – they wanted to get Natalia back for Olivia's sake. The rest of the police department was taking their cues from the three of them. Honestly, she couldn't remember the last time they'd all taken an investigation so seriously.

Her eyes swept over the room, taking in all the people there.

She saw Frank lean in to say something to Eleni before the two of them walked over to the corner near the kitchen doorway where Mallet was standing, to confer with him. Anna and Jonathan were in the corner on the opposite side of the doorway, passing a cell phone from hand to hand and talking animatedly. Doris and Callie Jennings stood near the two of them, exchanging occasional comments, but mostly just watching the crowd.

Olivia smiled at the sight of Phillip and James wandering through the room, handing out fruit punch and sodas from trays they carried. She could just imagine both Alan and Alex being horrified at the sight of Spauldings acting like the hired help. Her gaze shifted to where Bill had his arm draped around Billy's shoulders as they stood beside Vanessa and Beth, who were chatting away. Shayne, Josh, and Reva had camped out in some of the folding chairs and were all laughing at something or other.

Her gaze shifted again, taking in more of the people in her living room. Father Ray, who'd surprised the hell out of her by coming, wore a smile as he stood at the back of the couch with Remy and Ava, who were chattering away. Lizzie and Christina had taken over the couch, sitting with their sons, presumably comparing notes. She couldn't help but smile at the sight of Buzz amusing himself by chasing Emma, Sarah, and Clarissa through the throngs of people.

Looking around to see where the other kids were, she saw Marina in a chair in a corner by the front door, watching over Henry, Colin, and Peyton as they played with blocks. Olivia's heart clenched at the sight of the other woman and she fisted her hand. One part of her wanted to charge down the stairs, yelling and screaming, and throw Marina out of her house. After all, if the little brat hadn't helped Edmund escape in the first place, Natalia might not have been kidnapped. The other part of her couldn't help but feel a stab of sympathy. The younger woman had been ignored by everyone except her family most of the evening, from what Olivia had seen, and she knew exactly what it felt like to make a spectacular mistake and then try to recover from it. She also knew, all too well, what it

was like to crave the praise and attention of a parent. Still, understanding didn't equal forgiving and forgetting, and she didn't want to be anywhere near the little brat right now.

Shaking off her depressing thoughts, she looked around the room again. Rick and Mindy were wandering around, collecting dirty plates. Mel and Cyrus came in from the kitchen with trays of finger foods, and Matt trailed behind them with a tray of cookies. Sister Anne and Lillian looked to be deep in an intense conversation, while Blake wandered around, a goofy smile on her face as she held a sleeping Francesca. Olivia's heart softened at the sight of her youngest daughter.

It seemed like the only person who was a regular part of the Spencer-Rivera's life who wasn't here right now was Leyla. Olivia didn't envy her; the woman had left for Chicago that afternoon to update her parents about the search for Natalia. Somehow, she was sure she'd blow a gasket if she had to listen to Mr. Rivera say anything to the effect of the kidnapping being a punishment from God or something equally inane. She wouldn't be surprised if Leyla needed a stiff drink or twenty for having to put up with that. Still, the young woman felt she owed it to her parents to talk to them in person, and to spend some family time with them.

Olivia looked around the room again, and the sight of so many people gathered for the sole purpose of showing their concern and support for her nearly brought tears to her eyes. She actually had to grab hold of the railing at the top of the stairs to steady herself. For more years than she could count, she'd assumed she didn't deserve anything like a happy ending. That she didn't deserve to be loved. She'd been convinced she wasn't a good person and that the only people who could or should love her were her daughters. And yet here she was, standing in front of the evidence that there were more than just a mere handful of people who cared about her, that it wasn't just her few actual friends who would lend a hand when needed.

It overwhelmed her for a moment.

She certainly hadn't done anything to deserve this. But maybe that was the whole point. Maybe love and support weren't things that could only be received if they were earned. Maybe they were gifts given freely, given out of grace.

She shook her head for a moment, not sure whether it was Natalia or Sister Anne she was channeling there, but not interested in getting any more philosophical than that. All she knew was that as hard as this ordeal had been, and would be, it was slightly easier to bear knowing that she wasn't alone.

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The walls were moving. Natalia could feel them pressing against her, hard and cold, squishing her into her little corner like a little bug. She pushed and pushed against them, but they didn't move at all, and then they started laughing at her. The sound was

everywhere all at once. It was big and loud and made everything shake.

Like an earthquake. Like she was being tossed around like a little rag doll in a house that was being shaken up and tossed around so that everything would fall on the floor and break. She put out her hands to brace herself from falling down and shattering into a million little pieces, and felt nothing but air. The walls weren't pressing on her any more. No, they were far away now, like little dots, and she was tiny like a ladybug and the ground was going to split open around her and swallow her whole.

Like she was a piece of candy. Like in Willy Wonka's factory where evil little children disobeyed their parents and ate what they shouldn't eat and got sick or disfigured or even dead. But not Charlie, 'cause Charlie was a good boy and listened to his grandpa.

Like Rafe listened to her, even though she wasn't a grandpa, she was just a mom. He did listen to her, didn't he? He wore his coat when he went out to play and called if he was going to be late for dinner and did his homework most of the time. Had he done his homework? Was he even in school today? Where was he?

Had she lost him somewhere...left him in the grocery cart in the parking lot or let him wander off with strangers who gave him candy? Why wasn't he here with her? Wasn't there someone else who was supposed to be with her? Why was she all alone? What happened to green eyes? Why couldn't she remember?

She slammed her fist against something hard and gasped at the sudden flash of pain. Her hand felt wet and she lifted it and stared at it and saw the pretty trickles of red running like little, tiny rivers over her knuckles.

Blood. From punching a cinderblock wall.

In a sudden moment of clarity – pain chasing away whatever drug was running merrily through her veins – she remembered it all. Rafe was grown up and overseas, Olivia had green eyes and was the love of her life, and she was locked away in a tiny cell. She'd been drugged, kidnapped, imprisoned, taunted, and tormented. And she was all alone, so alone. She was sad she was alone because she was scared. She was glad she was alone because it meant Olivia and their children were safe.

She'd spend the rest of her days, locked away in this cell, alone except for her kidnapper, if it meant Olivia, Emma, Francesca, Leyla, Ava, and Rafe were all safe. She had to stay strong and keep fighting so she could keep them safe, no matter what.

Natalia tried to hold on to those thoughts, to pull them around her like a cloak, to hold fast to whatever was true. But the pain in her hand ebbed slowly away and she glanced to the side and saw the wall smiling at her – an evil smile – and she felt the cell begin to close in around her and poke at her and make fun of her.

She curled up on her side in a little ball, hands pressed over her ears, whimpering to try

and keep the echoing laughter at bay.

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Blake stood at the foot of the stairs, Francesca in her arms, surveying the crowd. She couldn't quite believe how many people were packed into the farmhouse and found herself getting misty-eyed at the display of community support. As she knew better than anyone, the people of Springfield could be a vindictive, back-stabbing bunch who had in times past nearly made a sport out of hurting each other. But more than any other place she knew, they also had an amazing capacity to band together to protect one of their own. Natalia might not have been born and bred here, but she was one of those people who was the heart and soul of their little town, and God help anyone who messed with her.

She freed one hand to surreptitiously wipe a tear from her eye at the thought of her missing friend. She couldn't imagine how Olivia must feel right now, not knowing where Natalia was or what exactly had happened to her.

Her eyes tracked over to where Olivia was standing next to Doris in one corner of the living room, out of the way of the foot traffic. They were clearly deep in conversation from the serious, focused expressions on their faces. Blake studied Olivia, taking in the bruised looking bags under her eyes, the worry lines in her forehead, the tired slump of her shoulders. Her heart ached for the woman, for the pain and fear that were so obviously written in her eyes no matter how hard she tried to mask them.

There was something else there, too, and Blake nearly gasped out loud when she realized what it was. There was an aura of defeat surrounding Olivia. It was unlike anything she would ever have imagined from the woman who always seemed so imposing, so strong.

She almost, almost went barging across the room, ready to break into the conversation and implore Olivia not to give up, to hold on to hope. But something held her still, something beyond the simple weight of the sleeping child in her arms. She watched as Doris jabbed a finger into the palm of her hand, making some kind of point, watched as Olivia nodded slowly, tentatively, in response.

Even from across the room, Blake could see the spark of anger in her lover's blue eyes and could tell from the sudden shift in Doris' body language that she was letting that anger come out in tone and gesture. While Olivia didn't seem to be responding in kind, weariness still enveloping her like a cloak, she was at least listening intently and nodding at times.

Blake was moved to tears again, watching her lover with her friend. The two women were so alike – both fierce and proud, both opinionated and strong, both hiding the fear that they really weren't worth much. She only hoped that she could give Doris half the love, understanding, and encouragement that Natalia had given Olivia.

More than anything, she hoped that Natalia was alive and would come back home, safe

and sound. She was afraid Olivia wouldn't survive otherwise, even with the love and support of the town around her.

Blake leaned down and kissed the top of Francesca's head, then looked up to the heavens and breathed a prayer. *Please God, let Natalia be alive, let her come home to her family.*

It wouldn't even matter if she was physically hurt or emotionally scarred from whatever ordeal she was enduring. As long as she was here – with her lover, with her children, with her friends – the rest would fall into place.

As long as there was life and breath, there would be love and hope to keep the darkness at bay.

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Edmund growled under his breath at the soft trill of his cell phone. It wasn't because there was anyone nearby who would be alerted by the ringing. It was because the unexpected sound nearly sent him tumbling off the tree limb he was sitting on.

At that thought, he laughed. Considering that he'd grown up on a tropical island, he had a strange affinity for these northern forests.

He fished the phone out of his pocket and glanced at the display, then down at his watch. The man was right on time, as always.

Edmund didn't waste time on pleasantries. "Report."

Hung Li's voice was smooth and cultured. *"The package is still secure and all the loose ends have been tied up."*

Edmund mentally translated that as meaning that the hired muscle who'd helped take, hide, and secure their prize had been eliminated and their bodies effectively disposed of. They'd learned the hard way that those who weren't in the inner circle of their criminal organization couldn't be trusted to keep their mouths shut. Killing was a lot less expensive than buying silence.

His associate continued, *"The police have not yet found our safe house or our storage sites. They aren't even close to stumbling across the locations, but we'd better keep tabs on their activities anyhow, just in case."*

Despite the fact that Hung Li couldn't see him, Edmund nodded. He wasn't going to go to all the trouble of acquiring a new toy and then losing it because he'd forgotten to keep an eye on what his enemies were up to.

He might be crazy – certifiable, even! – but he wasn't stupid.

*"The trail connecting us to the package is cold, but there are still clues out there that might lead to us and to..."*

Edmund broke in, "Hello, what have we just been talking about? That's why you and I will be out in the field, spying on the cops...to see if they manage to find the trail or connect the dots."

Only his years of experience in dealing with the other man allowed him to hear the slight note of irritation in the smooth tone. *"Of course, Sir."*

Edmund wanted to laugh at the display of pique, but didn't. His colleague was, after all, a professional, who had spent his career covering other people's tracks – particularly Edmund's – or, more accurately, saving their butts. He didn't want to alienate Hung Li; they made good partners. So he switched gears a bit. "It sounds like you and I can handle things here in Springfield and keep our prize secure on our own. What do you think about sending the rest of the crew back to the stronghold in Mexico?"

There was a measurable pause. *"I think that might be for the best. The smuggling side of the business has suffered a bit in recent months with so many of our people being involved in the intrigues of Springfield."*

Edmund rolled his eyes at the implied rebuke in the man's words, but didn't say anything, letting Hung Li say his piece.

*"I also think it will be easier for us to finish our plans here and deal with the current situation if we don't have so many of our henchmen bumbling around. Few of them have the type of finesse that you and I have perfected over the years; and the fewer of us there are here in town, the less likely it is that the police will find us...or our package."*

He nodded to himself, not at all surprised by his colleague's suggestion. It made perfect sense to him. "I agree. Relay the orders to the appropriate people; have them leave town tonight, if possible. I'll check in with you later."

Edmund disconnected the call, slipped the phone back into his pocket, and then swung himself out of the tree, landing with an icy crunch in the layer of snow underneath. It was times like this when it was good to be the boss. His colleague could take care of all the dirty little details; he had more entertaining ideas of how he could spend the rest of his evening.

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Jeffrey choked on a cloud of dust as he emerged from an old warehouse on the outskirts of town. He paused for a moment, pulling off the night-vision goggles he'd used to see in the pitch-black interior. He blinked hard, letting his eyes adjust to the faint rays of moonlight reflecting off the patches of snow on the ground. Luckily, the weather had turned a few days ago. After what felt like non-stop snowstorms, they'd switched over to

cold temperatures, clear skies, and sunny days; it was supposed to be like that for the next two weeks. He definitely wasn't going to complain. It made it a lot easier to be out and about, searching for Edmund.

Eyesight adjusted, he brushed at his jacket, sending dust particles dancing on the slight breeze, before pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and scrubbing it over his face. After a few moments, he was reasonably grime-free – or as near as possible without the benefit of a mirror to inspect himself in.

He walked over to his car and unlocked the door, climbing into the driver's seat, but making no move to put the key in the ignition. Instead, he opened the folder lying on the passenger seat and pulled out a steno notepad. Pulling a pen from its home in the spiral wiring that held the notebook together, he crossed off some lines on his checklist. He'd had high hopes for this warehouse having significance, but it was yet another dead end when it came to finding the place where Edmund Winslow was holed up.

He carefully replaced the pen, closed the notebook, and put everything back neatly in the folder. Then, and only then, he pounded his fists on the steering wheel, cursing softly and steadily.

Ostensibly, he was helping Anna and Jonathan in the search for Natalia Rivera, completely off the record and behind the scenes. He was reasonably sure Frank Cooper didn't have a clue that he was still in town, let alone working with one of the Springfield PD detectives. But in reality, that wasn't his focus. He had no vested interest in the missing woman being found. He was still stung by the way she'd confronted him and somehow turned Ava against him.

His sole interest was in drawing out Edmund and getting his arch-nemesis out of the way once and for all. He didn't care if that meant a lifetime in jail or a more permanent sort of goodbye. All he cared about was finding the man and making him pay for the hell he'd put him through.

Everything Jeffrey had valued in the world was lost because of Edmund Winslow. He'd bait whatever trap he could, use any tactic he could dream up, to get his hands on the man and make him suffer.

It wouldn't – couldn't – change anything that had happened. Jeffrey knew that much. Reva wouldn't take him back, and he wouldn't get back the year of his life he'd spent chasing the man. But it would make his sacrifices worth it if he could just put a stop to the thus-far-elusive Winslow.

With a frustrated growl, Jeffrey pounded on the steering wheel once more with a closed fist. He could barely eat, barely sleep. All his attention was focused on either finding Edmund on his own or finding Edmund with the help of the trap he'd baited.

He jumped in his seat when his cell phone rang, and flipped it open without bothering to

look at the display. After all, there were only three people who had this particular number, and one of them wasn't speaking to him, even if she'd known he was still in town.

"What?" he practically shouted into the phone.

He'd subconsciously been hoping it was Jonathan, so he almost grimaced when he heard the distinctly feminine clearing of a throat. *"Bad day there, Chief?"*

He actually took the phone away from his head and glared at it before putting it back up to his ear. "You could say that. What do you want, Anna? I told you I'd check in later if I found anything. And as usual, I've hit another fucking dead end."

He took perverse pleasure in the nearly inaudible intake of breath that told him he'd rattled Anna's cage. He liked the woman and she was a damn good investigator...operative...whatever. But his patience was paper thin and he didn't like her checking up on him every freaking day to see what, if anything, he'd found.

*"Look, Jeffrey...I know you're tired and frustrated. But I'm worried. You're so wrapped up in vengeance on Edmund that you seem to be forgetting about Natalia. She's the one we need to find. Maybe you need to step away for a bit...get to where it's not so personal."*

Under different circumstances, he might have applauded her for remembering the lessons he himself had helped teach her. But when it was directed at him...

"Given that I'm not getting any kind of paycheck to be doing this job, you've got no right to jump on my back for how I'm going about it," he snapped. "Like I said before, I'll let you know when and if I've got something."

He slammed the phone shut on whatever response she might have made and put the key in the ignition, turning it. Jamming the car into gear, he took off with a squeal of tires. His objective was clear. It wasn't his problem if she wasn't on the same page he was.

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Emma sat up in her bed, leaning back against her pillows, the covers pulled up to her chest. Shadow lay beside her, looking up at her sometimes like she knew Emma was sad. She was glad she had her puppy here with her. She didn't want to be alone, but she didn't want to run to her mommy either. Mommy had enough to worry about with Natalia being taken away from them. And she didn't want to watch her mommy try to put on her brave face, the one she wore when she wanted to convince people that everything would be okay...even when she didn't know if it would be.

When she was a little girl, Emma hadn't really noticed that that was what her mommy did. But when she started growing up and got to be a big girl, she'd started paying

attention to things like that. Even though she didn't feel very grown up right now with Ma being gone. She felt like a little kid again. And she didn't like that feeling...almost as much as she didn't like the bad man taking Natalia.

She reached down and patted a lump under her covers next to Shadow's head. Feeling the shape of her teddy bear made her feel better, even if she didn't want Mommy or Leyla or Ava to know she was doing something so babyish.

There was a creaking sound in the hallway and Emma froze in place for a minute, listening hard. Then she heard a footstep and the sounds of breathing and recognized them as being her mommy's. She relaxed a little bit, trying not to laugh at the way Shadow's ears perked up and her fuzzy little head swiveled around.

"Hey, Jellybean. I wanted to come and check on you and see how you liked the potluck."

Emma smiled, just a little. "It was nice of everybody to come and let us know that they miss Ma, too. I was happy to see everybody."

She heard a little snuffle when her mommy sat down on the edge of the bed, and Emma frowned. Then she saw her mommy smile really big, like she was making herself look happy. "It was really nice of them, wasn't it? The food was really good, too."

Emma nodded, but didn't say anything. She looked down at Shadow and put her hand on her puppy's head, petting her. She felt her mommy's hand on her shoulder, rubbing gently.

"Y'know, Em, it's normal to be scared and sad when things like this happen. It's really hard to have Natalia gone and not know where she is. But you know Anna and Uncle Frank and Jonathan are working really hard to bring her back home to us. Maybe you'd feel less scared and sad if you talked to me about it."

Emma knew her mommy was right; she would feel better if she talked about it. She didn't really know what was going on, and it scared her because she didn't. But she knew listening to her would make things harder for her mommy. Mommy already had to take care of her and Sweet Pea, had to keep things running at the Beacon, had to keep Leyla and Ava from being upset or fighting. That was a lot for anyone to do all at once...even someone as super as her mommy.

Emma didn't want to make things any harder. She had Shadow; she'd be okay.

She just looked up and tried to smile. Her mommy frowned at her, and she felt sad. She was still making her feel bad, even when she was trying to help. Emma wriggled around in her bed, trying to sit up straighter without squishing one of Shadow's paws.

"It's okay, Mommy. I know everybody is trying to bring Ma back home. It'll be okay."

She tried not to squirm when her mommy stared at her for a long, long time. It felt weird and she didn't like it, so she looked down at Shadow and started petting her again. The big puppy eyes stared happily at her and she felt a little better. She could share anything with Shadow.

"Alright, Emma. But if you need me for anything...don't hesitate to come and get me, okay?"

She felt the bed move as her mommy got up, so she looked up again. Her mommy bent over her and hugged her tight, and she reached up to hug her back. Hugs didn't fix everything, but they made her feel better when she was sad. She held on for a long time and then heard a soft whisper. "I love you, Jellybean."

"I love you, too, Mommy."

She smiled for real when her mommy tapped her playfully on the tip of the nose and then kissed her on the forehead. "Good night, Emma."

She said good night, too, and then snuggled down under her covers, squirming around so that she could lie down and get the pillows where she wanted them. Shadow stood up and moved toward the edge of the bed. When Emma finally settled down, the puppy came to lie on top of her legs.

She felt around under her covers and fished out Cornelius. She didn't think she'd be able to fall asleep for a long time, but she wanted to hold him anyway. Between him and Shadow, she felt safe, even if she was still sad.

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Jonathan paced back and forth in his living room, cell phone to his ear, listening to the ringing on the other end of the line. At long last he heard a breathless "*Hello?*" followed by fumbling noises.

