As Olivia approached the farmhouse, she could hear the phone ringing through the open window adjacent to the front door. However, in between trying to juggle her youngest daughter, her purse and a bag of groceries in her arms, fitting the key in the lock was proving to be quite a challenge. By the time she managed to get inside the house, and put down her purse and groceries, the answering machine had picked up the call. Rather than immediately pick the up the message, she decided the infant required tending first; she’d get to the message later.

Olivia took a long breath then resettled the very tired Francesca in her arms. Murmuring soothing tones to her daughter, she laid her down in the playpen, and then covered her with a nearby blanket. She then moved to the kitchen and put the bags up on the table before putting away the groceries. Natalia was going make lasagne for supper, so Olivia kept those ingredients toward the front of the refrigerator. When she was done, she stood and looked up at the clock on the wall.

It was 3:30 in the afternoon. Olivia smiled as she recalled that today was one of the days when Natalia took Emma after school for some one-on-one time together. It was a routine they’d developed so that Emma didn’t feel like she was being left out. Sometimes, they’d go to the park and play, or do pretty much anything Emma wanted, within reason. Olivia and Natalia both knew their older daughter had a penchant for big excitement with the imagination to match and, after a visit to her dad’s, she decided she wanted a horse. It took a bit of fancy verbal footwork on Olivia and Natalia’s part to dissuade her. Natalia had pointed out to the girl that it wouldn’t be fair to the ducks if they had to share Emma with the horses.

She chuckled softly, remembering Emma's exuberance every time she came home from an outing with Natalia, and the way the girl regaled her with every detail. Today, since it was nice and sunny, the plan was for them to go over to the park with a soccer ball. Natalia had mentioned it would probably be close to 5:00 before they got home, so Olivia decided that in the intervening time, she might as well get some work done while Francesca slept. She poured herself a large mug of coffee from the carafe on the counter.
Returning to the living room with her coffee, Olivia set the mug on the table in front of the couch and caught a flash of the blinking light on the answering machine.

The first two messages were Beacon-related; Greg wanted to confirm some bookings with her. Normally he’d have run those past her assistant, but Keira had left early for an appointment and Greg was under the impression that these bookings needed immediate attention. The third message, however, caught her attention. The soft Hispanic tone and sound of the voice was vaguely familiar, yet at the same time belonged to someone Olivia had never met.

“This message is for Natalia Rivera. This is her mother. Her grandmother is dying and would like to see her. She's at St. Joseph's Hospital in Chicago. If you need to call, you can reach me at 312-555-6982.”

Olivia nearly dropped the phone. Unless it was about Rafe or Gus, Natalia never mentioned her family, and most of those stories had been about her grandmother, of whom the younger woman had been very fond. Olivia also knew that Natalia had been on her own, and out of touch with relatives, since she was sixteen and pregnant. Nevertheless, she knew her partner would be upset when she heard the news.

Knowing that, Olivia chose to set aside the paperwork in favor of preparing supper. She took the baby monitor into the kitchen, and then started preparing the food. She was a perfectly good cook, and she knew the other woman would appreciate it. Grabbing the bell peppers, celery, onions and mushrooms out of the fridge, she began to chop and scoop the vegetables into bowls. Then she began the job of cooking up the ground beef in a frying pan. While she worked, she considered how best to break the news to Natalia.

She had just finished the lasagne when Emma barrelled her way through the kitchen door, dropped her backpack on the chair, and began babbling excitedly about her day. Hardly able to follow the rapid chatter, Olivia held up her hand and said, “Whoa there, Jellybean. Quieter...and slower. Francesca's sleeping.” Olivia had said with a smile on her face to offset the commanding words. “Actually, why don’t you wait to tell me at suppertime, which will be soon? Go on upstairs and get cleaned up...How did you get mud on your cheeks?” Olivia asked as she brushed her thumb against Emma's cheek. Out on the porch, Natalia could be heard rustling about, presumably taking off her coat, and as the other woman entered the kitchen, Olivia looked up and smiled before returning her attention to their boisterous daughter.