He frowned. "It's Jonathan," he said simply, wondering why Leyla hadn't looked at the caller ID on her cell phone to know who was calling her.

*"What's up? Did the police find something?"*

Jonathan shook his head, not in answer to the question – though it was the appropriate answer – but due to her obvious confusion about why he'd called. "No; no news. It's just...you'd said you'd call when you got to your parents' place, and you left here several hours ago and...well, I got a little worried."

There was more fumbling on the other end of the phone, but even with the background noise he could hear her frustration. "*What are you, my mother, checking up on me? I'm a big girl and don't have to answer to anyone.*"

He fought the urge to kick the table leg when he paced past it; with his luck, the thing would collapse and wake Sarah. But his own frustration was rising. “Look, Leyla, I’m not trying to check up on you. Maybe I should be, given the way you acted the other night, but I’m not that kind of guy.”

*“I already apologized for that.”*

He sank down on the couch. “I know you did.”

Granted, her apology had simply been the word sorry, and it had been muttered while she was so hung-over that she couldn’t get out of bed. But he had no doubt that she regretted hurting him by flirting with every man or woman that wandered by. She’d told him once that she had a bit of a wild streak, that she wasn’t the goody two-shoes everyone seemed to think she was. It was his mistake for not believing her, for relying solely on the glimpses he’d gotten of her when she was taking care of kids or otherwise being a nice, responsible young woman. Still, that was a conversation for another time, if they continued dating and things got exclusive.

He hastened to explain. “That’s not why I called. It’s just that you told me you’d call, and I know how long it takes to get up there. I thought maybe something bad had happened to you.”

*“I can take care of myself.”*

No, he wasn’t imagining it; there was a definite chill in her tone. He couldn’t help but raise his voice in response. “I didn’t say you couldn’t. But when I got the ‘this user is currently out of service area, please try again later’ message, I got a little worried that Edmund or his goons had tracked you down. Sorry if I give a damn what happens to you.”

The minute the words were out of his mouth, he wished he could call them back. Or, at least, that he could repeat them without sounding like he was yelling. But she responded before he could say anything else. *“Why did you try to call? Didn’t I tell you I was going to call when I got here?”*

Jonathan gaped, feeling like his eyes were about to pop out of his head. What the hell? He heard the fumbling noises again, then a muffled sound like a voice, and then Leyla’s whispered *“Damn it, not now.”*

He didn’t know what was going on, what she was doing, but something was up. She was acting weird, even by Springfield standards.

Before he could collect his thoughts enough to ask her anything, there was a rush of words in his ear. *“Look, sorry I didn’t answer earlier, that I wasn’t at your beck and call, but I’ve been a little busy. I’ve got to go; I’ll talk to you when I get back to town, okay?”*

The line went dead.

Jonathan banged his head against the back of couch, which wasn't nearly as satisfying an outlet for his frustration as he'd hoped, the padded cushions diluting the impact and all. He played over the phone call in his mind. For a brief second, he wondered if she'd been nabbed by the kidnapper and that her odd manner was her way of cluing him in to the fact that something was wrong. But he dismissed the thought as soon as it came to him. If she had been trying to alert him, she'd have started saying things that he knew weren't true. She wouldn't have been practically arguing with him.

Maybe it was just the latent stress of having her sister being missing and the person responsible still being on the loose. But that didn't quite sound right. Her reaction to stress, at least from what little he'd seen, was to shut down, not act out. She and Natalia weren't all that much alike, looks aside, but there were some striking similarities.

Maybe it was the fact that she was up in Chicago dealing with her parents. He'd heard enough about her mom and her dick of a father from both her and Olivia to know that they knew just how to push buttons. Still, she had lived around them as an adult, so presumably she knew how to handle them and their outrageous moments. From what she'd told him, it was only her dad who was likely to get all sanctimonious and such about Natalia being missing; her mom was likely to be in tears and just wanting her daughter to be safe.

Maybe he'd caught her after she'd spent time with another man. Maybe that was why she'd gone on the defensive. Two weeks ago, he would have laughed at the idea. Now, after seeing how flirty she could be, he couldn't escape the idea that if she had some friends with benefits, they'd be in Chicago. But that didn't quite explain the phone call. After all, if she wanted to keep him from being suspicious, she'd have made up a story about her afternoon and then launched into bitching about her parents. Her prickliness just made him wonder, and he was sure she was smart enough to know that.

Finally, he gave up trying to puzzle it out. No matter what was making her act so weird, there wasn't anything he could do about it now. She'd be back in Springfield eventually and they could talk about it then. It wasn't like there was a rush or anything.

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Olivia sat on the edge of the bed, gingerly, as if the mattress were filled with gunpowder and a single wrong move would set it off. She hadn't been able to stomach being in here much since Natalia...

She shook her head vehemently, not willing to mentally finish that sentence. If she finished it, it made it real. If it was real, then all the bad outcomes that could go along with it were also real. If she accepted that those were real, then she would never be able to get any sleep and face the morning.

Not that she'd get much sleep anyhow. Between the by-now-unfamiliar sense of being alone and the worries that haunted her dreams, she was lucky to sleep for a solid hour before jolting awake. Despite the support of friends and family – she smiled a little at the memory of the potluck that had filled the house to overflowing just a few hours ago – she was lost and floundering, and unable to do a damn thing about it. And she had to – she had to find a way to hold it together, to believe that Natalia would be okay, to believe that Natalia would come back to her. Not just for her own sake, but for the sake of the kids.

Francesca was too young to really have a grasp of the situation yet, even though she had taken to crying for Mami. But their other daughter...

She fought the urge to break down and cry as she thought about Emma. It was clear her little girl was upset and scared, but she had all her walls up and Olivia couldn't get in. Or maybe she was too tired and upset and scared herself to have made the kind of effort needed to be there for her daughter. She rubbed a hand tiredly over her eyes as she pondered that. She knew she'd left a lot to Leyla and Ava, who'd both stepped up to help with the girls as much as they could. Still, she thought she'd done a pretty good job of handling everything and balancing out her worries, her work, her daughters, her duties, her friends, and her fears. Maybe it wasn't enough.

She tried to play back the past several days in her head...and was disturbed when she realized that she couldn't. It was all just a blur that she was too exhausted to make any sense of.

With a soft sigh, she started to lie back on the bed, and then froze. She couldn't do it...couldn't bear to be here tonight without Natalia by her side. Swallowing down the threat of tears, she pushed back up to a sitting position and then stood. She walked to the door and shut it firmly behind her, not looking back.

She padded across the hall and poked her head into the nursery. Thankfully, Francesca was sound asleep, and had continued sleeping through the night despite the chaos of Natalia being missing. Easing the door shut, she tiptoed down the hallway to Emma's room. Peeking through the slightly opened door, she let her eyes adjust to the darkness for a moment. After a moment, she was able to make out the figure of her daughter, asleep, curled up with her fudge-colored teddy bear, Cornelius, in one arm, and Shadow draped protectively over her legs. The sight was both sweet and heart-breaking.

Once again fighting the urge to break down and cry, Olivia turned away and headed towards the stairs. She didn't bother trying to be quiet, since neither Leyla nor Ava was here tonight. For the life of her, she couldn't remember why they'd both left; she was sure they'd told her, but at the moment, she was coming up blank. God, she was tired.

She plopped down on the couch, contemplating the baby monitor for a minute, trying to remember if it was on or not. Then, she heard a soft gurgle and a rustle of cloth. She collapsed against the back of the couch, slumped over in a way that would have earned

her a lecture on good posture if Natalia were here. She'd gladly listen to that lecture every single day for the rest of her life if only it meant her partner was safe and sound.

Slowly, she straightened up, shifting so her back was braced against the arm of the couch. Putting her feet on the cushions, she bent her knees, drawing them up to her chest. She sat there for a long time, staring into space, fighting the despair that seemed to be her constant companion.

Nothing she did could turn off the worry and the dread that formed a solid lump in the pit of her stomach and the back of her throat. She was exhausted and no good to herself, her daughters, or Natalia like this. She had to get some rest.

Pushing up off the couch, moving slowly as if her feet were encased in lead, she plodded to the kitchen. Reaching up to the top shelf over the stove, she pulled out a small bottle of whiskey. It was one she'd bought a while ago and kept around to prove to herself that she didn't need to fall into the bottle anymore – not when she had a partner she could share her demons with. But tonight, her partner wasn't here and her partner's disappearance was the reason for her demons. She needed nightmare-free sleep in order to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and the bottle would help her find the oblivion she needed.

She put her hand on the bottle cap, ready to twist it open, but froze. To drink or not to drink. That was the question.

It would be easy, oh so easy, to drink her worries away for the moment. But they'd still be there in the morning, in all their stark and fearsome glory. She'd still have the burden of caring for her daughters and holding things together on her shoulders – only she'd be saddled with a hangover to boot. There had been a time in her life when the prospect of being happily drunk far outweighed the prospect of suffering for it the next day. There had been a time when even the knowledge that Emma depended on her hadn't kept her from losing herself in the bottle, as inconceivable as that thought was now.

That time had passed; she wasn't that person anymore. No matter how badly she wanted to lose herself tonight, she couldn't. She wouldn't.

She put the bottle back up in its isolated spot in the cupboard. Opening the fridge instead, she poured herself a glass of milk. Then, she grabbed a handful of the Oreos that someone had left behind after the potluck and headed back out to the couch. Propping her feet up on the coffee table and dumping the cookies into a haphazard pile on her shirt-covered stomach, she began munching, dipping the Oreos into her milk.

She knew that eating sugar before bed was generally not the best plan for falling asleep. But the sweet treat was comforting, reminding her of Natalia's tendency to whip up a batch of hot chocolate as a bedtime snack. She ate absently, and then put the crumb-filled, half-empty glass of milk on a coaster on the coffee table. Shifting around, she put a couple of throw pillows against the arm of the couch, and then leaned back against them, stretching her legs out on the cushions. She pulled the afghan off the back of the couch

and draped it over her body. Warm and full, she lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes. While she didn't think she'd actually fall asleep – her mind full of worries that milk couldn't obliterate like alcohol could – she'd at least be resting her body. That might be enough.

The taste of chocolate in her mouth reminded Olivia of happier times. When the memories of sitting here with Natalia and Emma over a cup of hot chocolate threatened to make the tears come, she decided to stop fighting them. She felt hot water leak out from behind her closed eyelids as she pictured the scene in her mind, concentrating on remembering every detail to keep away the fear that she might never have another moment like that with her family.

She cried softly as she pictured the smiles on the faces of her daughter and her partner, remembering how they'd teased each other about who had more mini marshmallows. She smiled at the memory of the speculative gleam in Emma's eye and her not-at-all-subtle attempts to steal marshmallows from either of her mommies' mugs. And she smiled a bit more as she recalled the beautiful, indulgent smile on Natalia's face and the twinkle in rich brown eyes.

It was the last coherent thought she had for the night.

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## ACT 2

January 11th

Olivia scrubbed the remnants of sleep from her eyes and lifted her coffee mug to her lips for a generous sip. Given that she'd spent the night on the couch, she'd slept more soundly than she'd expected and was still groggy. Her neck and back were stiff and sore, but that was a minor annoyance compared to the benefit of finally getting more than a couple hours of restless sleep.

She'd been awake for a little while already, getting the girls up and fed. Francesca had been her usual sassy self – content enough because she had one of her mommies around. But Emma...

She shook her head as she walked into the living room and sat down on the couch. Her daughter wasn't sulky, or clingy, or whiny, or grouchy, or any of the other things she'd expected with Natalia being taken from them so suddenly. While Olivia hadn't spelled out every bit of the story of what had happened – or at least what the police had pieced together so far – she knew her little girl was smart enough to read between those lines. Not to mention the fact that Emma had grown up in a town where kidnapping was almost the local pastime.

So she had no doubt that her daughter was every bit as aware of the situation as the rest of them. It was just that Emma was being so self-contained and so withdrawn that Olivia

wasn't sure how to help her. She was trying to be there for her, but was afraid that, between her own worry and grief, and having to take care of everything else to boot, she wasn't really being any help to the girl. More than anything, she wanted to make sure Emma had the support and stability she needed to get through this time.

Standing, she walked over to the end table, setting down her coffee mug and picking up the phone. She dialed a number from memory. She only let her ex-husband get out a few words before she said, "Phillip, it's Olivia. I'm hoping you can do me a big favor. Can Emma stay at the mansion for a few days...if she wants to? I haven't asked her about it yet; I wanted to have it set up first, just in case."

There was a measurable pause before she heard a response. *"Of course. She can stay here any time; you know that. But if you just need a little help with doing things, you know Beth and I--"*

"No, it's not that, Phillip. I just...I think it'd be better for Emma to be there right now, okay?"

*"Better for her?"*

Olivia pulled the phone receiver away from her ear and glared at it. She didn't know what the hell kind of weird word game he was trying to play, but she didn't have the brain capacity for it, whatever it was. Putting the receiver back up to her ear, she growled, "Yes, better for her. You know, where she's not in a house where every single thing reminds her of the fact that her ma is missing. I'll talk to Em and then will call you back if she's coming over. Okay?"

She didn't hear his actual reply, since she slammed the phone down before he could get that far. She was exhausted and overwhelmed and didn't have the energy for verbal sparring. It disappointed her that he didn't seem to understand that. Then again, he'd been the one *doing* the kidnapping in the past, not the one dealing with its aftermath.

But still, didn't anyone understand what she was going through? Didn't anyone know she was almost at her breaking point?

Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she picked up her coffee mug and took another long sip. The bitter brew washed away the sour taste left in her mouth by the conversation.

She trudged back into the kitchen, refilling her mug from the still mostly full carafe. It was the little things like that which drove home the reality of Natalia's absence in her life. How could she feel anything but lost? How could she not feel like she was desperate and drowning?

Emma needed to be someplace where the adults around her were focused solely on her and her needs. Not stuck in a house with an oblivious baby sister and a sad and stressed

mother. Even if Leyla hadn't been out of town for the foreseeable future, the young woman had been preoccupied with her own worries lately. Ava was still struggling her way out of the grip of depression. None of them were the kind of stable influence that Jellybean needed right now.

Olivia wanted nothing more than to have her daughter stay with her – to know that she was safe. She wanted to feel the love of her precious little girl to help fill some of the emptiness in her heart from Natalia's absence. But she loved her daughter so much that she would do what was best for her, even though it made her own heart ache.

She took another sip of coffee, and then set the mug down. Time to go talk to Emma and try to sell her on the idea of taking Shadow and going to Daddy's for a while.

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“Objection!”

“Overruled.”

Beth shook her head, fighting the urge to argue with the judge. She couldn't figure out why he kept overruling every objection she made. A hint of motion off to the side caught her eye; Mel was sliding a piece of paper her way. On the bottom of the yellow legal pad was a series of scrawled words. *You have to tell him WHY you're objecting.*

Beth felt her cheeks grow hot. She knew that, she really did. It was just that trial law in practice was not exactly the same as trial law in books. Not for the first time, she thought Mel should be taking the lead here. But the other woman had decided that it was time for her to get some experience, and Dinah hadn't cared one way or the other who handled what. While Doris was working with the two of them as a consultant, working on this case as a lawyer would be a clear conflict of interest for the mayor.

Beth couldn't decide if Mel actually trusted her ability to argue the case, or if the other woman just had some fantastic trick up her sleeve that would win the case no matter how badly the newbie lawyer bungled it.

She shot a warning look at Dinah, who was tapping her pencil on the table, before turning her focus back to the witness stand where an annoyed-looking Frank Cooper was explaining, yet again, that Dinah's fingerprints were on the alleged murder weapon – the stroller. She didn't blame him for being frustrated; anyone could have read the information contained in the report in front of him, and she knew he'd rather be spending his time working on the Natalia Rivera case.

The prosecutor finished his questions, and Beth stood. This part, at least, she knew she couldn't mess up. “Isn't it true, Chief Cooper, that there were other fingerprints on the stroller as well, not just ones belonging to the defendant?”

“Yes.”

She didn't bother to look at him, instead opting to gaze over at the jury. “Isn't it true that fingerprints from law enforcement officials, such as Anthony Camaletti Mallet and Marina Nadine Cooper, were also found on the stroller because they hadn't worn gloves before handling it?”

There was no mistaking his annoyance as he answered in the affirmative. No doubt he wasn't too happy with having to 'fess up that his officers didn't have the strongest grasp of the concept of not contaminating evidence. Especially since, by now, everyone in town had heard about Marina and DeSilva being dirty cops, tampering with evidence on dozens of cases before being caught. Honestly, it was a wonder anyone had even noticed, given the general ineptitude of the Springfield police department. Beth sometimes felt like most of the cops in town aspired to be Inspector Jacques Clouseau.

Shaking her head briefly to stop her woolgathering, she turned her focus back to Frank. “Then isn't it true that the defendant isn't the only person who could have used the stroller as a weapon?”

She caught a flash of exasperation in his eyes, though his tone was perfectly even as he conceded her point.

“No further questions.”

She went back to her seat, not at all surprised that the prosecutor had nothing further. He'd only managed to shoot himself in the foot by introducing the stroller evidence in the first place. Not that she was complaining. She needed all the help she could get.

Mel nodded at her and she managed a slight smile in response. Dinah was practically bouncing in her seat, and Beth put a restraining hand on the woman's arm. It wasn't because she didn't appreciate the enthusiasm. It was because she didn't want to have to deal with another reprimand from the judge for not keeping her client in line. Once was more than enough.

The prosecutor was standing again. “I call Anthony Camaletti Mallet to the stand.”

Beth bit down on her lip to keep from smiling. While she had no doubt he would be a formidable witness, she also knew he'd spent days trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together, only to end up suspecting the innocent Marina of being the murderer. She had no doubt that she could ask plenty of questions that would leave the jury wondering how, exactly, the man had risen up the investigative ranks to get to where he was today.

This part was going to be fun.

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A figure in a dark hoodie and black sweatpants stood in the shadows of a tree deep in the woods. It was dark enough to begin with in this particular area, despite the clear and sunny skies, because of the dense canopy of bare deciduous branches and the thick clusters of towering evergreens. But this tree was even darker yet. The shadowed figure knew from long experience that a person could pass within inches of someone hiding there and never even know it.

It was exciting, this game of cat-and-mouse. Watching the police department wandering around, cluelessly searching for clues, was incredibly amusing. The stupid saps had no idea what they were looking for – and even who they were hunting was a matter of debate.

The figure grinned.

Watching the poor, earnest searchers – even the chief of police and the CIA man were out combing through the days-old snowdrifts – was hysterical. If the scene had been made into a movie, the cops would be bumping into each other in a comedy of errors sort of way. It wouldn't be at all surprising to hear yelps of pain as they stepped on each others' toes and ran smack dab into each other upon rounding tree trunks.

The funniest part was that they truly had no idea what was happening. They were following leads blindly, grabbing up handfuls of rock in hopes of striking gold. When, for all they knew, there was nothing but pyrite planted in front of them to confuse the issue.

The figure grinned again, fighting the urge to laugh. That could wait until later, when there was no fear of being accidentally discovered by one of the cops. Moving slowly so as to not draw any attention, the person slipped out of the hiding spot, careful to walk only where the cops had already trampled a path, easing into the deeper, darker woods beyond.

Stalking the fruitless hunters was fun, but there were other, more pressing, things to attend to.

No matter; the game would still be afoot later. Of that, there was no doubt, or his name wasn't Edmund Winslow.

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Phillip took a deep breath and squared his shoulders before knocking on the farmhouse door. He hadn't called before coming over, but was certain Olivia was home, since her car was in the driveway. But whether she was in any shape to receive visitors, he didn't know.

A part of him didn't seriously think she'd fallen into the bottom of the bottle. After all, she'd been clear enough on the phone earlier – no slurred words or random ramblings. She hadn't asked him to take care of Francesca along with Emma, and he knew full well that Frank was too busy to take care of his daughter right now. But he also knew how

hard old habits were to break in times of stress, and he was worried.

He heard the faint sounds of locks being turned, and then the door opened. Olivia stood in front of him in rumpled sweatpants and a loose long-sleeved shirt, her feet bare of shoes, her face bare of makeup. Her eyes were puffy, but not bloodshot; she looked tired, but not hung over. She looked like hell, but not like the walking dead. Those were all good signs.

She frowned, and he hastened to say, "No, there's no problem with Emma or anything. She got off to school just fine and James is going to pick her up later."

He watched relief flood her face, though she didn't say anything, just turned on silent feet and went back into the living room. He followed her, despite the lack of an overt invitation, pausing to shut and lock the door behind him, then hang his coat on the coat rack. As he turned back towards her, he saw her plop down on to the couch and prop her feet up on the coffee table, and he headed over to sit down next to her.

For a long moment, there was silence. Then Olivia spoke, her tone flat. "I'm assuming this isn't a social call. What do you want, Phillip?"

In a way, he was glad she wasn't going to beat around the bush, but he was still uncertain about jumping right into a patch of thorns. "I wanted to talk about Emma," he started, staring down at his hands.

Feeling a gaze on him, he turned his head and looked up, momentarily taken aback by the flare of anger in Olivia's eyes. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound...or whatever that archaic saying was. Keeping his eyes locked on his not-at-all-happy ex-wife, he said slowly, "I know you're hurting right now, Olivia, even if I don't know exactly what it feels like to be in your shoes. But Emma's hurting, too and needs you to be strong for her. I don't mind having her with us in the mansion for as long as you need, so that you have some time and some space. But her world's been turned upside down; and as much as she loves me and Beth, it's not the same as being here in her own house with her sister and her mom."

He took a deep breath, aware of the tension flooding through the woman next to him. He said gently, "She loves you and needs you, Olivia. As much as you deserve to be selfish here and focus on your own sorrow and your own needs, you can't."

He'd mentally geared himself up for a fight, so was surprised to see the hurt look on her face. "You think this is about me?" she whispered, before turning away from him and leaning back against the back of the couch.

Phillip watched as her eyes slid closed and she brought a hand up to rub at her forehead, like she was warding off a headache. Suddenly unsure of his footing, he asked cautiously, "So what is it about?"

He could barely hear her whisper. "Emma. I'm trying to do what's best for Emma."

The layers of pain and guilt in those quiet words made him realize he'd clearly gotten something wrong. Reaching out, he laid his hand against her arm, not liking the way she jumped at the simple touch. He kept his voice gentle. "What do you think is best for her?"

After a long moment of silence, he saw her shake her head and heard a soft, bitter laugh. "Apparently I have no idea, since you felt compelled to come over and confront me about it."

He had seen many sides to Olivia Spencer over the years and had learned to deal with all of them. But this one he didn't much like. "Cut the pity party, Olivia," he snapped. Then, he softened his tone and said, "Talk to me. What's going on in your head about our daughter?"

He wanted to leave it a more open-ended question, knowing there was a lot more in her head than just the things related to Emma. But now that she was on the defensive, she'd never talk about the rest of it with him. At least not yet. Still, the subject of their daughter gave him a legitimate opening.

Even so, he wasn't surprised when she didn't respond right away. He sat back, mimicking her posture, giving her space to speak in her own time. Long minutes ticked by.

"I tried to talk to Emma last night, when everyone had gone home." Her voice was small in the quiet room. "But she was so withdrawn, so self-contained. She wouldn't say anything, except that she'd be okay."

The pain in her voice was clear, and he ached for her. She continued talking, her words coming slowly. "I'm sad and exhausted and going crazy, Phillip. Emma clearly needs more attention than I have to spare right now. She needs someone who can spend a lot of time with her, who can coax her to open up. I don't know if I can be what she needs right now. God knows I want her to be here with me, so I know she's safe and can see how she's doing. But it's better to have her stay with you, where the focus is all on her, not on Natalia's absence."

One small part of Phillip's mind noted how far Olivia had come in a couple of years. She'd always been a good mother – that had never been in doubt. But she'd spent most of the time that he'd known her focused on herself – her wants, her needs, her appetites, and even on her self-pitying, self-destructive routines. Now, here she was, sacrificing what she wanted to do right by her daughter.

The other part of Phillip's mind was focused solely on the here and now, and the obvious pain of the woman beside him. He turned sideways on the couch and then leaned forward to pull Olivia up and into a hug. It was an extremely awkward angle for him, but when he felt her sit up a little straighter and lean heavily against him, he forgot the twinge of discomfort. He knew there wasn't really anything he could do to help with the situation of

Natalia being missing, so he'd do this one little thing that he could.

She trembled slightly in his arms and he murmured, "Oh, Olivia." She didn't seem to be crying, and part of him wished that she would, because she might feel better for venting her feelings. Then again, Emma didn't get her stoic nature out of thin air. Like mother, like daughter.

After a couple of minutes, he felt her pull away, and released her. She opened her mouth and he spoke quickly, cutting her off. "I know that you want to help Emma, and I know how much it must hurt to think that she needs more than you can give her. But I think you're wrong."

He watched her closely and was relieved to see a spark of irritation in her eyes at his words. Good; it meant she wasn't completely stuck inside her own misery. He continued persistently, "Emma's not holding back because you're too preoccupied or aren't spending enough time with her. She's holding back because she knows you're upset and doesn't want to add to your burdens."

He paused then, watching the emotions flit across her face in rapid succession as she processed his words. He could almost tell the exact moment that she realized the truth of the observation. He pressed the point. "Yes, you may have to push a little to get her to talk. But it's not a matter of her feeling neglected by you. It's that she needs to know she's not making things harder for you...a burden shared is a burden halved, and all that."

Absently, he wondered when he'd started thinking in clichés. But he quickly forgot to ponder it when he saw some of the gloom seem to lift from Olivia's face. She looked thoughtful, and then nodded. "I think you're right, Phillip. She would worry about making things harder. I'll talk to her about it today or tomorrow; depending on how things go, I might stop by the mansion. I don't think it'll break through her walls right away, but it will give her time to mull things over."

She paused there and he started to respond, and then thought better of it when he saw the thoughtful look on her face. Her voice was steady. "I'd still like her to stay with you for a night or two, though, Phillip. I do have my hands full right now and am running exhausted...and I know it worries her to see it. She doesn't need that stress on top of everything else in her head."

He nodded, knowing she was right. "Listen, I need to get back to work. I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusions, but I'm not sorry we talked. If there's anything I can do, Olivia, you know you just have to ask."

To his surprise, she leaned over and hugged him. "I'm glad we talked, too. Thank you. And thanks for the offer to help."

He wanted to say more, but didn't know what. So he got to his feet as Olivia did the same. She walked him to the door in silence, opening the door while he shrugged into his

coat. He walked outside and stood on the front step for a moment, turning back to face her. "They'll find her, Olivia. I have faith that they will."

He wasn't surprised when her only response was a wan smile. He nodded and she closed the door, and he turned back towards his car.

He could tell she was struggling to stay hopeful, no matter how much she might say all the right things to anyone who asked. The woman was a born realist; she knew the odds as well as anyone. But he knew better than most that miracles could and did happen. And if anyone deserved a miracle, it was Natalia Rivera.

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Marina glanced at the clock for the tenth time in as many minutes. Not that it really mattered exactly how late Shayne was in getting home – she'd already had to tell her grandpa that she would be late for her afternoon shift at Company, if she made it at all, because she had to stay home with Henry. She knew from recent experience that it was damned near impossible to get a babysitter on short notice; she'd learned to plan ahead in making arrangements when Shayne wasn't around.

Normally, she would have just brought Henry to the restaurant with her – hell, he'd spent half his life in the kitchen already. But her mom had made some off-handed comment about workplace rules and how children didn't belong in certain settings, and she'd decided it wasn't worth the hassle. Lord knew Eleni wouldn't hesitate to throw her own daughter under the bus and tell the driver to gun it. Marina had learned that the hard way already. In a weird way, though, she was glad that her secret about being a dirty cop was finally out in the open; at least that way, her mom had one less thing to poke at her about.

Of course, it grated on her that everyone in town now looked at her like she had some damned scarlet letter pinned to her front. Half of Springfield had done equally bad things! Hell, they'd done worse things, because for all her faults, she hadn't ever killed a person. And yet she was the big bad wolf. It wasn't fair.

The kitchen door slammed shut and she jumped at the sound. Shayne raised his hands in a gesture that was half-apology, half-alarm. "Whoa. I thought you were at work."

She rolled her eyes. "Kinda hard to go to work when you're an hour late getting home and I have to stay here with Henry." She caught his puzzled look and threw up her hands in exasperation. "Remember...my mom made the big stink about him being in Company...I told you I didn't want her calling Child Welfare on me. We had this conversation, Shayne."

He scrubbed a hand over his face and said softly, "Sorry. I guess I forgot."

She stared at him, unable to believe her ears. "How the hell could you forget? Don't you remember how pissed off I was? Do you ever remember anything I tell you?"

The sharp edge of his voice made her take a step back. “You’ve spent more than a year taking him to work with you every day, so it’s going to take a little while for me to remember that things have changed. Besides, you know I have a lot on my mind right now, Marina.”

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her raging emotions. “Oh, how could I possibly forget? Poor little Dinah is on trial...of course that’s all you’ve got energy to think about. I’m so sorry that I expected you to pay any attention to what’s going on with me and your son.”

That stung him; she could tell by the way he took a half-step back and by the flash of hurt in his eyes. But she was hurting, too. His words were quiet, his tone flatter than she’d expected. “What’s going on with you, Marina?”

She fisted her hands, battling to hold back the tide. But she couldn’t, and the dam broke. “What do you think? I’ve been going through hell the past few weeks, and all you have energy to think about is Dinah and that damned trial. I’m here supporting you, raising your son, and all you can think about is her. What about me? All the hell I’ve dealt with because of DeSilva and Edmund, and it’s like you don’t even care about how hard it’s been for me.”

Shayne’s eyes flashed. “What the hell are you talking about? I’m still here; I’m still with you, even after finding out that you were a dirty cop, even after finding out that you helped that bastard Winslow escape. By all rights, I should have walked away the minute I found out just how much crap you’ve pulled over the years.”

A part of her was thrilled to see the anger on his face and to know she’d put that emotion there. She felt in control in a way that was rare for her these days. She spat, “The fact that you even think you should have walked away means that you aren’t 100% on my side.”

She watched him shake his head, heard the annoyance in his tone. “No, it just means that I thought you were above doing something like that. But then I reminded myself that Edmund was blackmailing you and you were trying to protect Henry. And then I felt sorry for you, trying to live up to your dad’s expectations and getting too far in over your head to pull out. How dare you accuse me of not being there for you?”

She stepped right up to him, getting in his face. “But you’re not, Shayne. Don’t you get it? Dinah’s a fucking murderer, and you’re there by her side like a little faithful puppy. You can’t even come home for lunch on time for me. I’ve made some bad choices and done some bad things, but I’ve never killed anyone in cold blood. What makes me so much worse than her?”

He was breathing hard, clearly trying to control his reactions. But the color was high in his cheeks and he practically spat his words at her. “She at least had the guts to own up to what she did, to confess to her bad deeds. She didn’t spend years trying to cover them

up.”

Marina raised her hand and slapped him. Hard. She snapped, “And then she ran away, went gallivanting around Europe so she wouldn’t be arrested. Again... what makes her any better than me? Hell, what makes anyone in this damned town any better than me? People here are murderers, kidnappers, adulterers, rapists, thieves...and yet I’m the town pariah and everyone else is a saint in comparison.”

She was breathing hard and felt the anger starting to fade. Apparently Shayne felt the same; he abruptly stepped to the side, sank down into a chair at the kitchen table, and cradled his head in his hands.

“Marina, I’m sorry. It’s just that because you were mixed up with Edmund, it’s hard for anyone to forgive and forget, since he’s still on the loose and still hurting innocent people. Maybe I haven’t been as supportive as I should have been. But Dinah is a friend, and she needs support, too, and I’m not going to turn my back on her.”

She sank down into the chair next to him. “You still love her, don’t you?”

His voice was a bare whisper. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

For a long moment, there was silence, except for the pitter patter of little feet as Henry ran around his room upstairs.

At last, Shayne asked, “Do you still love Mallet?”

She sighed softly. “I don’t know if I ever stopped.”

This time, there was no sound of footsteps as silence settled around them, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Marina wanted to keep fighting, wanted to yell and scream and vent all the frustrations that seemed to choke in her throat on a daily basis. She also wanted to hug Shayne and feel him hug her back, and have a moment of peace in the middle of the maelstrom that was her life recently. She didn’t know which way to go, what to do.

She started in surprise when she felt strong arms wrap around her from behind. She hadn’t even realized Shayne had gotten up from his chair. She leaned back against him, letting herself take comfort in the display of affection, finding that it calmed her inner turmoil in a way she hadn’t expected.

“I’m sorry, Shayne. I don’t know what came over me. Of course Dinah’s your friend and you want to be there for her.”

His tone was contrite. “Hey, it’s okay. I should have known that spending so much time at the trial might upset you, especially after everything else that’s happened. I’m sorry

too. I should have remembered you needed me here with Henry.”

She half turned in his embrace and looked up at him. “What do we do now? I mean about the whole ‘do you still love him or her?’ thing.”

Whatever response she’d expected, laughter wasn’t it. “There’s nothing we can do. No matter what we may or may not feel, Dinah and Mallet are still together. But you and I still care about each other, and we still have a son to raise together. Maybe we should just decide to be friends with benefits and not try to make this into something more than it really is.”

She nodded, agreeing with him in principle, but feeling like it was yet another piece of her life that had crumbled before her eyes. It wasn’t fair. Then again, nobody had ever promised that life was fair.

Before she had time to get too lost in that train of thought, Henry padded into the kitchen and announced he was hungry. She shared a smile with Shayne as he moved off towards the refrigerator to see what he could scrounge up for their growing boy. At least that was one thing that never changed.

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“I wish I had more news for you, Auntie O, but we just haven’t come up with anything definitive to show where Natalia is or who has her.”

Jonathan sighed as he sat back in his chair and looked across the desk at Olivia, watching her process his words. He’d stopped by the Beacon mainly to keep his aunt in the loop – lack of progress aside – but a small part of him wanted to check on her, to make sure she wasn’t falling completely to pieces.

There were bags under her eyes and worry lines seemed permanently etched in her forehead. There was a tired slump to her shoulders and she looked smaller than her actual size – her larger-than-life personality nowhere to be found. It worried him, even though he’d expected it. He was just so used to her being strong and in control.

He heard her sigh and watched as she rubbed at her temples. Her voice was surprisingly steady, though. “I know you’re all working hard to find her. I really appreciate you keeping me up to date on how it’s going.”

He started to say something, but stopped short at the distinctive trill of his cell phone ring tone, muffled though it was by being in his pocket. He smiled apologetically at her as he fished it out, not missing the flash of hope in her eyes. He glanced at the caller ID and shook his head, letting Olivia know that it wasn’t a call from the station, seeing her slump slightly in her seat at the gesture.

“Hey, Leyla,” he said into the phone. “How are you doing?” From the corner of his eye

he saw his aunt perk up slightly as she realized who he was talking to.

*“Hi, Jonathan. I just wanted to apologize for being so short with you on the phone the other night.”*

He couldn't help it; he smiled. “It's okay. Don't even worry about it. I know things have been really hard for you. It's a stressful time for everyone; I'm actually here talking to Auntie O about that.”

Not that he and Olivia had actually gotten that far, but he wanted to alert Leyla to the fact that he wasn't alone.

*“Oh, hey, can I talk to her?”*

Expecting a slightly different response, it took him a minute to kick his brain into gear enough to answer, “Sure.”

He shifted in his chair, leaning forward to hand the phone to Olivia, who had an eyebrow raised. He couldn't tell if it was a question or a comment, but she took the phone willingly as he settled back into his chair.

“Hi, Leyla. How's everything going with your parents?”

He watched a wry smile flit across his aunt's face as she listened to the answer. Her tone held a note of amusement. “Sounds like it's going better than I would have expected. I've met your parents, remember?”

There was a long pause while she listened to the answer and he futilely wished he could hear both sides of the conversation. Then her expression grew more solemn and she asked, “How are you holding up?”

The pause for her to listen to the answer was fairly short this time, and he suspected Leyla was brushing off the concern. A few moments later, Olivia said, “Of course. Take as much time as you need with your parents. I've got Greg helping out in the daycare center right now, and the banquet staff is being great about covering for him.”

He watched her nod at the phone and then heard, “No problem, just give me a call when you're able to come back. Here's Jonathan.”

He stretched forward again to take the phone, pressing it up against his ear. “So, gonna be staying in Chicago a while longer?”

He'd meant it as a conversation starter, but he could hear the bristle in her tone.

*“I need to be here. I have...I mean, my mom hurt her back and is a bit of a mess. I've got my hands full...you should understand that.”*

He shook his head slightly, wondering why exactly he always seemed to set her off. “I do understand. Listen, Leyla, I didn’t mean to sound like I was questioning you. I know it’s tough for you and your family with Natalia being missing. I just want you to be okay.”

Her sigh came across clearly over the phone line. *“Look, I don’t mean to be so touchy. I just need you...everyone...to give me some space so I can take care of what I need to take care of.”*

Taking a deep breath, he tried to keep his voice gentle. “Don’t worry about it. Take care of yourself, okay? I’ll talk to you whenever you get back to town.”

*“Okay. And Jonathan...”*

Over the phone connection, he heard a faint thud and a dull pounding noise, interrupting whatever she’d been about to say. Instead, she cursed under her breath. A quick *“I’ve got to go”* and the line went dead.

He flipped his phone shut to find Olivia staring at him, concern written on her face. He just shook his head and said, “She seems like she’s under a lot of stress, and I think I must be a safe person for her to be testy with.”

It didn’t really surprise him when his aunt just raised an eyebrow and said, “I’d be stressed, too, dealing with her parents. I have no doubt her father thinks Natalia being missing is God’s punishment or something.”

He nodded noncommittally. He honestly hoped that was all it was – the stress of her sister being kidnapped along with the stress of dealing with her narrow-minded parents. Still, she seemed like she wasn’t quite herself, and it nagged at him.

“Even so, I’m worried about her.”

He looked up in surprise at Olivia’s words, seeing the worry in her eyes. Apparently she was picking up on something odd, too. His response was an exhaled, “Yeah.”

Then, remembering what all his aunt had on her plate, he added, “I’m sure that whatever’s going on, she can handle it. Besides, she’s got friends there she can lean on. It’s not like she has to deal with everything all alone.”

He watched as Olivia considered his words and then nodded, some of the worry draining from her features. He only wished he could convince himself so easily that everything was okay.

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Natalia cringed away from the shadow looming over her, but couldn’t escape the tight

grip on her hair. Her cheek ached from where she'd been slapped, but she was glad for the pain because it chased away some of the lingering fogginess from whatever drug she'd been given.

“You're pathetic.”

The hiss was like a snake, poised and ready to strike. The words were venom, burning into her, ready to kill her.

“You deserve to suffer. All the sins you've committed, all the people you've hurt. You deserve to be judged, to be cast down from your pedestal into the flames. This...here... you brought it on yourself, you meddling bitch.”

Natalia sniffled and tears spilled down her cheeks, both from the painful grip on her hair and the hate in those snarled words. And the worst part was that she did deserve it. She'd hurt everybody she claimed to love. She was weak and pathetic.

She gasped as the hand tightened in her hair, forcing her head to turn towards her captor. The black hoodie made the face below invisible – like Death himself in his long, black cape, only his cold, dead eyes visible. The only thing missing was the scythe. Natalia shut her eyes. She couldn't stand to look up into that featureless face; she couldn't get past her fear of her tormentor or the pain from the demons unleashed by the implacable figure.

Without warning, the fingers let go of her hair and then she felt the crack of knuckles against her cheek. Pain blossomed along her jawbone and she tasted blood in her mouth. Unable to keep her balance, she toppled over onto her side on the cold, hard floor. She curled into a ball, trembling.

Once again, the hateful hiss sliced through the air. “Pathetic.”

She didn't move, didn't respond, just wrapped her arms around her legs and tried to make herself as small as possible. For a long, long time, the hooded figure stood over her, occasionally prodding her with a booted foot. Then, she heard a mocking “We'll play again later” before the tell-tale sound of footsteps told Natalia her captor was leaving. Moments later, she heard the metallic clang of a door, and she was once again all alone.

She stayed in her curled position, hugging herself tighter and giving in to her tears.

Today was the first time her captor had hurt her physically. It scared her. Not the pain itself; she could handle that. It scared her that maybe her tormentor was tired of the game and was ready to just kill her and be done with it.

She didn't know how long she'd been here – the drugs and the lack of light in her cell made it impossible to tell day from night. But she had to believe that Olivia would move heaven and earth to find her, would harass Frank and the police every single day to make sure they kept looking.

Unless Olivia thought she'd run away again.