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, Emma said in a hushed, yet no less excited tone, “I was trying to tell you! The ball landed in the rain water from yesterday. I was running to get it and slipped a little in the puddles.” Suddenly, she stood tall, her bearing becoming suffused with pride. “I didn’t fall, though.”
Olivia looked her over from head to toe and noted the dirty sneakers on the kitchen floor. Glancing pointedly at her daughter, she pointed to the porch by the backdoor, “Shoes, missy,” she spoke, as she nudged Emma towards the porch so she wouldn’t trample any further through the house. The girl got her shoes off quickly and came back to stand in front of her mother. “Now, go get cleaned up and we’ll have supper, and you can tell me all about your afternoon.”

Emma nodded before quickly taking off through the living room and up the stairs, not being quiet at all. A sudden wail came from the direction of the living room, indicating that Francesca had woken from her nap. Olivia and Natalia both grinned and shook their heads, as Emma’s “herd-of-elephants” style of taking the stairs frequently woke the baby.

“Olivia, that smells divine. Let me go feed our youngest and then I’ll help you with dinner. How long was she asleep?”

“About an hour-and-a-half. Listen, Natalia, I’ve got to tell you something,” Olivia said as she put the lasagne into the oven and then followed the younger woman into the living room.

Retrieving Francesca from the playpen, Natalia sat on the couch and prepared to breastfeed. She looked up and spotted the older woman fidgeting nervously with the band of her ring. “Olivia, what is it?”

“There was a message today on the answering machine. I don’t know how to say it.” Olivia’s forehead creased and she brought her hand up to scratch at her chin. She hated to cause the younger woman any pain. Even as she fretted, Olivia glanced up the stairs, listening for any sign that Emma’s return was imminent, because she definitely didn’t want the child to overhear this bit of bad news.

“Olivia, you’re starting to scare me. Is it about the girls?”

“No. It was from your mother.” Olivia stopped for a moment, and then moved over to sit on the couch beside her partner, and put one arm around a profoundly shocked Natalia. Her other hand came up to caress the younger woman’s face. “Sweetheart, your grandmother...your abuela that you told us about...she’s in the hospital. She’s dying and she’s asked to see you.”

“No...Abuela Hernández?” Natalia questioned very quietly. She sank back into the couch, not quite believing what she’d heard.

“I don’t know, sweetie. She just said your grandmother.”

“No, please, no.” Natalia buried her head against Olivia’s chest as she cradled her daughter against her breast.
While Olivia held her partner close, the tears the younger woman shed soaked through her shirt, though she paid them no mind.

After several moments of quiet crying, Natalia moved back slightly so she could see Olivia's face. Wiping away the tears, Natalia whispered, "Olivia, I..." and then faltered, unsure what to say.

"I wrote down the information your mother left. The message is still on the machine. I wasn't sure if you'd want to listen to it." Olivia sat back against the rear of the couch, pulling Natalia against her, and she pressed a kiss to the side of her head.

Natalia closed her eyes tightly as more tears threatened to fall. She knew Olivia could be very tender and supportive with her, but the love she felt pouring from her partner right now far surpassed anything she could have ever anticipated. "I love you, Olivia. So much."

Breaking the emotion of the moment, their infant daughter let go of her suction on Natalia's nipple and fussed a bit. The younger woman covered her breast then brought the baby up to her shoulder and rubbed her back to get her to burp. The rubbing was as much for her daughter's benefit as it was for her own. She heard Olivia let out a giggle as Francesca brought up a loud burp. When Natalia looked over at her partner with a dismayed look on her face, the other woman only laughed harder. After a moment, despite the somber mood, Natalia joined in on the laughter for a minute before she started crying again.

Aware of the time that had passed, and knowing that Emma would soon be coming back downstairs, Natalia pulled away again a bit and brushed the tears from her face. "I don't know what I should do."

Olivia reached up to cup Natalia's face in her hand and then caressed her cheek with the back of her hand. "Natalia, they are your family. As much of an estrangement as there has been between you and your family, I think you'd regret it if you didn't see your grandmother before she dies. I know that the prospect of seeing your parents must be terrifying you right now. I wish I had some advice to offer."