That thought burned her in a way none of the taunts had. Maybe no one was looking for her; maybe they'd all realized they were better off without her around. After all, she'd nearly killed Olivia by locking her in that bathroom. She'd broken Frank's heart by not being honest with him – or herself – from the beginning. She'd disappointed her parents and left her sister alone in that apartment with them. She'd hurt Ava by being unable to forgive Jeffrey for his past actions. She'd put her family in danger by pointing that gun at Edmund and making herself a target in the process. She'd raised Rafe without the benefit of a father and then coddled him too much. The list went on and on.

Maybe they'd all finally seen just what a horrible person she really was and were happy to be rid of her. Maybe they were having a party right now, to celebrate that her past sins were coming back to haunt her.

The room began to spin and the walls loomed menacingly over her and the hard floor started laughing at her. She pulled her arms up over her head to shut out the sound, wondering if this was what it felt like to lose your mind.

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Josh took a sip of tea, not because he was thirsty, but because it gave him a chance to peer over the rim of his cup at his hostess. He didn't much like what he saw.

It was safe to say he was one of the few people who had seen Olivia at her best, her worst, and every state in between. This wasn't her worst – he still had nightmares about her nearly managing to commit suicide while Puccini's *Tosca* played in the background. But it came close, if only because he hadn't expected to find her like this.

Tired – yes. Stressed – of course. Depressed – well, duh. But this...this was something else. He was facing an anguished, plaintive creature who was dabbing at her eyes with the edges of a napkin, trails of mascara trickling artistically down her cheeks. When she wasn't wiping her eyes, she was wringing her hands helplessly.

When Olivia called him earlier and said she needed to talk, he'd never imagined this scenario playing out. It was what he'd have expected from Reva, honestly. He loved Reva dearly, but no one was better at the scene-chewing, histrionic drama than she was. Well, except old-school Olivia Spencer – the tigress he used to know before Natalia brought out her inner kitten.

Suddenly aware of eyes on him, he self-consciously set his cup of tea down on the kitchen table and sat back in his chair. Olivia sniffled and dabbed at her eyes some more, though he could see from across the table that the paper was soaked through and useless. He reached out and handed her another napkin, which she took with a watery smile.

He narrowed his eyes and didn't bother to disguise his annoyance. "What do you want from me?"

He almost winced at the wounded look she gave him, but didn't back down, folding his arms across his chest. He knew her pain was real, knew she was devastated because Natalia was missing. But this was a production of some kind, and he didn't know what role she'd cast him in – even if he'd been inclined to play along, which he wasn't.

Watching her as closely as he was, he saw the exact moment the mask fell. She was still crying, but started wiping the tears away with the back of her hand, and her expression turned bleak instead of sorrowful. Now this was the real deal.

She looked down at the table top and sighed. "I'm sorry, Josh. I don't know what came over me."

He didn't say anything, just waited. She looked up abruptly, still sniffing, but with a slight quirk of the mouth that told him she got it. He clearly heard the wry note in her voice. "Okay, so I was hoping to play on your sympathy to get you to run interference for me."

Josh smiled slightly, unfolding his arms and leaning forward, reaching out with one hand to wipe away some of the still-falling tears. "What's wrong, Olivia? I mean besides the obvious..."

Her sigh shook her whole body and she slumped forward against the table, her head bowed, her voice subdued. "I'm making everything worse. I think I'm doing the right thing for Emma, sending her to stay with Phillip so she has adults around who can focus on her. Only Phillip comes over to tell me that I'm being selfish."

She laughed bitterly and looked up at him, shaking her head as she said, "Okay, so he didn't understand why I did what I did, but does that really matter? It's what everyone else is going to think, too...that I'm abandoning my baby. They're going to think that when push comes to shove, I put myself above Emma."

He cleared his throat, but didn't get a chance to say anything before she continued talking, her voice thick with sorrow. "I've always been the tough bitch, able to handle everything life throws my way. Run over people before they run over me. I've always been able to keep going, no matter what, and to make sure Emma was taken care of. Now, I'm barely able to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and my daughter's shutting me out. I'm trying to do whatever I can to help her, but I can barely keep myself afloat. I feel like I'm on the verge of losing control."

He could tell the admission scared her, and reached out to cover her hand with one of his. She looked back down at the table top and her voice was so quiet he could barely hear her. "I've never felt a pain like this before. Half the time I feel like a zombie because I'm so cold and dead inside. The rest of the time I feel like I've got a massive fever because

the pain and the fear burn through every nerve ending. I...I'm scared and alone, and I don't think I can survive if Natalia is..."

He was out of his chair before the last words choked in her throat, and fell to his knees on the floor beside her. She turned to him, and he pulled her down into his arms and felt the dam burst. His shirt was soaked from her tears and he didn't even want to think about where she was wiping her nose. Still, he was grateful for it. For all her tough exterior, he'd always known there was a fragile, emotional soul underneath. And unlike the crocodile tears from earlier, these were heart-wrenching, soul-shaking sobs. She needed the release.

After a while, he felt her begin to calm in his arms and he whispered, "First of all, no one needs to run interference for you. Phillip knows he jumped to conclusions and he knows you love Emma. Anyone who knows you knows how much you love that little girl. Those who don't know you...well...who cares what they think? They don't matter. Second of all..."

He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat so that he could get the words out. "If the worst does happen, if Natalia winds up dead, you will survive. It won't be easy, but you'll go on. You'll do it for Emma, you'll do it for Francesca, and you'll do it to keep Natalia's memory alive. As long as you live, a part of her will always be with you."

He paused then, holding her tighter as her sobs began anew, rubbing her back soothingly. After a long moment, he said gently, "You've never felt a pain like this before because you've never had a love like this before."

He felt a fresh batch of tears against his shoulder and continued to hold her close, offering what comfort he could. Once she began to settle down again, he said calmly, "I know you're scared and sad. I think it's good that Olivia 2.0 is able to show her feelings so openly and is able to love so deeply. You know I think the changes in you have been for the better. But don't entirely shut out Olivia Spencer 1.0...don't just roll over and give up without a fight."

He wasn't at all surprised when she shoved out of his arms and looked up at him, disbelief and irritation written across her face. Good; that was exactly what he'd hoped for.

She snarled, "What the hell..."

Before she could say more than that, he interrupted, "I know that finding Natalia is a job for the police and the CIA – or whoever Mallet works for these days. There's not much you can do to help with that. What I mean, is don't just sit around wallowing and worrying. There was a time when you'd have haunted the police station and made Frank's life hell on an hourly basis, when you'd be out waving money at private detectives, when you'd be pulling out all the stops to intimidate your enemies in the hopes that one of them would slip up and show his hand."

She glared at him and her tone was icy. “I’ve got Francesca to take care of, Emma to reassure, the Beacon to run, and the farmhouse to tend to. There’s nothing I can do to make Frank work any harder than he already is. Phillip’s already spending money to help with the search, and we already have a good idea who kidnapped Natalia.”

She shook her head and pointed her finger emphatically in his direction as she continued, “Even if I had Edmund in my reach, there’s nothing I could do to intimidate him. If it’s Anna’s father who’s the kidnapper, well, there’s no chance in hell he’d be intimidated by the likes of me.” She paused, sighing. “I can’t get out there and be the bitch on wheels I used to be, because there’s nothing and no one for me to direct that towards.”

He reached out and traced the track of a tear as it slid down her cheek. “I know that, Olivia,” he said softly. “I just wanted to remind you that there’s a fine line between realism and pessimism, between mourning and wallowing, and I don’t want you to cross it. It won’t do you any good, it won’t do Emma and Francesca any good...and more importantly, it won’t do Natalia any good.”

Her whisper was just the ghost of her breath, but he heard it anyhow. “I don’t want to give up, but I don’t have the kind of faith Natalia does. I don’t know if I have the strength to do this.”

He pulled her into another hug, relieved that she didn’t resist it, but saddened that she was so pliable, that the anger that had breathed life into her a moment before had sputtered out. “Yes, you do. I know you do. Your strength is the love you have for Natalia and for your daughters.”

She pulled away from him again and cocked her head thoughtfully to the side. “Is it really as simple as that?”

He didn’t answer right away, remembering his own doubts over the years, the doubts that he’d had to wrestle with even when he served as a minister. Finally, looking her in the eyes, he quoted quietly, “So faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love.”

Her eyes filled with tears again, but there was a new lightness in her expression that hadn’t been there before. He smiled, just a little.

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### ACT 3

January 12th

Olivia swore under her breath as she reached for the cordless phone, knocking it off the charger and onto the floor. Shifting her grip on Francesca, who squealed in delight at this

fun new game, she bent over to retrieve the handset. She fumbled a bit, but managed to press the talk button and get the phone up to her ear.

“Hello?”

All she heard was the crackle of static, and a chill went down her spine. Could it be Natalia, somehow finding a phone to make a call, but too injured to speak? No; she'd have dialed Olivia's cell phone number instead. What if it was the kidnapper, calling to taunt her?

A soft whimper sounded in the ear not pressed up against the phone, and she shifted her attention to her daughter. Sweet Pea had obviously picked up on her unease, and the last thing she wanted to do was scare the toddler.

Pressing a kiss to the smooth forehead, she carefully set the little girl down in the playpen near the couch, glad to see that a set of colored blocks immediately caught Francesca's interest.

Turning her back on her daughter, she growled into the phone. “Hello? Who is this?”

For another long moment there was nothing but static, and then she heard a lightly accented voice. *“Hello, Olivia. Sorry to call out of the blue like this, but I wanted to get a message to you while I could.”*

She closed her eyes and let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. “Hi, Rafe.”

She'd spoken to him briefly a few days before. But since his unit was on some kind of assignment where phone privileges were very limited, they'd agreed that she'd be the one to call and leave a message if there was any news. Sadly, there wasn't. She rubbed at the bridge of her nose and asked, “How are you holding up?”

There was a static-filled delay before he responded. *“Okay, I guess. I'm worried about Ma, but the worst part is being all the way over here and feeling helpless.”*

“Join the club,” she muttered, before she could think better of it. The young man had enough on his plate with being in a war zone; she'd sworn to herself that she wasn't going to confide her worries to him.

She started to say more, intent on distracting him, but she was too slow. His words broke through the static. *“Somehow, I can't picture you being helpless.”*

Sighing, she turned and glanced down at Francesca, who was busily building something that looked strangely like a hotel. Satisfied that the girl was no longer picking up on her mood, she walked around the couch and sank down into the cushions.

“It's hard to feel like there's nothing I can do,” she confessed. “If we had any clues,

anything that would lead us to where Edmund's holed up, I'd be the first in line to kick his ass and make him tell me where Natalia is. But the police have nothing, and all I can do is sit here like some damsel in distress, wringing my hands."

Through the static, she clearly heard a snort and then uproarious laughter. She actually pulled the phone away from her ear and glared at it, like that would do any good. Putting it back up to her ear, she could still hear laughter, and her tone turned acidic. "I'm so glad my problems are amusing to you."

Immediately, she heard a "Sorry" on the other end of the phone and waited impatiently for the young man to get himself under control. There was a time when he would have found her distress enjoyable, but they'd moved well beyond that. Still, the unexpected reminder of that time – especially with the additional parallel of her partner being missing – brought a fresh stab of pain.

Caught up in old memories of Rafe taunting her, it took her a moment to register that there were words breaking through the static on the other end of the line.

*"...just not the damsel in distress type. I mean, maybe it doesn't feel like there's much you can do since you're not a cop and not out there with Frank and those guys. But you can keep the pressure on them to make sure they don't write Ma off or move the investigation to the back burner; you can send out press releases on a national level; you can lean on your contacts in San Cristobel to see what they know about Edmund's associates."*

She heard him chuckle as he finished with, *"Hell, you could run off to Mexico again with Rambo Reva Shayne and break into his stronghold."*

Olivia sat stunned for a minute, realizing that, apart from keeping pressure on the local police and giving Phillip free reign to hire private detectives, none of the other options had occurred to her. Still... "None of that seems like enough."

Rafe's sigh was clear, even through the static-filled phone line. *"I know it doesn't."*

There was a note in his voice that reminded her of where he was and what kinds of things he'd been doing, and she realized he knew exactly how she felt. She listened intently as he continued, *"But at some point, doing whatever you can, no matter how small it seems, has to be enough. I wish there was something I could do other than stay strong and pray for Ma to come home safe. But I can't, so I do that with my whole heart."*

Olivia felt a lump in the back of her throat. Once again, Rafe had surprised her. But she'd cried enough recently and she didn't want to get all weepy in front of him. She tried to keep her tone light. "We'll be a team and each do our part. You keep the faith for both of us, and I'll hound Frank and the police department to make sure they don't let up for a minute until Natalia is found."

She could almost picture the young man nodding. *“Yes, ma’am. You’ll be a hell of a partner. Kick their asses into gear for me, too, okay?”*

“Damn straight.”

There was another burst of static on the phone line and then an audible curse. *“Listen, Olivia, I have to go. We’re moving out and I need to grab my gear. Hang in there.”*

She nodded, even knowing he couldn’t see her. “I’ll try. You, too. Stay safe.”

The call disconnected and she dropped the phone into her lap, rubbing at the bridge of her nose with one hand, thinking. Okay, so maybe she couldn’t do much at all in the grand scheme of things to find Natalia and bring her home safely. Maybe it was normal to feel overwhelmed and helpless in such a desperate situation. But there were things she could do, and she would do them with her whole heart.

First and foremost, like Josh had reminded her, she could love her girls and keep them safe, and she could love Natalia and try to emulate her faith in happy endings. Secondly, like Rafe had just reminded her, she could kick asses into gear with the best of them. She knew Frank, Anna, Jonathan, and Remy were working their butts off on the investigation, but there were other people on the case she could hound and harass to ensure they were giving it their all.

That way, even if the worst happened – she swallowed hard and fisted her hands at the thought – she’d know she’d done everything in her power to prevent it. And that would sit better on her conscience than if she’d been sitting around on her hands, waiting.

Olivia Freakin’ Spencer was back.

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Olivia stood in the doorway of Emma’s room in the Spaulding mansion. The door was wide open, but her daughter had her back to it, shoving papers haphazardly into her backpack. She smiled a little at the normalcy of the scene, then lifted her hand and used her knuckles to rap on the door.

“Daddy, it’s way too early to leave for school...”

Emma had pivoted to face the doorway as she spoke, and Olivia frowned at the way the girl froze on seeing her. Okay, so her daughter hadn’t known she was coming over today, but it still shouldn’t have shocked her so much, should it?

For an awful, eternal moment, Olivia lived with the fear that she’d finally fucked things up badly enough to alienate Emma. But then...

“Mommy.”

The word was quiet, nearly a whisper. But it was full of need, and sadness, and all the things Emma had been holding inside in recent days. And it was accompanied by a sudden flurry of movement and small arms snaking around Olivia's waist in a tight hug.

Olivia bent down and lifted Emma up in her arms, in a way she hadn't in years. Then, remembering why she hadn't done it – namely because her daughter was too heavy for that – she walked over to the twin bed and sat down, Emma in her lap.

For several minutes, they sat like that; Olivia rocked her daughter gently, while Emma cuddled against her, head nestled on her shoulder. There were no words, no tears, just the rustle of cloth and the sounds of the household below moving about its daily tasks.

“I'm sorry, Jellybean.”

She felt the weight of Emma's head lift from her shoulder and looked down to see her daughter staring at her like she'd lost her mind. So she elaborated, choosing her words carefully. “I'm afraid that when I suggested you come and stay with Daddy and Beth, I didn't explain it very well, so you ended up feeling like you were being a burden on me. That's not true at all and I should have made sure you didn't feel that way.”

Watching Emma carefully, she saw the faint tremble in the girl's lower lip. A part of her was terrified by this conversation, not sure if she had the tools to help her daughter. Another part was more relieved than words could describe, because she'd been so worried about how closed off Emma had been.

Her daughter's voice was very, very quiet. “You didn't make me feel that way. But you have all those other things to take care of and I didn't want you to worry about me, too. I wanted to come to Daddy's because I knew it would help you.”

Olivia's heart broke at those words, even knowing that she should have expected them. Stoicism didn't just come out of thin air, after all. “Emma, I love you, so of course I worry about you. But you're never a burden on me. I didn't send you to Daddy's to help me; I thought maybe it would help you. I just thought maybe it would be easier for you to be here at the mansion instead of at home without Natalia being there.”

She felt the tension in the small body nestled against her. “Is it bad that I don't think about Natalia as much here as I do at home?”

Olivia felt tears prick her eyes and hugged her daughter tighter, feeling Emma's head lean on her shoulder again. “No, baby, it's not bad. It's normal, because you're not surrounded by things that remind you of her. It doesn't mean you don't love her.”

She could practically feel some of the tension flood out of her daughter at the words. Talking about this wasn't easy, but she was glad that they were able to do it, that Emma was finally opening up to her again. There was silence for several moments, before

Emma said quietly, "I miss you and Francesca, but I want to stay here again tonight. Daddy said I can build a snow fort with James after school, and then we're going to have pizza for dinner and he's letting me and Peyton stay up a little late to watch a movie. I just..."

Emma trailed off there, and Olivia finished the sentence for her. "...want to forget the bad things for a little while."

Under different circumstances, she might have laughed at the way Emma pulled out of her arms enough to stare at her incredulously, like she was psychic or something. But she simply smiled at her daughter and said softly, "I understand. We have to keep living...we can't just stop and spend all our time being scared and sad. Natalia wouldn't want us to do that."

She hadn't thought about it in those terms, exactly, but it was true. Her partner wouldn't want them to exhaust themselves with grief, even though there was no way to avoid feeling it and being overwhelmed by it at times. And there was one more thing she needed Emma to understand.

"Jellybean, there's nothing wrong with wanting to forget the bad stuff," she said, trying to choose her words carefully, "But we'll still feel scared and sad a lot of the time...and that's normal. I hope you know you can come and talk to me about whatever you feel, whenever you need to. Just like when I was really sad yesterday, I talked to Josh. It helped me a lot, because it reminded me that I don't have to carry my sadness all alone."

Emma's eyes were wide. "You did?"

Olivia couldn't help but smile. Yup, her daughter knew exactly how much she held close to her vest. She was reasonably sure no other child on earth would have been that impressed by the simple fact of her mother talking to someone.

"Yes, Jellybean, I did. It was hard, but I felt a lot better afterwards."

She watched Emma carefully. Her daughter had her head cocked to the side, clearly mulling over what she'd said. The girl's tone was thoughtful. "It's kinda like how we're supposed to talk to the doctors about the bad things that happened, isn't it?"

Olivia reached out and ruffled honey-colored hair. "Exactly. Only we stay at home and talk to each other and don't have to go to someone's office."

A giggle greeted that statement and she felt a weight lift from her shoulders. They still had a long road ahead of them and Emma still hadn't opened up that much; but she was showing signs of her old spark, and that was a huge relief. Just as that thought occurred to Olivia, she saw her daughter grow solemn again.

"I'll think about it, okay, Mommy? But...I...not now...like last time...can't..."

There was frustration on the young face, presumably because Emma couldn't find the words to explain what she wanted to say. Olivia ran her fingertips soothingly down her daughter's cheek as she said, "You don't have to say anything if you're not ready, Jellybean. Okay? Just know that when you are ready, when you want to talk, I'll be there."

Olivia saw the flash of relief in hazel eyes and decided to change the subject. She'd explained what she needed to explain, and apologized, after a fashion, for her own misreading of the situation. The door was open for future conversations, but she wasn't going to shove the girl through. The fact that Emma had let down her guard and confessed some of what was in her head was a huge step, and made her think that things would somehow be okay.

Olivia leaned forward and kissed her daughter's forehead. "How about I take you to school this morning and we stop to get some hot chocolate and pancakes on the way?"

Emma's face brightened, but then her brows scrunched in confusion. "But don't you have to get back to Sweet Pea?"

Olivia shook her head. "Nope. I already dropped her off at the daycare. Greg is running it today since Aunt Leyla is still in Chicago."

She didn't miss Emma's conspiratorial grin. "Maybe I should skip building the snow fort and come to the Beacon after school. I can help Greg with the little kids and then practice some of my moves on him."

Olivia smiled back. "I think he'd like that, Jellybean."

Emma gave her a hug and then jumped off her lap and bounced around the room, gathering up her things. Olivia made a mental note to give Greg bonus pay for hazard duty.

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A figure in a dark suit sat in a well-camouflaged car, hidden behind overgrown shrubs, binoculars in hand. Despite the darkness of the foliage and the distance from the subjects under observation, seeing clearly was no problem at all. Not with the specialized and expensive equipment in the car.

The police officers seemed to be growing desperate in their search, finding only small bits and pieces of a larger puzzle. It was almost an amateur effort, really, despite having a couple of professionals in the mix. In an odd way, it was quite amusing to watch. At least for someone on the outside looking in, someone who had no investment in a quick solution to the mystery. It wasn't hard to feel some sympathy for the few competent investigators in this two-bit town, or to imagine how frustrated they must be with their

colleagues.

The figure smiled grimly.

Continuing to watch this farce wasn't strictly part of the job, but it never hurt to know what the adversary was up to, even when they didn't seem remotely close to stumbling across anything important. The trick of being successful in any endeavor was to never, ever relax, to never let down the protective guard.

Of course, it was truly quite difficult to take the police in this town seriously, particularly after watching them for a while. It would be a miracle if they could solve a case even with the clues staring them in the face. Trying to unravel the current set of tangled threads and figure out which had significance was simply beyond their capabilities. Even though the team currently out in the field had the only real professionals on it, their chances of success were slim, at best, with only having fools for helpers.

The figure chuckled slightly, then put down the binoculars and rolled up the dark-tinted window. The car started quietly and then slowly crept down the faint path of tire tracks cutting their way through the slowly melting snow. There was other business to attend to; remaining out here any longer was pointless.

That much was a fact, or his name wasn't Hung Feng Li.

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“Hey, Mom.”

Olivia looked up from her paperwork to see Ava standing in her office doorway. She smiled at her daughter. “Come on in, honey. Give me just a sec to finish signing this contract.”

She refocused on the page in front of her, vaguely aware of the shuffling sounds indicating that Ava was moving through the office and taking a seat in front of her desk. Finishing up the last signature with a flourish, Olivia set the stapled document in her outbox and folded her hands on top of her desk. She looked at her daughter, who was studying her curiously.

Ava blew out a breath and then asked, “So, uh, why did you want to see me, Mom?”

Olivia felt herself tense at the uncertain note in her daughter's voice. She hastened to reassure her. “It's nothing bad. Honestly. And it's nothing to do with work or anything like that. I just thought maybe you'd want to go out and have lunch with me today.”

“Um...I guess...why?”

Was it her imagination, or was her daughter fidgeting? What in the world? Oh right. She

took a deep breath. “Look, Ava, I know I’ve been kind of a basket case lately, and I’m sorry if you feel like you have to walk on eggshells around me.”

The sharp shake of a dark head was too quick to have been rehearsed. “You don’t need to apologize, Mom. Seriously. You’ve been handling things a lot better than most of us would.”

Olivia managed a smile, the words making her feel a little better. “Thanks, honey. So what do you say? Want to head out to Company or Towers? I’m paying.”

She was struck by the way her daughter couldn’t quite look her in the eye, the way Ava’s thumb rubbed against her forefinger where her hands were sitting in her lap. The young woman’s words were halting. “I guess I could take time for that. If you really want to, I mean. It’s just...it’s...I’ve got some things I need to do today. I was going to work through lunch and leave around one to go take care of...stuff. Errands, I mean.”

Her daughter never had mastered the art of lying to her face. Well, actually, Olivia was sure she wasn’t lying about planning to work through lunch and needing to leave early. But she was damn sure Ava wasn’t going to be out running errands; there was no reason in the world for her to temporize and evade about something so mundane.

Olivia reached up and rubbed the bridge of her nose. She wanted to come right out and ask what was going on, but wasn’t sure she had the energy to deal with a verbal fencing match. “It’s no big deal. I just thought it would give us some time together.”

She intentionally left the statement open-ended, waiting to see what kind of answer she would get. It wasn’t any of the ones she expected. Ava practically jumped to her feet and all but sprinted to the door. “Thanks, Mom. Maybe tomorrow, okay?”

Olivia barely had time to nod before her daughter was out the door. She leaned back in her office chair. What the hell was that?

Come to think of it, Ava had snuck out of the office a few times in the past several days, being evasive when anyone asked what she was doing. Olivia hadn’t thought anything of it at the time, being so caught up in her own misery and worry about Natalia. But now that she was feeling a little...not better, not exactly, but stronger, she could see a pattern and see how unusual it was. Ava was definitely her mother’s daughter, which meant work was always a priority. It was more than a little odd for her to be neglecting it. Especially under the circumstances.

After all, Ava and Natalia weren’t particularly close, even though they were on much friendlier terms now than they had been for a while. While she had no doubt that her daughter was worried about the missing woman, Ava’s way of showing her concern would be to throw herself into work, to take as much of that burden from Olivia as she could. This wasn’t like her at all.

Olivia rubbed the bridge of her nose again, half-tempted to go track her daughter down and badger her for answers. But maybe the young woman just needed some space to deal with all the chaos and stress of life in Springfield these days. Whatever was going on, Olivia knew there wasn't anything she could do about it until Ava was ready to open up and talk about it. With her stubborn streak, pigs might well fly before that happened.

Decisively, Olivia pushed up out of her chair. Okay, so she'd just find someone else to have lunch with. Doris was probably over watching Dinah's trial, and Anna was probably out hunting for clues. But she might be able to cajole Buzz into taking off his apron and sitting down for a bite. Or hell, if she couldn't, Blake probably could turn on the charm and coax him to take a break. Buzz would be good company – sympathetic without being maudlin. That was what she needed.

She headed out of her office, telling Keira she'd be out for the rest of the day, but to call if anything important came up. Her assistant, used to this routine, just nodded. Olivia headed down the hallway towards the elevator, catching a glimpse of a dark head ducking out of sight around a corner. It wasn't Ava – the figure was too short and stocky for that – but it caught her off guard nonetheless, bringing her uncertainties to the surface again.

She shook her head. Great, just what she needed. One more person to be worried about.

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Mallet sat at the counter at Company, sipping his mid-afternoon coffee, watching Marina out of the corner of his eye. He hadn't spent much time around her since arriving back in town – partly because he'd been busy, and partly because he didn't want to upset her. She seemed happy enough with Shayne, raising his son, and he didn't want to intrude on her life. Especially since he was the one who'd walked away from her in the first place.

At the time, he'd thought he was doing the right thing, stepping out of the picture to let Henry be raised by his real father. But now that he was back in Springfield, not distracted by the glamour of Europe and the excitement of living with such an unpredictable woman as Dinah, he realized just how silly and selfish he'd looked. After all, Olivia was raising Frank's child as her own, and no one seemed to think it was bad for little Francesca. Frank was still a part of his daughter's life. Just like Shayne could have been a part of Henry's life while Mallet and Marina raised him.

Mallet took another sip of coffee, shaking his head at his stupidity. He felt a familiar presence beside him and turned to see Marina standing next to him, coffee carafe in hand, smile on her face. He smiled back and raised his cup. She topped off his coffee and then stepped back around to the other side of the counter. She set the carafe on the hot plate of the coffee maker and turned back to him. It was so reminiscent of old times that it almost took his breath away. There was a part of him that missed her, missed the quiet life they'd had together.

He studied her, taking in the bags under her eyes and the thinner lines of her face. The

revelation of her being a dirty cop had come as a shock to all of them, and he could see that the stress of the whole thing had taken a toll on her. She looked exhausted, haunted.

He felt a sudden surge of sympathy for her. He'd always known how much she adored her father, how much she needed his approval. It wasn't hard to imagine her getting sucked in to evidence tampering to close her cases quickly and make her father proud. It still bothered him that she'd helped Edmund escape, but then again, the madman had been blackmailing her. While Mallet didn't condone murder, there was a tiny part of him that wished Jeffrey O'Neill had been a better shot. At least that way, Winslow would be out of their lives for good, no longer able to terrorize Springfield.

He shook himself out of his thoughts when he realized Marina was staring at him, clearly concerned about his woolgathering. He mustered up a smile at the worried look in her eyes and started to say something, only to stop with his mouth hanging open when she suddenly glanced over his shoulder and tensed. A scant second later, he recognized the sound of the bell over the door and turned to see Eleni Andros stride into the room. He glanced back at Marina, who gave him a tight smile and then headed briskly into the kitchen.

Mallet knew how much Marina despised her mother for walking out on her. Heck, he found the woman difficult to deal with, and he only had to work with her, not live with her. Still, he'd hoped that they'd managed to rebuild some bridges now that Eleni was back in town for good and dating Frank.

He practically jumped in surprise when Eleni sat down next to him, her gaze trained on the door her daughter had just disappeared through. Trying to smooth it over, he said, "She'll come around. Just give her time."

Her response was a disbelieving snort. Yeah, he didn't blame her there. After all, Marina didn't get her fiery temper out of thin air. Like mother, like daughter.

But as if to prove him correct, the kitchen door opened and Marina came out, heading for the counter. She wasn't smiling, but she was at least polite as she took her mother's order, and then headed back to the kitchen.

Mallet sipped his coffee, somewhat at a loss for words. He didn't want to get sucked into shop talk about the Natalia Rivera case. They were just spinning their wheels, with no new leads to go on, and the mere thought of the confusing mess made his head ache. Luckily, Eleni's mind was on something else.

"Do you have any news on how Dinah's trial is going?"

He took another drink of coffee, the unexpected question leaving him wondering what she was really asking. Marina came out of the kitchen again and busied herself with filling napkin holders behind the counter. He watched her for a minute, buying some time to ponder the question. At long last, the gears clicked into place. He glanced at Eleni and

answered, “The defense is poking holes in all of the evidence the prosecution presents, but they’re not pressing too hard to suggest the information in the file was tampered with or that the evidence itself was contaminated.”

Not that he wanted to think too hard about that, knowing that he was one of the people who had handled some of the John Doe/Edmund Winslow evidence improperly.

He heard Eleni’s soft sigh. “I can’t imagine why not. I mean, what exactly are they waiting for?”

Well, that was the twenty-five thousand dollar question if he’d ever heard it. “Beats me.”

Eleni swiveled on her stool, turning to face him. He heard the conviction in her tone. “I believe very strongly in the law and in punishing people who break it. Clearly, Dinah intended harm to someone she thought was Edmund Winslow. But given what kind of man he is and that she was acting in an effort to stop him...maybe this is one time when we ought to take the circumstances into account.”

Mallet blinked, trying to digest her words. Granted, he wanted Dinah freed for his own reasons. But was she really saying...?

Before he could ask, he heard an indignant, “I don’t believe you!”

He glanced back at Marina, who had stomped over to them, her face red with anger, her hands fisted at her sides. She shook her head, her words acidic. “You treat me like I’m the worst criminal ever for tampering with files, and yet you want a confessed murderer to go free? She skipped the country to avoid getting arrested because she knew she was guilty!”

He could hear the answering bite in Eleni’s voice as she turned to face her daughter. “Maybe she did kill someone. But at least she was trying to protect Henry, not to mention the rest of the town, from that madman.”

He gaped incredulously at those words, his eyes still fixed on Marina, who was glaring at her mother. Her voice dripped with venom. “Are you fucking serious? Why the hell do you think I blackmailed the social worker...you know, that big thing that got me in too deep with Edmund to get out again? It was to keep Henry safe! My God, you can understand and forgive everyone else for what they do wrong, but nothing I do is ever right.”

Eleni snapped, “Don’t be so damned dramatic! Not everything in this world revolves around you.”

Mallet winced at that low blow.

Marina slammed her fist down on the counter, anger lacing her tone. “Is that really what

you think? Seriously? Believe me, I know that where you're concerned, nothing in this world revolves around me. Let's face it, Mother; if I were on trial for the exact same thing as Dinah, you'd be the first one to say they should hold me accountable. If I'd been kidnapped like Natalia, you'd be scolding Dad for putting in too many hours on the case, not worrying about my wellbeing the way everyone in town is freaking out about little Miss Mary Poppins."

Eleni slapped her hand down on the counter and interrupted, "Well, maybe if you stopped blaming me and everyone else for your own problems, I wouldn't have to push so hard for you to take responsibility!"

But Mallet could tell Marina hadn't heard a word her mom said, intent on finishing her interrupted speech. The words tumbled out of her mouth in a breathless rush. "Hell, if I'd been one of Edmund's victims at the wedding massacre, you'd only notice because I was lying on your damned autopsy table!"

With that, Marina stormed off...not back into the kitchen, but out the front door.

Mallet turned in his seat to watch her go, whistling under his breath. He'd never seen her so angry. Then again, he'd never seen her interact with her mom before, and it was clear that something about Eleni seemed to bring out the worst in her daughter.

He glanced back at Eleni, who seemed shell-shocked, staring down at the countertop and shaking her head. She muttered, "Is that really what she thinks, that I don't care about her, that I don't notice her? I've tried to start over with her, but she won't let me. She's still stuck in the past."

He felt a surge of sympathy. "Listen, Eleni, I know this is none of my business. But I know Marina. You can't just tell her you're sorry, you have to show her. And with all due respect, with the way you went digging into old files and exposing her secrets, what you said to her was at odds with what you actually did."

Okay, so he didn't really know whether that was entirely accurate or not, since he hadn't been around when Eleni came back to town. But based on what he'd seen so far, it seemed like a good guess. Given the surprised look in her eyes, the thought hadn't even occurred to her. Her words only confirmed that. "But that was me doing my job. It didn't have anything to do with her."

Mallet shook his head. "Maybe to you. But what would you think if the first thing your estranged mother did when she got to town was start going over your old paperwork, looking for problems?"

He held up a hand when he saw Eleni start to protest. He tried to keep his tone even, neutral, as he continued, "I know that's not why you started digging deeper; I'm just saying that's what it might have looked like to her. Look, I'm not saying she doesn't have any blame here, because she can hold a grudge with the best of them. I'm just saying

there's another perspective here than how you're seeing things."

She stared at him for a long moment, her expression unreadable as various emotions flitted across her features. Finally, defeat won, and she visibly slumped on the barstool. "So what do I do to try and make this right?"

He was silent for a long moment. "Right now, there's nothing you can do. Just give her time."

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Natalia leaned her back against the wall and drew her knees up to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs and cradled her chin on her knees. A shiver racked her body and she hugged herself tighter.

She was cold, exhausted, and scared.

Her head ached and felt like it was stuffed with cotton, but that was a definite improvement. At least she finally felt halfway lucid, mostly able to tell what was real and what wasn't. The misty, ever-shifting dreamlike state she'd been in since the time of her capture had been terrifying.

Her memories weren't entirely clear – or reliable – but they haunted her. Even telling herself over and over that she'd been drugged, that she must have been hallucinating, didn't make the images any less disturbing, the accusations any less harsh. All her past sins had marched through her mind, refusing to let her ignore them, reminding her of how flawed she was. She wasn't worthy of anyone's respect. After all, if she hadn't done so much damage, hurt so many people, she wouldn't have driven someone to kidnap her. It was a punishment for her wicked deeds, as her father had often said whenever he'd disciplined her.

She must have brought this on herself, as her tormentor pointed out time and time again.

She still didn't know who was keeping her captive. The kidnapper had taken to wearing a mask recently; or maybe had been wearing one all along and she'd only noticed it now, as the drugs began to wear off. Natalia had fought back the last time her captor came into her cell, had tried to reach up and pull the mask off, to see the face underneath. That had only earned her a hard kick in the ribs and her wrists being bound again for several hours.

Reflexively, she loosened her grip on her legs and rubbed absently at first one wrist, then the other. Her skin was raw in spots from the rope, and what wasn't raw still ached.

Another shiver ran through her and she stopped rubbing her wrists, once again hugging her knees tightly to her chest, trying to warm herself. She rocked slightly in place, moving carefully so as not to aggravate her sore ribs, hoping the motion would help warm her. It didn't take long before the chill in her bones started to fade.

If only she could chase away the chill in her heart and soul so easily.

She'd tried to pray every time she'd had a lucid moment in her drugged state, but it had given her no comfort. It had been like opening herself up to a vast, endless darkness. Not even the faintest glimmer of light had broken through. She'd felt like she was standing on the edge of a chasm, a vast, dark crack in the earth below, unable to see the bottom. It had been – and still was – terrifying to face that abyss and feel alone, to feel no hint of the God who'd walked hand-in-hand with her since she was a child.

Taking a deep breath, Natalia closed her eyes and opened her soul and walked through the familiar rituals of prayer, murmuring under her breath. She hugged herself more tightly at the feel of the dark emptiness, the lack of Presence. It was just her in that emptiness, alone with her demons.

Abruptly she opened her eyes, tears stinging them. But even the faint light in her cell couldn't chase away the lingering fear. It only amplified it. God was too far away for her to find, and the faces of everyone she'd ever wronged swarmed around her like a parade of ghosts – fingers wagging at her accusingly, mouths twisted in anger, eyes gleaming with hatred.

She shrank in on herself, trying in vain to hide. She whispered, horrified, "I never meant to hurt anyone. I'm so, so sorry for what I've done."

The faces disappeared, as if puffs of smoke borne away on the wind, leaving her alone. She deserved to be alone; she'd been deserted by God and wasn't worthy of anyone's time or attention. She had to atone for her sins; she wasn't worthy of love.

But Olivia loved her.

That thought made her open her eyes wider. Olivia had seen her at some of her worst moments, had seen the badness she was capable of, and yet for some reason, still loved her. She could almost hear her lover's chiding voice in her mind – *We all make mistakes because we're human, Natalia; but you're a good person with a good heart.*

The familiar, slightly wry tone she heard in her head sent an ache through her. She wasn't sure she was worthy of her partner's love, not right now, but she'd give anything to be back home – safe and sound with Olivia and their children.

Well, no, not anything. She'd willingly live out the rest of her days, trapped in this hell, if it ensured that Olivia, Emma, Francesca, Ava, and Rafe would be safe.

It might even be appropriate penance.

Her mind was set to wander back through dark places when she thought she heard a soft thump against the ceiling. Instantly she froze, muscles tensed, ears perked, listening. That was a noise she'd heard before, usually before her captor came to taunt her. Several long

moments passed and there was only silence – no footsteps, no sounds that indicated motion.

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and consciously uncurled herself, straightening her legs on the hard floor and leaning her back against the wall. She closed her eyes, taking deliberate, measured breaths to control the wild beating of her heart.

Casting around for something to help calm her, her thoughts drifted again to Olivia. She fought the urge to break down and cry as she thought about her lover, her best friend. Strong. She had to be strong. She had to be strong for Olivia, to survive until she could make her way back home again. She couldn't fall apart. She had to keep fighting. But it was so hard, and she felt like she was hanging on by her fingernails.

She took a deep breath and focused on picturing Olivia's face, the familiar features soothing her. She took comfort in the mental image of the woman she loved, the woman who loved her, flaws and all. Natalia wasn't sure what she'd done to deserve someone as wonderful as Olivia Spencer. All she knew was that she was grateful beyond measure for such a gift.

Holding thoughts of Olivia close, her racing heart began to calm and her fear slipped away for the moment. Her muscles slowly began to relax and she felt the fog of sleep drifting through her mind.

Exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally, she let go, letting sleep claim her, the thoughts of her lover blanketing her.

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Driving along, Josh saw Olivia's car parked on a side street and made a sudden, un-signalized right turn that left the motorist behind him honking wildly. He ignored it, since the little old lady should have stopped at the stop sign instead of following him straight through. Two wrongs might not make a right, but they meant that if she had hit him, she'd have been at fault.

He pulled in behind the white Nissan and chewed on his lower lip. This wasn't familiar territory and he wasn't quite sure what Olivia would be doing down here. Especially since she'd been so distraught the day before, to the point where he'd planned to stop by and check in on her later today to see if he could irritate her into getting out and about.

Climbing out of his car, he shut the door behind him and glanced around the building fronts. They appeared to be a combination of derelict apartment buildings and shabby warehouses. He wondered if Olivia had gotten a tip on some disreputable place where Edmund Winslow was hiding out. He cracked his knuckles. If so, he sure as hell wanted a piece of the madman. Assuming he could figure out just which one of the dilapidated buildings his quarry was in...

Suddenly, a door marked “Shelter Donations” opened and Olivia walked out, a nun trailing closely behind her. Josh blinked in surprise before managing to paste a smirk onto his face, and then walked over to join the duo.

Olivia must have read his amusement because she rolled her eyes at him. But her tone was perfectly even. “Josh, this is Sister Anne. Sister Anne, this is my friend Josh.”

He tipped his head forward respectfully and held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Sister.” The nun had a firm grip and a pleasant smile, and he warmed to her immediately.