Natalia sighed, and then drew her bottom lip in with her teeth. "I know. You're right. I need to do this."

Olivia paused a moment, then looked Natalia directly, seeing the sadness in her partner's brown eyes.

"Remember though that you have another family - this family we have here. We will always be here for you, and I will always love and support you, no matter what you decide."
However, Em will be down in a minute or two. Why don’t you take Francesca up to the nursery and finish feeding her. I’ll check on supper and be here to listen to Emma tell me about her day. Come down when you’re ready.”

“I repeat: I love you. What did I ever do to deserve you?” Natalia smiled and tilted her head to the side while maintaining contact with Olivia.

“I usually ask myself the same question about you.”

“Any conclusions?”

“You are my family; you and our children. You are my home.” Olivia stopped and smiled, which turned into a wry grin as she continued. “I finally figured out what I’ve been looking for all my life, though it took us forever to get here.”

“That’s awfully sappy of you.”

“Don’t repeat that. I have a reputation to maintain.”

“Uh huh,” Natalia muttered as she stood up somewhat unsteadily with her daughter in her arms. The other woman reached out to steady her until she got her bearings. Resettling the feeding blanket over her shoulder, Natalia rested Francesca against it and then turned toward the staircase. “What reputation?” Natalia said with a smile as she climbed the stairs.

Olivia chuckled to herself as she stood and moved into the kitchen. Natalia was right, the food did smell divine. She opened the oven door and looked in at the bubbling mozzarella on top of the lasagne. Just as she finished pulling the hot dish out and putting it on the counter, Emma came rushing into the kitchen.

“Em, sweetie, what have we told you about running in the house?” Olivia asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not to,” Emma replied a little guiltily.

“Right. Now, will you help me get the table set? Then you can tell me all about your day at school and your time with Natalia this afternoon.”

“Yay!” Emma went over to the drawer and pulled out the silverware and napkins then placed them on the table. After that was done, she pulled the footstool over to the counter and pulled down three plates from the shelf. Olivia grabbed the glasses from the cupboard and put them on the table. “Mommy, where’s Natalia?”

“She’s just finishing feeding Francesca. She’ll be down shortly.”
“Okay. Oh, hey, Mommy? Guess what? Ms. Warner said we’ll be doing a dia...dio-rama?”

“A diorama? What about?” Olivia asked, remembering the last big school project Emma had and hadn’t told them what she was going to do.

Emma finished setting the table before she faced her mother. “It’s about our family and our city. We get to make little mini buildings and things. Can you help me make a mini-Beacon?” The girl gave her most charming smile when she saw her mom nod. “And maybe Grandpa Buzz can help me make a mini-Company.”

“Grandpa Buzz, huh?”

“Yes. Since he’s Francesca’s granddad, he can be mine, too.” Emma stopped for a minute then looked up at her mother, curious but slightly hesitant. “Mommy, do you think Granddad Alan would be mad at me if I call Buzz ‘Grandpa’, now?”

“Oh, Jellybean. No, I don’t think Alan would mind.” For all his faults, and there were many, in the last few months before he died, Alan had started to become a genuine human being. Perhaps it was due to Phillip’s illness and Alan’s desire to put things right. Whatever the reason, Olivia was glad he had come around and she knew the older man had loved her daughter. She put her arm around Emma and kissed the top of her head.

Natalia pushed off the doorframe where she’d been watching the last half minute of the exchange between mother and daughter. “How are my girls?”

Emma looked up at Natalia and smiled. “Good, Ma. How is Sweet Pea?”

Nothing about Natalia’s bright smile gave any clue to the sadness that roiled beneath the surface. “Good. She’s fed and now she’s sleeping. Now, we should get some supper, and get your homework done.” She grabbed the pot-holders and put the pan of lasagne on the hot pad on the table.

Emma continued to tell her mothers all about her day, what the other children in her class were doing, and relaying her afternoon adventures with Natalia at the park.

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As supper ended, Olivia looked over at Natalia and noticed that despite Emma’s exuberant mood, the younger woman was unsurprisingly distracted. She heard her daughter call Natalia’s name twice, without being answered, and saw the girl turn and look at her questioningly.
“Em, sweetie, can you go up and get your pyjamas on? Get started on your homework. I just want to make sure everything is okay with Natalia. After, we’ll come check your homework and read you a story.”

Concerned, Emma looked over at Natalia, and then back to her mother. “Okay.” She got up from her seat and put her dish in the sink before heading upstairs.

After Emma had left the kitchen, Olivia placed a hand on Natalia’s arm to draw her awareness back to the present. Once she got the younger woman’s attention, she spoke to her. “Natalia, we need to let Emma know what’s going on, especially since we’ll be going out of town. We also need to call Phillip and Frank. You need to let Frank know we’re taking Francesca out of town.”

“Oh, God. I wasn’t even thinking about that.” Natalia dropped her head into her hands. “What are we going to tell Emma?”

Olivia placed her hand on her partner’s arm. “We tell her the truth; that your grandmother is dying.” She paused a moment, and then placed her hand under Natalia’s chin. She coaxed the younger woman’s head up so she could look into her eyes, and she tried to reassure her. “Emma will understand that.” The older woman stopped to consider a thought then shook her head. “I wonder if we should bring her with us or have her stay with Phillip. It’s not going to be much fun for her; all adults around.”

“She’s old enough to decide what she wants to do. You’re right, though, we need to tell her about my grandmother. It’s just hard.” Natalia sighed deeply and dropped her head down, feeling all at once like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. With her head slightly bent, she turned and looked at Olivia. “I haven’t seen my family in nearly twenty years. What do I say about that?” Natalia was starting to get a little anxious.

“Emma’s had so much to deal with in such a short time and she’s adapted rather well. I know a lot of that, in the past couple years, has been thanks to you. Natalia, you’re one of the strongest women I know.” Olivia grasped Natalia’s hand, palm to palm, and threaded her fingers through the younger woman’s. She grew solemn as she continued, “I’ve tried to never willingly lie to my daughters. I believe that if we just tell her the truth – that you’ve been separated from your family for most of your life – it won’t matter to her why. She loves you.”

“I know. I’m just nervous.”

“Come here,” Olivia spoke softly, drawing Natalia into her arms. “I’ll be right here with you.”
After a moment she felt Natalia begin to relax. “I’m going to go up and get Emma to come down; then we can talk with her.” Olivia pulled away to go upstairs, but not before placing a kiss on Natalia’s forehead.

As soon as her partner disappeared up the stairs, time seemed to slow and Natalia began to fidget, needing something to keep herself busy.

She stayed into the kitchen to heat some milk for hot chocolate for each of them. Hearing Emma’s giggles, as the young girl and her mother returned to the living room, was like a balm to her soul. Sighing heavily with nervousness, Natalia joined them as she carried the steaming mugs into the room.

“Here you go; hot chocolate all around,” Natalia said as she placed the tray of mugs down on the table.

“Yay!” Emma grinned widely.

“Emma, sweetie, Natalia and I need to talk to you.” Olivia looked at Natalia then looked back at her daughter.

“Is something wrong?” Emma hesitated as she looked between both of her mothers. She’d had a lot of losses and knew how people looked when they had sad news.

“Emma, remember when I spoke about my abuela?” Natalia clasped her hands together on her lap, to calm the tremble of anxiety she felt.

“The one who told you about making New Year’s wishes?” Emma nodded and smiled as she remembered Natalia talking about the old woman; and about their first New Year’s together as a family.

“Yes, that’s her, sweetie. She’s in the hospital and she’s dying.” Natalia’s voice grew strained with the effort of holding back tears. “She’s dying and she’s asked me to see her.”

Emma’s shoulders deflated. “Like Granddad Alan?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know much right now. I need to talk with my mother a little bit later, but I do need to go home to Chicago to see my abuela.” Natalia unclasped her hands and immediately her fingers began to toy with her skirt.