“Likewise.” There was a brief pause before Sister Anne looked over at Olivia and said, “I’ll just get the last container out of your trunk.” The nun smiled at them both before walking over to the car.

Josh opened his mouth to ask the obvious question, but shut it when Olivia shot him a barbed glare.

“No, I’m not turning into a church lady or anything,” she declared, her tone daring him to disagree. She continued, “But I’ve gotten to know Sister Anne, and she really has helped me – and Natalia – deal with some of the religious issues that have come up during our relationship. She’s become an advisor and friend, and she does good work down here at the shelter.”

He smiled. “I don’t know why, but I’m relieved that you haven’t gone off the religious deep end in your old age.”

He wasn’t quite prepared for the way she stepped forward and lightly cuffed the side of his head. “Watch who you’re calling old.”

Rubbing his head, he rolled his eyes at her and mock-complained, “Ouch!” She merely laughed at him; after a moment, he gave up and joined in. “Alright, you win,” he conceded. “I have to admit I’m glad to see you out and about today. And donating items to the shelter, no less.”

He was puzzled when a dark cloud suddenly came across her face. Her voice trembled, just a little. “I...Natalia baked some cookies for the shelter guests before she...like she really needed to be doing that before our ceremony...but you know how she is...”

Josh mentally kicked himself and reached out to run a soothing hand down her upper arm as she stared off into the distance. But she shook her head and seemed to rally herself. “I’d put them in the freezer, you know, after she went missing. Just seemed like I needed to hold on to whatever I could of her...”

His heart ached as she faltered, but he was impressed when she picked up her train of thought quickly, her voice stronger now. “But the people here can’t wait; they need help and food today. Natalia can bake more cookies when she comes home. Or Emma and I

can bake them on her behalf if we have to.”

He'd been so intent on Olivia that he literally jumped when he heard Sister Anne's voice coming from beside him. “That's what it means to have faith. It's not waiting for a specific outcome, like having Natalia as the baker, but trusting that there will be more cookies, somehow, someday.”

Despite the seriousness of the topic, Josh couldn't help but laugh at the analogy. “I see why Olivia likes you. You've got a very commonsense approach to theology.”

Sister Anne simply shrugged. “Religion isn't just about the Mystery and Might; it's also about how to live daily life in community with one another.”

The former minister in him had his interest piqued, and when Olivia waved her hands around in the air, Josh was certain she'd picked up on his reaction. Her words confirmed it. “No, no, no. The two of you will have to save the theology discussion until after I leave.”

“Off to see how things are going at the Beacon?” he asked.

He was surprised when she shook her head. “No, I was there this morning, getting caught up on my inbox. I'm going to check in with the police department. It's time to make a nuisance of myself and see if they've got any new information. I'm also going to hunt down Mallet and make damn sure he knows that if he takes weeks on end to decipher any clues they do happen to get, I'll whack him upside the head with Francesca's stroller.”

Josh glanced to the side to see if the sudden tinge of anger in Olivia's tone had shocked the nun. But Sister Anne just stood there impassively, a tiny hint of a smile on her lips. He wondered if she was as relieved to see the outburst as he was. Now that was the Olivia Spencer he knew – ready to kick ass and take names.

Her mention of Mallet reminded him of something else, and before he knew it, he'd turned back toward Olivia, saying, “If only Dinah had gotten the right guy, none of this would have happened.”

There was a spark of something in those green eyes – it might have been amusement or it might have been irritation. He couldn't really tell. Olivia's words didn't clarify it either. “You're right. Maybe I need to go yell at Dinah for a while, too.”

Knowing just how capricious her moods could be, he held out a hand to stop her as she turned to walk away. “Now, Olivia...”

She turned back and smiled mischievously at him. He just shook his head, chuckling. She chuckled for a moment, too, before her smile faded. Her words were earnest. “No, I'm not going to go off on Dinah. But I'm definitely going to the police station. Gotta make sure those clowns don't butcher yet another case. You know how they are.”

There was anger smoldering in her eyes, and he felt like he should counter it somehow, but God knew, there was nothing he could say to that. Well, there was one thing. “Yes, I do. Just don’t expect me to be a character witness if you get yourself arrested for assaulting an officer.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I won’t. That’s what I keep Phillip around for.”

He choked with laughter as she turned and said goodbye to Sister Anne before heading back to her car, leaving him standing there with the nun. He followed the Nissan with his eyes as Olivia drove off, and then turned back to the Sister. Her words caught him off-guard.

“It’s good to see her angry. It means she’s finally thinking again, not just reacting. It was a pleasure to meet you, Josh, but I need to get back to work.”

He bid her adieu, watching as she walked back to the door. She certainly wasn’t what he would have expected, that was for sure. But he had to agree with her assessment of Olivia’s anger. Even if he half-expected to get a phone call about bail money later...

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Anna took another sip of coffee, grateful that she’d stopped by Company on the way in to the office instead of settling for the usual PD sludge. She was glad that Frank and Mallet had called another meeting to compare notes and go over the bits of evidence their search teams had found in recent days, but she couldn’t help but feel antsy, wanting to get back out and do something.

She heard Frank clear his throat and quickly glanced around the room to see that everyone was finally there – Mallet, Remy, Eleni, Officers Johnson, Tyson, and Baird, and Jonathan and Cyrus, who’d been specially deputized to help in the investigation. She turned her attention back to the police chief, watching as he ticked off points on his fingers.

“The good news is that each of our teams has found some bits of evidence that point to possible culprits in the kidnapping. The bad news, of course, is that we still haven’t turned up any sign of Natalia. As we all know, the longer she’s missing...”

Anna felt a surge of sympathy when he had to swallow hard before finishing with “...the smaller the chance that we’ll find her alive.”

She understood his reaction. She felt that same sick feeling in the pit of her stomach every time she thought about that possibility. A quick glance at Jonathan and Remy told her that they both felt the same way she and Frank did. Cyrus, Eleni, and the three junior officers looked sympathetic, but not overly upset, which made sense since they didn’t really know Natalia at all. She studied Mallet for a moment, wondering why he always

seemed to wear the same expressionless expression. Not for the first time, she wondered if his face was a mask or if he really was as devoid of deep thoughts and emotions as he seemed.

With an effort, she turned her attention back to Frank, who was winding up whatever he'd been saying. She had a feeling she hadn't missed much as he nodded towards Remy, who stood up and laid some plastic evidence bags in the middle of the table.

Frank continued, "We all know about the initial evidence that Eleni and her techs found at the farmhouse. Even though none of those bits and pieces pointed to a specific suspect, they strongly suggested that Natalia was kidnapped. The traces of phenil...pheno...that drug makes it pretty clear that she didn't leave of her own free will. So far, we haven't found any evidence to the contrary, so we've been focused on finding who took her."

Anna fought the urge to pipe up and ask him to get on with it. She admired his dedication to this case, but going over the same old information every time they had a meeting was getting on her last nerve. Thankfully, he seemed to pick up on her impatience, gesturing to the bags at the center of the table.

"My investigating team found these items in various spots in the woods near the farmhouse – places where we now know Edmund was prowling around in the months prior to the shooting at Rick and Mindy's wedding. There are labels from Mexican cigars, a handkerchief monogrammed with an 'EW,' and a collection of pesos. Given that we know he has a headquarters in Mexico, it seems logical that these items are his and it suggests that he is the kidnapper."

Anna glanced at Frank's team – Mallet, Remy, and the three junior officers. The junior officers all looked pleased with their boss' summary. Mallet looked like he usually did, but was nodding in agreement. Remy had a guarded look on his face, and she knew him well enough by now to realize that he wasn't at all convinced by the evidence, but wasn't in the mood to challenge his boss. Once again, she felt a surge of pride in the detective she was trying to mentor. If she could just keep him away from Frank's influence, he'd actually be a good investigator.

She looked over at her team – Eleni, Jonathan, and Cyrus – waiting to see if any of them would say anything. Eleni caught her eye and quickly shook her head; Anna sighed, but couldn't blame the woman for not wanting to outright contradict her boyfriend. Cyrus just shrugged, and she couldn't blame him either, since he wasn't an actual cop. Jonathan canted his head to the side, studying her for a moment, and then nodded slightly.

She sat back slightly in her chair as Jonathan said, "I agree that these things could point to Edmund. But none of them are conclusively his. The handkerchief is the strongest piece of evidence, and yet he's not the only person in the greater Springfield area with those initials. Besides, there's no way of telling how long these items were out there. Like you said, he was lurking around before the wedding fiasco. He could have dropped these things at that time."

Anna saw Frank's frown and knew he was about to object. She spoke quickly. "Jonathan's right. There's no way to tell whether Edmund's been anywhere near the farmhouse recently. For all we know, he left town – even the country – after he escaped."

She didn't really believe that Edmund had disappeared entirely, but she also wasn't convinced that he was the kidnapper. She heard Frank sigh and watched him shake his head before conceding their point. He leveled his gaze on her and asked, "So what have you come up with?"

Anna nodded at Jonathan, who placed another set of evidence bags in the middle of the table. She smiled at him and then said, "These items were all uncovered near the house rented by the hospital orderly, who we presume was hired by my father to assist in Edmund's escape. What we've found does seem to point to my father."

She gestured to each of the bags in turn as she presented her case. "The first is a store receipt for duct tape, rope, bottled water, and candy bars, dated the day before Natalia's disappearance. The second is a torn piece of paper with a few partial words on it... we can make out 'San Cri' and 'reven' and 'ung'. Our best guess is that the missing words are San Cristobel, revenge, and Hung Feng Li. Finally, we have a cast of a boot print which matches a partial boot print found in the woods behind the farmhouse a few days after Natalia disappeared."

She watched as the bags were passed from person to person. Her team's evidence was slightly stronger than the evidence found by Frank and Mallet's team, she knew, but it was still far from conclusive. Certainly, it wasn't a smoking gun.

Remy echoed her thoughts as he piped up for the first time. "Unless we know who owns the boot that made that print, it doesn't point to anyone in particular or prove that the person was the kidnapper. And you're only guessing at what the torn paper says."

Anna sighed, not at all surprised by him seeing the obvious problems. Before he could point to the third bag, she offered, "We did go and check at the store listed on the receipt. We'd hoped to get some footage from their security tape for the day and time printed on the receipt, to help us figure out who purchased the items. Unfortunately, they'd already taped over it. We talked to the clerk who was at the cash register at the time, but she couldn't seem to recall what she'd done earlier that day, let alone what had happened several days before. She did sit down with a sketch artist; but as you'll see, the picture is somewhat generic."

She nodded at Eleni, who reached into a folder and pulled out a sketch that was quickly passed around the table. If the situation weren't so serious, Anna might have laughed when Frank scowled at the picture and said, "The only thing it tells us is that our kidnapper likes oversized hoodies. My God, you can't even tell for sure that it's a man, let alone what ethnicity he is."

Anna sighed and reached for her cup of coffee, taking a healthy swallow. Setting the cup back down, she put her elbows on the table, leaning forward. “Let’s face it, Chief. We’ve all got a whole lot of nothing conclusive. You have things that suggest Edmund’s involvement; we’ve got things that suggest my father’s involvement. It’s possible they’re both working together, and it’s equally possible that we’re barking up the wrong tree.”

When Mallet cleared his throat, she looked up at him in surprise. He looked and sounded puzzled. “Why would either of them kidnap her themselves?”

Frank gaped at Mallet in disbelief, and for once Anna was in complete agreement with him. She could hear the incredulous note in the chief’s voice. “Well, Edmund has a grudge against half the town, and Olivia Spencer is definitely in his sights. He killed Emma’s nanny and vandalized the farmhouse. Not to mention the fact that Natalia picked up a gun with the intention of shooting him. Anna’s father has worked for Winslow and the royal family for years; he’d be the first to take action to protect Edmund from a perceived threat.”

Anna watched Mallet shake his head, and she jumped in to bolster Frank’s words. Or, more accurately, to fill in the blanks and answer the question that had been asked. “Edmund doesn’t have DeSilva or Marina working for him any more. We know from Marina’s lie detector test that she hasn’t seen Edmund since his escape from the hospital. Cyrus managed to track down DeSilva in Peoria, and while he wasn’t exactly cooperative, both his boss and a neighbor vouch for the fact that he hasn’t left the area in the past two weeks. While it’s possible that Edmund still has henchmen around to do his bidding, there’s been no sign of activity like there was the last time he had people in town. Everything points to one or both of them, no other helpers.”

If anything, Mallet looked even more confused. “No; I mean, I know all that. What I mean is, are they the only ones with a motive to kidnap her?”

Anna couldn’t help it; she rolled her eyes. Hadn’t he read the initial case reports? Well, she mentally amended, maybe he hadn’t. After all, he was here to check into the tainted evidence and make sure that the Springfield PD was once again on the straight and narrow. He’d only started helping out on this case when it became obvious that they were running into nothing but dead ends. She glanced around the table and saw that she wasn’t the only one who’d had that reaction – Cyrus and Jonathan were both smirking and Remy was shaking his head.

Luckily Frank had, as usual, completely missed the nuance. His response was completely serious. “If anyone does have a motive, we can’t find it. Natalia has had her share of run-ins with people, but nothing serious enough to earn her any actual enemies. If anyone in Springfield is universally liked, it’s her. Olivia has her share of enemies, but these days, they’re mostly business rivals who would never do anything like this. The only other person who’s raised our suspicions is Father Ray Santos; but it’s hard to believe a priest would do something like that, no matter how strongly he disagrees with Natalia’s choices.”

Simple fairness compelled Anna to speak up grudgingly. “I don’t much like the priest, but I didn’t think he was lying to us when he said he didn’t know anything about her being missing.”

She caught the sympathetic look Frank gave her and realized that he’d been as bothered as she was by their interview with Father Ray. It made her feel a little better. She glanced back up at Mallet, who sighed heavily. She couldn’t blame him. This whole investigation felt like searching for a needle in a very large haystack.

Cyrus spoke up unexpectedly. “Seems as though we’ve right well exhausted the obvious places to look for clues. Maybe it’s time we all went our separate ways for a couple of days, follow our guts and see where they lead.”

Anna leaned back in her chair, waiting to see what Frank would say to that. To her surprise, he was nodding. “I agree. I think a couple of us should stay here, to go over all our notes and all the evidence, and see if we can look at it from a new angle. Everyone else can try looking in a new direction and see if they come up with anything. At this point, we’ve got nothing else to go on.”

Mallet quickly volunteered to go over evidence, as did Officer Baird. Frank said he’d work with them as well, and that everyone else should nose around on their own. He set a time for them all to meet up the next day and go over what they’d found, if anything. Then he dismissed them.

Most everyone filed out of the room quickly, but Anna sat there for a moment, drinking the lukewarm remains of her coffee. She’d check in with Jonathan later, see what he was thinking about doing. But before then, she needed to check in with Jeffrey – both to see if his contacts had turned up anything and to see if he had any ideas on which direction to go.

She was reasonably sure Frank would have a cat if he knew O’Neill was helping behind the scenes. But there was no one on earth who knew Edmund and her father better than Jeffrey. If anyone could help her track down their whereabouts, it was him.

She could only hope that it would be soon enough for Natalia.

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## ACT 4

January 14th

Frank slid into a booth at Company, feeling like he should have just hit the snooze button one more time. Luckily, he’d missed the bulk of the early morning breakfast rush and Blake was able to give him a steaming cup of coffee mere seconds after he’d sat down.

He waved distractedly at her as a way of saying thanks, and then yawned widely.

Deciding the coffee would probably burn his tongue if he didn't wait a minute, he left the mug on the table and reached for one of the menus nestled between the napkin holder and the salt and pepper shakers. It was probably a bad sign that he was too tired to remember what he wanted, since he knew the offerings by heart. He browsed through the selections, picking up his mug to take a hearty sip of liquid caffeine. By the time Blake wandered back over, he'd figured out what he wanted. He raised an eyebrow at the little frown on her face as she looked at him, but didn't ask about it. Whatever it was, it couldn't be important or she'd have blurted it out by now. She probably just thought he looked as tired as he felt.

He downed the mug of coffee in several long sips and started to feel more human. By the time he'd put away a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and pancakes, and refilled his mug from the carafe a few times, he felt pretty much back to normal. So he was a little taken aback when Marina slid into the seat across the table from him, her eyebrows scrunched in worry.

"Blake said you didn't quite seem like yourself. Is everything okay, Dad?"

Frank leaned back against the padded back of the booth seat. The question struck him as funny – Natalia was missing, Edmund and Hung Li were at large, so no, nothing was really okay – but he knew what she meant. "I just had a rough night. I had bad dreams where I was wandering around in underground tunnels. I was supposed to find a killer clown, like in one of those late night horror movies, but it was pitch-black and I couldn't see more than a foot in front of my face. All I found were the bodies of his victims."

He shuddered at the memory. Even knowing the nightmares were just a sign of how helpless he felt at having no solid leads, it had been immensely unnerving to wake up and feel like he was responsible for those dream deaths.

He felt a warm hand cover his where it rested on the table. He looked up into the worried eyes of his daughter, and tried to laugh it off. "I'm just tired. I've been working too hard and it's taking its toll." He reached out with his free hand and held up the mug. "Nothing more of this won't cure."

She didn't look convinced and he forced a smile. He said, "I appreciate the concern, honey, but I'll be fine." Trying to get the attention off himself, he said the first thing that came to mind. "So I hear you blew up at your mother the other day."

Her exasperated sigh didn't surprise him at all. But her tone was milder than he expected. "I'm trying really hard not to start in with her, Dad. She just makes it so damn hard. It's like she holds me to a higher standard than other people just because I'm her daughter. And yeah, I know people expect more from their kids, but she walked away from me, from us. She lost that right a long time ago, you know?"

Yeah, he did know. It had taken him a long time to come to terms with the fact that his parents had deserted him and his sister, and yet still wanted to dole out the parental advice when it suited them.

He leaned forward. “Look, Marina, I know she hurt you. But that was a long time ago.”

Marina pulled her hand away from his and laughed bitterly. Her voice was sarcastic. “Yeah, her digging around in old files and humiliating me in front of everyone is just ancient history.”

He shook his head, frustrated at her for being so stubborn about it, and upset with himself for never once suspecting what was going on under his nose. “Damn it, that’s entirely different. She was just doing her job. If you’d been doing yours, she wouldn’t have found anything wrong.”

He wanted to kick himself when he saw Marina figuratively shrink down in her seat and curl in on herself, a hurt puppy dog look on her face. Hastily, he tried to make amends. “I didn’t mean it like that, honey. It’s just...she wasn’t out to get you, specifically. You just happened to be the person she caught.”

Marina didn’t look up at him, her gaze focused instead on the table top. “It’s just that none of this was supposed to be this way. It all got so messed up. I was supposed to be following in your footsteps as a cop; you and Natalia were supposed to be married and raising Francesca; Mallet and I were supposed to be married and raising Henry. She – my mother – was supposed to stay out of our lives for good. We were all supposed to have a happy ending.”

Frank reached out and covered a fidgeting hand with his own. “Life rarely turns out the way we expect it to, but that doesn’t make it all bad. The stress of the stuff with Edmund aside...I’m happier now than I have been in a long time, and I wouldn’t want to change a thing.”

She didn’t look up at him, and he wanted to say more, but didn’t know what. This kind of touchy-feely stuff wasn’t exactly his forte. So he just sat there, one hand still covering hers, watching her as he drank the rest of his coffee.

At long last, she looked up at him, her eyes sad. “I wish I could believe I’d have my happy ending.”

He squeezed her hand. “You will, Kiddo.” Then, wanting to cheer her up and not knowing what else to do, he broke out into a falsetto. “Somewhere, over the rainbow, waaayyy uuupppp hiiiigh...”

A burst of laughter greeted his attempt, and he smiled at his daughter, who smacked his hand and rolled her eyes. “Please. Stop before you scare away the other customers.”

He put on his best mock-offended face. “I think I’ve been insulted.”

Marina simply stuck out her tongue in response.

He laughed. Then his cell phone beeped, and he pulled it out of his pocket, glancing down at a text message reminding him that he was due to meet with Remy in ten minutes.

“Sorry, Kiddo,” he said, sliding out of the seat. “A policeman’s work is never done.”

She slipped out from the other side of the table to stand beside him. “I know.” There was a slight pause, and then she added, “You know I love you, right?”

He smiled fondly at her and reached out to ruffle her hair. “I know. Anyhow, give Henry a kiss for me, and I’ll see you later.”

For just a second, he thought he saw a flash of hurt and some other, unnamable, emotion in her eyes. But before he could puzzle over it, she smiled at him and said, “I’ll bring some coffee over for you in a little while. I know how awful the sludge at the department is.”

He chuckled and leaned down to kiss her cheek. “Thanks. This is why you’re my favorite oldest daughter.”

He wasn’t too surprised when she just rolled her eyes in response, waving at him before turning back to her waitress duties. He headed out the door, humming under his breath. Just great. Now he was going to have that damn song stuck in his head...

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Olivia leaned forward to grab her coffee mug from the table in front of the couch, and then sat back carefully, shifting her position slightly so that she wouldn’t squash Francesca. Her back finally against the couch cushions, she looked to her right, smiling at the sight of the toddler next to her, the little hands busy with a ridiculously long string of beads and a puzzle book.

Satisfied that her youngest daughter was content, she took a long sip of coffee before glancing towards her middle daughter. Emma sat on her left, a sketch pad laid across her lap, bending over the paper and staring intently at it. Olivia’s heart ached for the girl and she wanted to reach out and pull her into a hug and tell her everything would be okay.

Instead, she took another sip of coffee.

She’d already learned that her daughter was in no mood to be pushed.

Emma had come home yesterday, and while things had seemed normal at first, it hadn’t taken Olivia long to realize that Natalia’s absence was coloring every aspect of her

daughter's day. Her attempts to get Emma to talk, to reassure her, or to do anything at all to help had been met with pained silences and forced smiles. If it wasn't so obvious that Emma wanted to be home, she would have packed up the girl's belongings and taken her back to the Spaulding mansion, just to get her away from the reminders of her missing ma. She'd ended up calling their family therapist, Brooke Tremaine, with a desperate plea for a home visit, but even that hadn't done anything to help Emma's mood. They'd had dinner and watched a movie, and then Olivia had gone up to read her daughter a bedtime story, hoping that she'd want to talk. But Jellybean had cuddled up against her side with Shadow and asked for a second story, falling asleep before it was over.

There hadn't been anything at all that Olivia could say or do to reach her.

All she could do was be a tangible presence and hope to God it would be enough. Forcing a Spencer woman to do something she wasn't ready for...well, Olivia knew better than anyone how badly that would backfire.

She watched as Emma canted her head to the side, and then fiddled with her box of crayons to find a slightly different shade of brown for whatever she was drawing. Olivia couldn't see the paper clearly, her daughter's slight form hunched over it.

Emma had wanted to draw for a while after breakfast, but had been adamant that she wasn't going to do it at the kitchen table. Olivia had seen the flash of panic in her daughter's eyes. She knew just how much of their life as a family was spent in the kitchen, around that table, and how much her daughter didn't want to be reminded of how bad things were. She'd tucked a lock of hair behind the girl's ear and suggested they sit on the couch, not missing the relief Emma couldn't quite contain.

Olivia took another drink of her coffee, glad that a late school start allowed for this quiet time with her girls, sad that the quiet was laced with somberness. Emma's mood was affecting them all; even Francesca, who was normally a little chatterbox, was subdued. She glanced over at the toddler, who was still sitting quietly, totally absorbed with pushing the beads along the string that held them. Then she looked back at Emma, watching her daughter's hand move steadily across the paper in her lap.

She didn't know how long they sat there like that, silent except for the scratch of crayons on paper and Francesca's occasional murmur of not-quite-words. It was long enough for the dregs of her coffee to grow cold. She leaned forward, setting her mug down carefully on the table, and frowned when Emma seemed to jump at the sudden movement. Olivia reached out and tucked a lock of errant hair behind the girl's ear, mustering up a tiny smile when her daughter didn't flinch away, though her attention remained focused on the paper in her lap.

"Is Ma...Natalia really going to come home?"

Though the words were but a whisper, they echoed loudly in the quiet space. Olivia felt her heart clench at the naked pain in Emma's voice and wished she could take the burden

from her daughter's shoulders. But she couldn't, any more than she could offer up meaningless platitudes.

Though Emma didn't look up from her drawing, Olivia focused all her attention on her daughter, seeing the way the girl's knuckles were white from how tightly she held the crayon.

"I don't know, Emma."

She could almost feel the surprise radiating off her child at that answer, so different than anything any of the adults had said to her up until now. Olivia sighed softly. "I wish I could say 'yes;' I wish I could promise you that she'll be found, safe and sound, and that everything will be okay. But I can't. What I can say is that Natalia loves us all very much, and she'll do everything in her power to come back home to us."

"She ran away before. What if..."

Olivia winced at the reminder of that fateful Bauer barbecue, that day that she herself had flashed to when Natalia first failed to show up at their commitment ceremony. She knew her scars from that ran deep; she just had hoped Emma's had healed by now.

Her fingers itched to reach out and squeeze Emma's shoulders, but the tension radiating from her daughter told her the touch would not be welcome, not now. She kept her voice soft. "Yes, she did. But this time is different, sweetie."

Emma looked up then, and Olivia gasped slightly at the flare of anger in her eyes. "How do you know that? How do you know someone took her and that she didn't run away?"

And there it was. The elephant in the room, finally revealed in all its wrinkled glory.

How did she know, really?

The words rushed out of Olivia's mouth. "Natalia was scared before. We weren't a family yet, not really. She loved us, but she didn't trust that we'd still love her even when she made a mistake. She didn't trust that God wanted us to be a family. Now, she knows better. She'd never leave us without a word like that, not again. She knows how much it hurt me...and you...and she loves us too much for that."

She paused then, feeling the truth of those words in her bones in a way she hadn't let herself feel them before. Even if Natalia had had second thoughts about the ceremony, she would simply have called it off, not run away. Olivia felt the burn of shame that she'd even entertained such thoughts, no matter how fleetingly.

She looked at her daughter, her precious child, seeing the war of hope and fear in Emma's eyes. Olivia said softly, "We've had all sorts of scary things happen in the past couple years, Jellybean, and Natalia didn't run away from any of them. Do you know

why? It's because she knows we're a family, and families stick together. We deal with the things that scare us together."

Emma bit her lip. "Like we did when the bad man killed Jane."

Olivia nodded. "Like we did after what happened at Rick and Mindy's wedding."

Though her heart ached to hold her little girl, she simply sat watching Emma, letting her daughter wrestle with things in her own time and own way. A soft gurgle and a faint murmur of nonsense reassured her that Francesca was still amusing herself, so she could concentrate on Emma.

Emma's nose wrinkled, the way it sometimes did before she cried. "Uncle Frank and Eleni and Anna...they found stuff that made them think a bad man kidnep...kigna...took Ma away."

"Yes, honey, they did. Natalia didn't leave by her own choice, and she'll fight to come back to us."

Olivia couldn't hold herself back any longer; she reached out and ran her fingers across her daughter's cheek. She kept her voice quiet, soft. "I want to help you through this, Jellybean, but I don't know what you're thinking or feeling. I really wish that we could talk, like we used to. I know I'm not as good a listener as Natalia, sometimes, but I'll try really hard."

Expecting continued resistance, Olivia was caught off-guard when Emma burst into tears and shoved her paper and crayons on the floor. A heartbeat later, her lap was full of a sobbing child, clinging to her for dear life. Tears stung Olivia's eyes and she didn't bother to hide them, just let them fall as she held her precious Jellybean close.

For several minutes, no words were spoken. The only sound was that of Emma sobbing and Olivia crying. Then the girl began to speak in broken sentences, pouring out her anger at how life wasn't fair, at the bad men who took her ma, at the people who talked to her like she was too young to understand things, at the kids who thought it was okay to pick on other kids. When the anger drained from her, she was sad – wanting everything to go back to normal, but not even knowing what normal was anymore.

Olivia dropped a kiss on her daughter's head and murmured, "Oh, Jellybean." She knew she should say more, but wanted to let Emma speak freely, to get her feelings off her chest so they didn't suffocate her.

She felt a tiny hand on her thigh and looked to her right to see Francesca balancing precariously on the couch cushion, reaching out to wipe a tear from Emma's face. Olivia moved one of her arms quickly, wrapping it around the toddler's back for support, and felt Emma shift in her lap as well, reaching for her sister, pulling her close. Within moments, the three of them were locked in a tight embrace, Emma sniffing and

Francesca babbling softly.

A long moment later, Emma whispered, “Most of the time, I’m not so angry. Doing the martial arts with Anna helps a lot. More than anything, I’m sad right now. People always leave me. Grandpa Alan died. Jane died. You almost died when you were so sick. Daddy was gone for a long time, and then when he came back he was really sick and almost died. Ava was gone for a long time, too. Ma ran away once, and now she’s gone again. Rafe keeps going back to war.”

Olivia kissed the top of her daughter’s head again. “It makes you scared that you’ll be left all alone, doesn’t it?”

Emma didn’t answer in words, but Olivia felt the girl nod against her shoulder.

She tightened her embrace, feeling Emma snuggle closer, watching Francesca pat her sister’s leg in what she imagined was supposed to be a comforting gesture. Olivia kept her voice quiet, even. “I know what that feels like, Jellybean, how scary it is and how sad it makes you. I spent a lot of my life feeling like I was alone.”

She could almost feel the surprise radiating off her daughter. She continued gently, “Bad things happen, and the people we love aren’t here forever. I’ve learned that what we have to do is keep on loving. We can’t shut people out, hoping to make it hurt less when they’re gone. I’ve tried that, and it doesn’t work. All we can do is love them and enjoy as much time together as we have.”

Olivia took a deep breath, steadying herself so she could finish what she needed to say. “I know you’ve had to worry more than any little girl should about losing your family. But even if something bad happened to all of us, you’d still have people around who love you and care about you – Aunt Leyla, Beth, James, Jonathan, Grandpa Buzz and Lillian, Frank, and Anna. And you’d still have Sweet Pea, Sarah, Peyton, and Clarissa. It wouldn’t be the same as having your whole family here...but you wouldn’t be all alone.”

There was a long silence then, save for Francesca’s soft, nonsensical babble as she continued to pat her sister’s leg. Olivia pressed gentle kisses against Emma’s head, trying to offer comfort while giving the girl space to think about what she’d said. She could only hope she hadn’t said the wrong thing...hadn’t negated her daughter’s feelings in the rush to provide an insight it had taken her 40-odd years to learn.

Emma’s voice was thoughtful. “I’d still have Uncle Sam, Doris and Blake, Remy, and Josh, too, wouldn’t I?”

Olivia smiled against honey-colored hair. “Yes, you would.”

“I don’t want to lose you or Daddy or Nat...Ma.”

Olivia felt the threat of tears again at the sadness in Emma’s voice. She said gently, “I

know you don't. I can't promise that nothing bad will happen. But I can tell you that I'm not sick anymore, so I should live a long time. Daddy's not sick either, and he plans to stay in Springfield. I know Natalia will fight to come home and see her Jellybean again. I don't want to lose her either, Emma. We just have to hope and pray that she is able to come home to us again."

She felt Emma sigh against her, and then small arms tightened around her. "I'm glad you understand why I'm scared and sad...that you aren't mad at me because I feel like that."

"I'd never be mad at you for how you feel, Em."

She felt her daughter shift in her arms and then felt a kiss pressed to her cheek. Emma's voice was full of both relief and surprise. "I feel better for talking about this. I love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too, Emma."

A third voice chimed in with "Wub do."

Emma laughed, and Olivia couldn't help but chime in as they both stared down at Francesca, who was looking from one to the other with a confused look on her face, like she couldn't figure out what was so funny. Then, she clapped her tiny hands together and repeated, "Wub do, wub do, wub do."

Olivia thought it was the cutest thing in the world when Emma leaned down and kissed her little sister, then reached out her arms and pulled Francesca into a hug. "I love you, too."

Olivia sighed happily as her two daughters snuggled against her, silence reigning after the intense conversation. She knew there was still a long road ahead, that Emma still needed support and help and understanding to deal with all the things going on around her. But this was still a significant breakthrough, and she was thankful for it. It helped her believe that no matter how things turned out with Natalia being kidnapped, their family would get through it, together.

None of them would have to deal with it alone.

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Dinah twirled a piece of hair around her finger and tuned out the drone of voices around her. She wasn't sure if she'd ever been so bored in her entire life. Given that she was in the middle of a murder trial, that was saying something.

She slumped down in her seat, watching out of the corner of her eye as Beth cross-examined some expert on...something or other. She probably should have paid more attention to what was going on, but really, what was the point? This was all the technical

mumbo-jumbo where her lawyers poked holes in the prosecution's case. Things wouldn't get interesting until it was their turn to start introducing evidence and witnesses. She especially looked forward to taking the stand and getting to finally say something. Having to sit quietly and listen was grating on her last nerve.

She watched the elegant Spaulding woman glide across the courtroom to face the jury even though her question was directed to the milquetoast on the stand. Something about smudges and whorls and God knew what else. At least Beth seemed to get more comfortable in her role with each passing day. In the beginning, Dinah had been tempted to fire her lawyers and represent herself. Come to think of it, if she'd done that, at least she wouldn't be so damn bored.

A tap on her shoulder pulled her gaze to the side, where Mel was scowling at her. She rolled her eyes in response. Then she pressed the palms of her hands together and pillowed her hands against her head, closing her eyes and pretending to snore.

"Does the defendant have something to add?"

Dinah jumped at the bass tone of the judge's voice. Apparently she had just made that snoring sound out loud. Oops. She half-rose from her seat. "No, it's all good. My bad. Carry on."

As she sat back down, she saw Mel shaking her head and then glanced over to see Beth staring at her, mouth hanging open. Dinah rolled her eyes; the woman was looking at her like she'd just farted in church or something. "What?"

A hand clamped down on her forearm – hard – and she suddenly realized she'd actually said that out loud. Whoops.

She jerked her arm away from Mel's iron grip just as the judge cleared his throat. "Counsel, I've already warned you about this, and I expect you to control your client or be held in contempt of court. Ms. Marler – if you can't remain quiet, I'll have you removed from the courtroom."

"Okay, I'll be quiet."

This time she heard audible groans from both Mel and Beth. Now what? Oh..."I'm sorry, Judge, but I couldn't answer you and remain quiet, too. I'll be quiet now. I mean, after I'm done talking. And when I'm not on the witness stand..."

"You've made your point, Ms. Marler."

What point? She had no point. She started to stand up and explain it to him, when she felt a hard hand on her shoulder, holding her in place. Mere seconds later, she felt another hand on her other shoulder. Mel flanked her on one side, Beth on the other. Sheesh. What did they think she was going to do? Get up and hit the judge or something?

She froze when she heard a hiss near her ear. “Do you want to get us thrown in jail with you?”

Oh right, that contempt of court thing. She looked at Mel and answered her question with an exaggerated head shake. As much fun as it might be to see a Spaulding behind bars with her, it wouldn’t help her case any. She really didn’t want to stay in jail any longer than she had to. Yeah, she probably deserved to be in prison, but she also figured that she’d already suffered enough because of Edmund Winslow.

“Now that we’re done being interrupted, let’s get back to the matter at hand. Counsel, you may resume your questioning of the witness.”

There was no mistaking the condescension in the judge’s tone, and she bristled to hear it. Beth moved back towards the witness stand, but cast a worried glance over her shoulder. Dinah wanted to roll her eyes in response, but she also wanted to get away from Mel’s grip on her shoulder. There was no way that would happen as long as the lawyer thought she’d do anything...untoward. She took a deep breath and sat back in her chair, folding her hands tightly in her lap, listening to Beth babble on about lines and swirls and gobbledygook.

It took a few minutes, but finally Mel moved her hand away and went back to filling up a legal pad with fragmented notes. Dinah had tried to read them earlier to amuse herself, but the chicken-scratch writing gave her a headache and the random words and sentences could have been in Chinese for all the sense they made to her.

She heard the clearing of a throat behind her, a sound as familiar to her as her own name. She turned slightly in her seat to see Shayne sitting two rows back, a smirk on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. She smiled at him, and he rolled his eyes in response.

Turning back to the trial before the judge decided to reprimand her for absolutely no reason, she realized she felt a little better. It was really sweet of Shayne to be here, supporting her. He hadn’t missed a single day of the trial, even when he couldn’t stay the whole time because he had to get home to Henry. Not that Mallet had missed it by choice – he did have that whole kidnapping case to work on. Still, it was nice to know there was someone in the world who was there for her when she needed him.

Why exactly had she walked away from Shayne again?

She shook herself before she could get too twisted up in that chain of thought. With her luck, she’d start talking to herself about it and have the judge lecture her on her chaotic love life. That was the last thing she needed. Still, at least she wasn’t the only one bored out of her skull; she could tell Shayne was, too.

Hell, the prosecution had to be wrapping up its case sometime this century. Lord knew she wasn’t even sure any more if she’d really killed someone, let alone left any actual

evidence of it. She had no doubt that any savvy lawyer could make mincemeat out of her confession, make the jury think it had been coerced even though it hadn't been.

Hopefully, by the time they got to her side of the trial, things would get more interesting. Or at least keep her awake.

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Anna swore under her breath as her coat got caught on yet another thorn, snagging the material. Not for the first time she had her doubts about poking her nose around in this remote section of the woods. The path through the underbrush was more of a suggestion than an actual trail, and was so overgrown that the idea of anyone using it on a regular basis was laughable. Still, she'd come this far; she wasn't going to give up now.

Nearly bending double, she inched her way under a sagging tree limb. Even if it turned out to be a wild goose chase, at least she was doing something.

She swatted a dangling twig out of her way, struggling through a slushy snowdrift, hoping she didn't twist her ankle in the process. No wonder Jeffrey hadn't wanted to come back here and check out the place himself. Leave the dirty work to his underlings.

She blew a stray piece of hair out of her eyes and chided herself. That wasn't exactly true. She was damn lucky that he was even in Springfield right now, let alone was willing to help in the investigation into Natalia's disappearance. He had his own clandestine assignments to carry out, which was why he couldn't come out here himself. It was sheer luck that his pilot had flown him over this patch of woods yesterday when he returned from a meeting with an informant. It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd been scanning the terrain below and spotted the hint of a building in the trees where no building should be.

They'd run out of other leads and she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Too bad she couldn't have told the chief about it and had him send someone else here to help her scout around. But she didn't want to explain why Jeffrey was helping in the background without his permission, and she knew Frank was already prickly enough about his department, trying to prove that the Springfield police were competent. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. She'd wanted Jonathan to come with her, since she could trust him to keep his mouth shut, but he'd been tied up with some other things, and she couldn't exactly explain why she needed him with Frank and Remy standing right there.

She pushed through one last tangle of thorny branches and felt her heart start beating faster as she came into a tiny clearing with a little wooden shack in the center of it. Quickly, she ducked back behind a tree. Pulling her gun from its holster, she eased the safety off and took stock of the cabin. There were tiny windows with no hint of light shining behind them. No smoke rose from the chimney. The roof drooped as if the beams were starting to rot, thick moss grew in patches on the wooden walls, and massively

overgrown shrubs made the house seem like it was being swallowed by the woods.

Following the line of the shrub branches upwards, she frowned slightly as she realized the sky was growing dark, with heavy clouds swallowing the sun. The forecast hadn't mentioned any chance of a storm, but there was definitely one brewing. No matter; she could worry about the weather later.

Refocusing on her mission, she glanced at the area in front of the door. A snowdrift, presumably from the storm they'd had several days ago, blanketed the small front porch, and it looked completely undisturbed. There was no hint of footprints there or on any of the patches of snow on the ground around the cabin.

Still, she wasn't about to assume the place was as abandoned as it looked and just charge in recklessly. That might be a good way to get herself killed. Not to mention getting Natalia killed, if she was being held in this place.

Anna ducked down, out of the line of sight of the windows, and ran as fast as she could while hunched over to get to the side of the cabin. Listening hard, she couldn't hear anything other than the slight whine of the wind in the trees and the faint rustle of animals in the woods beyond. Still, she moved slowly, edging around the corner of the house towards the door. She inched up on to the porch, wading through the drifted snow, treading carefully so as not to lose her footing, and leaned sideways towards the door, her ear nearly pressed against the wood, listening.

Silence.

Reaching out cautiously, she slowly twisted the doorknob. Not surprisingly, it didn't move. She took a deep breath, mentally weighing her options, and then took a step back. One well-placed kick later, the door flew open. She burst through the threshold, gun at the ready, and scanned the dark room quickly for threats.

There was no one there.

Years of experience made her cautious, so she inched her way along the wall to the bathroom, moving slowly in the dimly lit space, checking every possible hiding place. The shack itself was nothing more than an open room with a kitchen space at one end and a fireplace at the other, a small bathroom being the only other room in the place.

Satisfied that there was no one there and that the shack was as deserted as it looked, she breathed a sigh of relief. Then, she started looking around in more depth, thankful that she'd brought a flashlight since there was no electricity in the place. A generator sat in a corner of the kitchen, but wasn't running. The light coming in through the windows had been fine for checking for hostiles, but wouldn't be much help in actually finding tidbits that might end up being clues.

The kitchen held little of interest – there were only cans of soda and bottles of water in

the non-functioning refrigerator, only a handful of plates and cups graced the shelf over the sink, and there were just a few assorted canned goods in the cupboards. The bathroom was equally mundane and boring, containing only a toilet, two rolls of toilet paper, a small sink, and a holding tank for well water.

There was a table against the wall to the left of the fireplace, and as she shone her flashlight over it, she saw that there was a bulletin board tacked up behind it. Various pictures and papers were pinned to the board in stark contrast to the Spartan nature of the rest of the shack. Moving closer, she shone the light over the table, taking in the things littered across the top – pens and paper, folded maps, a coiled rope, a roll of adhesive tape, an empty coffee mug, a container of thumb tacks, a stapler, an unopened pack of AA batteries, and other odds and ends. Frowning, she shone the light across the bulletin board.

There were several articles cut out of the *Springfield Journal*, some recent, some yellowed with age. The old ones referenced various kidnappings – Lizzie Spaulding; Marah Lewis; Rocky, Marina, and Henry "Coop" Cooper; Zach, James, and Emma Spaulding, and Jude Bauer; Susan Lemay. There were more, proving that kidnapping did seem to be a sport in Springfield, but those were the first ones that caught Anna's eyes. A quick glance at the new ones showed that they were exclusively focused on Natalia Rivera, with various phrases underlined and mocking comments like "serves her right" and "they'll never find her" added in the margins.

A chill went down Anna's spine as she realized just what she was looking at. The place wasn't nearly as abandoned as it looked. The kidnapper had been here, and recently.

She glanced around the desk again, searching for any tell-tale sign of just who it was who'd been here. Damn it; if only she'd brought a fingerprint kit with her. She was careful not to touch anything, but carefully looked over the assorted items, searching for a clue. But there was nothing at all distinctive in the clutter, nothing that would point to any particular person. Just like all the other clues they'd found.

She turned her gaze back to the bulletin board, scanning the pictures and flyers and papers posted there. Again, there was nothing at all distinctive about the clippings, nothing to give a hint as to the poster's identity.

It was maddening to know she was standing here, in the kidnapper's lair, and still have no clue who she was tracking or what he'd done with Natalia. She smacked herself in the forehead, frustrated, mentally going over whether it would be feasible to put surveillance on the shack or whether she just needed to haul Eleni's team out here in the hopes that they'd find a print or a fiber or something distinctive. This evidence was useless if no one was able to see it and analyze it. Suddenly, she remembered her cell phone had a camera and fished it out of her pants pocket. The photos wouldn't be as high-quality as a regular camera, but they'd do. She quickly began snapping pictures of the items on the desk and bulletin board.

When she was satisfied that she'd recorded everything of interest, she put her phone away and sighed. Maybe someone would spot something in this mess of commonplace minutia and identify it as belonging to a specific person. Hell, maybe the handwriting on the news articles would be recognizable to someone. She shone the flashlight over the newsprint pages again. It didn't look familiar to her, but that didn't mean anything. She hadn't seen her father's handwriting in years, and Edmund's was equally unknown to her.

Frowning, she realized there was one article that didn't have a kidnapping theme, and leaned in to study it more closely. She shook her head, not seeing what it had to do with anything, and her gaze landed on a picture.

She stared at it for a moment, then back at the article, and then back at the picture, her eyes widening. She glanced over the other pictures and miscellaneous items on the board, their relevance suddenly clicking into place.

Abruptly, she turned on her heel and raced out of the shack, pausing only long enough to pull the splintered door shut behind her. She shivered as she got fully outside; the temperature had dropped noticeably in the short time she'd been in the cabin, and snow was beginning to fall. She ignored the weather, focusing instead on not breaking an ankle as she ran back along the tangled path to where she'd left her car.

She had to get back to the police station, had to report this in person. There was no way in hell she was taking a chance that the phone lines were tapped and that she'd tip off the kidnapper. Even if she'd had cell phone service in this remote area.

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A black-clad figure stood shrouded in shadows, watching the silent, scared woman in the room beyond. Seeing Natalia Rivera like this – hurt, horrified, and hopeless – was exhilarating. It was like the rush from the best cocaine or the smoothest liquor.

The namby-pamby naysayers who turned up their noses at torture simply didn't know what they were talking about. Watching someone else suffer – whether physically or mentally – was pure pleasure. Almost poetic, in a way.

Especially when that someone was the so-called Saint of Springfield.

The dark figure smiled.

Everyone thought Natalia was so sweet, so kind. They all loved her like she could do no wrong. But she was all show. She was just another pretty face standing on a pedestal, and she needed to be knocked off. She wasn't even royalty or a celebrity or a politician – she wasn't important enough to deserve the kind of fear and respect given to those who were higher up in life. She was just some little nobody, a pretty little whore, who'd wrecked relationships and destroyed hearts and subtly undermined the people around her – just like every other citizen of Springfield.

She was no saint; that was for sure. If she hadn't lucked out and ended up marrying a Spaulding son and then gotten her claws into the powerful Olivia Spencer, no one would have ever noticed her or given a fat damn about her.

The figure chuckled grimly. If Natalia really was so sweet, she never would have wound up with such a devious and conniving bitch like Olivia. That alone was proof that she wasn't so nice; that alone was reason to make her pay for her sins. Making the powerful Olivia Spencer suffer by proxy was almost more delicious than making her suffer directly. Watching her fall apart, even from a distance, was incredibly intoxicating, almost addicting. It was almost as much fun as hurting Natalia. But not quite.

The dark figure stepped back into the shadows, laughing softly, almost maniacally. This game was much more exciting than expected. But more play time with the powerless little captive would have to wait. There were other plans and schemes that required attention.

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Olivia walked into Company, pausing just inside the door to let her eyes adjust to the dim interior. Even though the sky outside was an endless expanse of grey, storm clouds moving quickly across the horizon, it was still lighter than the entrance of the restaurant.

She moved towards the counter, glad to see Doris perched on a stool, drinking a cup of coffee. Good; that would save her a stop. She plopped down on the stool next to her friend, setting her purse on the floor between them and settling her elbows on the counter.

Before they could even greet each other, Blake appeared as if by magic, smiling warmly, but with concern in her eyes. "How are you doing today, Olivia?"

Olivia mustered up a tiny smile at the matter-of-fact tone in the woman's voice. When other people asked her the same question these days, too often it came across as either pitying or salacious. Her reply was simple and to the point. "I'm tired and sad, but hanging in there."

She stared up at the redhead for a long moment, wondering why Blake was studying her so intently. She didn't have to look to the side to know Doris was equally confused and on the verge of just coming out and asking. But then Blake sighed, apparently satisfied with whatever she'd seen or heard, saying softly, "I'm glad."

Olivia did glance at Doris then, sharing a shrug with her, before Blake broke in once more. "So, what can I get for you, Olivia?"

She ordered a cup of coffee and a Chef's salad. Within moments, a steaming cup of java sat in front of her, and Blake had disappeared into the kitchen. Olivia picked up the mug to take a sip.

“Why are you going for the rabbit food, Spencer?”

“Because I’m hungry.”

She glanced to the side, just in time to see Doris roll her eyes. Not that she could blame her friend for that reaction; after all, an order of French fries was more along the lines of her usual late-morning snack order. Olivia wanted to roll her eyes in return, particularly when Doris raised an eyebrow so high that it nearly disappeared into her hairline. But she settled for taking a long, deliberate sip of her coffee.

By the time she put the mug down, Blake had wandered back over and stood near them, drying glasses with a bar towel. Olivia turned slightly on the stool to face Doris. While she knew her friend was just teasing, striving for an air of normalcy amidst all the chaos, she felt the need to answer more seriously.

“Since Natalia isn’t here to look after my health, I need to be more conscious of it on my own. If and when she does come home, I want to be able to tell her that I made an effort to survive on more than coffee and doughnuts.”

She saw the way Doris’ eyes widened, the mayor’s mouth hanging open, and attributed it to her use of the semi-fatalistic word “if.” Her friend had been trying hard to keep her hopes up about finding and rescuing Natalia, trying to keep her from sinking into the depths of despair. God knew she’d been there lately, but this was not the same thing. She couldn’t define it, exactly, but like Josh had pointed out, there was that fine line between pessimism and realism.

Olivia glanced to the side to see if Blake was having the same reaction as her girlfriend. It actually took her aback to realize that the redhead was smiling encouragingly at her and to see a hint of relief in blue eyes.

Confused by that reaction, Olivia turned her attention back to Doris. Picking up where she’d left off, she said, “But I also don’t want to eat something heavy that will put me in a food coma. I’m heading over to the police station to take a look at their evidence summary, to offer a fresh pair of eyes and maybe make some sense out of what they’ve found. I was actually going to stop by your office and see if you wanted to come with me.”

She saw Doris frown and knew exactly what that expression meant, even before the mayor spoke. “Do you seriously think Frank will let you anywhere near his precious case files, particularly since he’s still smarting about the whole evidence tampering fiasco?”

Olivia smiled. “He might not like it, but I’ve already made arrangements with Remy. His logic is that if Cyrus can be helping out on all sorts of cases when he’s not actually a cop, there’s no reason I can’t at least take a look at things.” She felt her smile slide away. “After all, while I don’t remember Anna’s father at all, I do know Edmund. There may be

something I recognize as having come from San Cristobel that would help identify which of the two is responsible.”

She watched as Doris cocked her head to the side. “If Anna hasn’t ID’d any of the stuff as being from the island, what makes you think you can?”

Olivia shook her head. “I don’t know if I’ll have any better luck than she did. But a long shot is better than nothing at this point. Even if I don’t manage to connect any dots, I won’t be kicking myself later for not trying.”

She saw Doris nod. “Okay, that makes sense.” There was a pause, and then her friend laughed. “Sure, I’ll come with you. Two heads are better than one, and all that nonsense.”

Olivia chuckled in response and picked up her coffee mug again, taking another long sip. She was still bone-tired and needed the burst of caffeine, but things weren’t as overwhelming as they had been in recent days. The realization surprised her a bit.

She put her mug back down, staring into the dark pool of liquid as if it held answers. On the surface, nothing had changed. The love of her life was still missing, she was still tremendously worried about Emma, and she was still struggling to hold everything together. She was still sad and scared and more than a little stressed. But she wasn’t held tight in the grip of despair; she wasn’t burning up with the fire of rage; she wasn’t feeling lost and at sea, helplessly tossed about by waves. She wasn’t sure what, exactly, had changed. How could she feel better when things were still in the “from bad to worse” category?

She wasn’t aware she’d said that last sentence out loud, until she heard a strangled cough. Glancing towards Doris, she saw the hint of red in her friend’s cheeks, and the flustered hand gestures that told her the woman had no idea what to say or do. Then she heard the soft clearing of a throat, and she swung her head around to see Blake standing in front of her.

Bracing herself for Blake’s usual breathless and bubbly babble, she was surprised by the quiet, serious tone. “You feel better not because things have changed, but because you’ve changed your approach. You’re determined...ready to do what you can, no matter how small. If you just lie there when a bear is after you, you’ll probably be eaten. But if you run and fight back, you might get away with just being bitten. Doesn’t make it any less scary, doesn’t mean you aren’t scarred for life. But it does mean the bear didn’t win.”

Olivia felt like her eyes were bulging out of her head as she stared at Blake. It was probably the strangest analogy she’d ever heard in her life, and yet it made so much sense. That was exactly it – she’d decided to fight back and a calm determination had chased away the heavier, more incapacitating emotions. At least for now. But it still rattled her a bit to have someone else see that clearly into her – someone other than Natalia, that was.

To cover her shock, she blurted out, “So when did you turn into an armchair psychologist?”

Blake didn't rise to the bait, simply smiled gently at her, the understanding in her eyes both welcome and disconcerting. Olivia heard Doris' voice. “She's actually pretty good at figuring out what's going on with people and knowing how to help them.”

There was no mistaking the note of pride in the mayor's voice, and Olivia broke away from Blake's gaze to glance at Doris. “Oh my God, Wolfe. You sound like a lovesick teenager.”

Doris turned beet red and glared at her, and Olivia chuckled. She wasn't sure she could have taken any more soul searching or touchy-feely stuff. It was nice to have something back on vaguely normal ground – and teasing her friend definitely fell into that category. Besides, she owed the other woman for all the cracks Doris had made when she and Natalia started dating.

Before things could go any further, Buzz pushed through the kitchen doors and lumbered over to the counter, a plate of salad in hand. He smiled at the three women, looking quizzically between them for a moment, and then shrugging. Olivia smiled at him as he set the plate down in front of her and said, “Bon Appétit.”

She watched as he did a mock bow, then turned and went back towards the kitchen. For a moment, there was silence as the three women glanced at each other. Olivia wondered if the other two felt the same way she did – like there was a lot more serious stuff they could say and yet like it was a weight hanging over their heads. It was as if they were frozen in time for a moment, and she wanted to break the spell, but didn't dare.

And then Blake reached out and patted Olivia's hand, leaned over and kissed Doris quickly, and turned without a word to follow Buzz into the kitchen.

Olivia sighed softly, as much in relief as anything, and picked up her fork. Now that the food was sitting in front of her, she realized just how hungry she was. She took a big bite, and then turned her attention back to Doris, who was staring dreamily into space.

Olivia laughed. “You've got a hell of a girlfriend there, Doris.”

She watched as Doris turned to face her, a huge smile on the mayor's lips. “Yes, I do.” There was a slight pause. “So do you. And when we get her back and you see her again, you can tell her I said that.”

Olivia felt a sudden lump in her throat, not at the assurance, but at the display of support. “Thanks, Doris. I...it means a lot. You're a good friend.”

She didn't miss the discomfort on her friend's face at the praise. “Yeah...you are, too.”

If it hadn't been such a touching display, she might have laughed at the way Doris squirmed on the stool. Taking pity on the stoic mayor, she turned back towards the plate in front of her, attacking the salad with a vengeance.

Mulling over what Blake had said, she smiled grimly to herself. She was going to make damn sure that no matter what happened, the bear didn't win.

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“You fucking bitch.”

Those three words echoed in Natalia's ears as she huddled in the corner of her cell, one hand obsessively rubbing her aching thigh. Her tormentor had left some time ago, but the hate-filled words lingered in the air and raced around inside her head on an endless loop.

She'd tried to fight back again today, to stand up to her captor, to face down the demons that came along whenever that masked, hooded figure appeared. All it had gotten her was a newly split lip and a nasty bruise on her thigh from a well-placed boot. She'd learned the hard way that she didn't have the physical strength to escape from her tormentor – not after days of little water, less food, and the after-effects of whatever she'd been drugged with. The cold and damp of her cell was also starting to affect her; she felt a dull ache in her chest, like she was coming down with a cold.

Too weak to fight back physically, she'd simply curled in on herself and let the hooded figure scream abusive words at her. She'd tuned them out as best she could, but couldn't entirely escape them. It scared her how easily her captor got angry at her, and she couldn't help but wonder whether she should continue to hold on to whatever thin shred of hope she could. It was only a matter of time before her tormentor got angry enough to kill her; she'd seen the menace in those cold eyes and it had chilled her to the bone.

She wanted to defend against her captor, to find a way to fight back, to stay strong for her lover and her family. But she didn't know how to confront such insanity.

The insulting echo in her ears faded as she mulled over that last word. Insanity. That's what she was dealing with. Whoever held her had clearly gone around the bend, clearly wasn't operating from any rational motives that could be understood or reasoned with.

For a moment, that realization left her feeling even more helpless, if that was possible, than she had before. A madman was unpredictable; that was what made him so dangerous. There was no way to defend against an unpredictable opponent, no strategy that could be used to fight him.

She took a deliberate breath, and then another, trying to calm herself so that she could think. Maybe fighting back was the wrong way to look at it. She wasn't a “strike first, ask questions later” kind of person. She never had been. She mulled things over – usually too long – before she acted. Her way of standing up for herself and her beliefs wasn't usually

confrontational or abrasive; it was quieter and came from her belief in her feelings and her trust in God.

The only way she'd be defeated by her captor would be if she gave up hope, if she stopped believing in Olivia, in her family, in her friends, in God. She could be beaten down physically, verbally, emotionally – but as long as she stayed true to her faith in the people and principles she held dear, she'd be resisting in her own way.

The thought strengthened her. She could do that. As scared as she was, as weak and hurt as she was, she still had her love for her family, her belief in God, her trust in Olivia. Her tormentor hadn't managed to take any of that away, despite the drug-induced hallucinations, despite digging up her darkest demons, despite the hateful accusations that were like a slap to her soul. Even though she'd felt emptiness when she'd tried to pray, she still believed in the good, loving God who'd been her rock throughout her life.

Natalia sat up a little straighter in the corner of her cell. She said a quick prayer of thanks for all the people she cared about. She thought about her friends, like Blake and Frank and Buzz, and how lucky she was to know such good people. She thought about Leyla and what a blessing it had been to have her sister enter their lives. She thought about how proud she was of the man Rafe had grown to be. She thought about how fierce and proud Ava was, and how much she regretted hurting the young woman as she struggled to deal with her feelings towards Jeffrey. She thought about Francesca, her beautiful baby and her ray of sunshine. She thought about Emma, the child of her heart, and a wonderful gift to her.

Then, she closed her eyes and thought about Olivia – the woman who'd shown her what love really was, the person with whom she could be her truest self. Memories flooded her mind. She remembered her lover being with her when Francesca was born, her strength and support making the pain of the delivery easier to bear. She remembered sitting next to Olivia, wrapped in a half-embrace as they watched Rafe and Emma together. She remembered her partner's comforting, steadying presence in the hospital chapel as she lit candles after seeing her abuela one last time. She thanked God for her partner's presence in her life, for giving her such a precious gift. Her love for Olivia washed over in a warm wave, chasing away the chill in her soul.

She opened her eyes again and managed a small smile. Her love for her family and friends would sustain her, no matter what happened, no matter how this ended. She just hoped that in some small way, they all knew how important they were to her, how much she loved them.

*For the joy of human love; Brother, sister, parent, child; Friends on earth and friends above; For all gentle thoughts and mild.*

Natalia blinked as the words popped into her head unexpectedly. It took her a minute to figure out where they'd come from. She finally placed them as a verse in the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth." In a flash of memory, she was once again a child, snuggled up

against her abuela at bedtime, listening to her sing her favorite hymns instead of reading a bedtime story.

She hummed the tune under her breath, and then closed her eyes again to draw the words out from her memory. As she concentrated, focusing again on the verse about love, she felt the same sense of Presence that she usually had when she prayed, that sense that God was with her. For a long moment, she was overwhelmed by the feeling of finally having His light in the darkness. Then, she took as deep a breath as she could with her chest aching, concentrating again on the lyrics, humbled by the reminder that prayer came in many different forms.

Her voice was shaky and breathless, but she sang softly anyhow. “For the beauty of the earth; For the glory of the skies; For the love which from our birth; Over and around us lies; Lord of all to Thee we raise; This our hymn of grateful praise...”

She drew strength from the words, from the focus on beauty, from the focus on love. It was the antidote to the ugliness and hate surrounding her.

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Anna fought to keep her balance as she raced through the door of the police station and rounded the desk, heading for the hallway towards the meeting room. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the desk clerk gaping at her in shock, his mouth moving as he said something that she didn't hear. She ignored it, intent on her mission.

Her boots clacking on the tile floor, she burst into the meeting room, stopping just inside the door to catch her breath and to take stock of who was there. She'd expected Frank, Remy, and Mallet to be there; they all stared up at her with nearly identical looks of “where's the fire?” She'd hoped Jonathan would be there; he was half out of his seat already, clearly ready for whatever action was needed, and she took a moment to be thankful for his steady presence. She hadn't expected to see Doris or Olivia, but she found herself glad that they were there; it would save time and headaches in the long run.

She gulped in a deep breath and straightened, squaring her shoulders, absently brushing snow off her coat. She regarded them all solemnly.

“I know where Natalia is...”

the end