Emma looked to her mother. “Are we all going?”
“Em, we’d love you to be with us, but there probably won’t be a lot for you to do. You’d find it pretty boring. You could stay with your Dad if you wanted or you can come with us. That is your choice.”

Emma looked at her mother, and with solid determination announced, “I love Daddy and I’m glad he’s feeling much better, but Natalia is my family, too.” The young girl turned her attention to her other mother; she gave her a hug. “She needs me now.”

Natalia felt tears build up along her lids, threatening to spill. “I love you, too, Emma. And you are my family.”

Olivia reached over and ruffled her daughter’s hair. “Okay, Jellybean, it’s going to be an early day tomorrow. Natalia and I have some planning to do. Why don’t you go finish your homework and then I’ll be up to read you a story in a little while? Come here and give me a hug.”

Emma did just that, then went and hugged Natalia again before heading up the stairs to her room.

Natalia lifted her mug and took a big drink then looked over at Olivia. “That went better than I was hoping.”

“She’s resilient, and smart.” Olivia spoke proudly of her daughter. Then in a slightly more somber tone, she added, “Now, I need to call Phillip and you need to call Frank.”

“Ugh. Thanks for the reminder.” Natalia shrugged.

“It’ll be okay, Natalia.” Olivia ran her hand over Natalia’s back comfortably.

Olivia picked up the now lukewarm mugs of hot chocolate and took them to the kitchen. She took her cell phone out of her pocket and placed a quick call to The Beacon to get a contact number for the Hyatt Regency in Chicago; and then she called that hotel to book adjoining suites for their family for the week. She didn’t know how long they were staying, but she figured that it would not take more than a week. It was unusual to be able to book a suite on such short notice, but she had the benefit of it being off-peak season. Once that was settled, she placed a call to Phillip. After a short conversation during which Olivia continued to be surprised by how supportive Phillip was of her relationship with Natalia and of their family, she moved back into the living room to find her partner pacing the room. She heard part of Natalia’s conversation with Frank and went over to the younger woman, enveloping her in a hug from behind. Olivia could feel the woman noticeably relax at the contact.
“I don’t know, Frank. Probably a week. My grandmother’s dying.” Natalia sighed. Her interactions with her former fiancé had improved, but occasionally there were moments of frustration. “I still have to talk to my mother to find out more details, but I don’t know how forthcoming she’ll be. I haven’t seen her in nearly twenty years, and our parting was less than amicable...” Natalia dropped her head forward and exhaled sharply. “Yes, Olivia and Emma are coming with me and Francesca. Frank, they are my family, of course they’ll be there...We’ll be leaving in the morning, probably by 10am...Okay, good night, Frank.” Natalia pressed the off button on the handheld portable phone before replacing it on the charger.

Olivia placed a kiss on the side of Natalia’s neck. She then brought her hands up to rest on the younger woman’s shoulders and felt the tension in her shoulder muscles. Gently, she began to rub the muscles and when Natalia whimpered and her head dropped forward, Olivia applied more pressure.

“Oh, God, that feels good.”

“There’s more where that came from.” Olivia pressed a gentle, soothing kiss to Natalia’s neck. “Was Frank giving you a hard time?”

“A little. Just wanted to know how long we were going to have Francesca out of town. He half-suggested that maybe he and Blake could look after her. But I don’t think he was that serious.” With their heads close together, Natalia felt her partner’s head shake slightly.

The hotelier brought her arms around her partner, and rested her head on the younger woman’s shoulder. “Okay, why don’t you head upstairs and get ready for bed. I’m just going to lock up and shut off the lights down here. I want to check on Em and read her the next chapter of her story.”

Natalia nodded and headed up the stairs to the nursery, to check on the youngest member of the Spencer-Rivera household. Francesca had started to fuss and Natalia knew that her daughter was close to her last feeding before everyone went to sleep. She checked the infant’s diaper first and changed her before she picked her up and brought her over to the rocking chair.

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Olivia tucked the sheets up around her sleeping daughter. It had taken three chapters of Children of the Lamp: The Akhenaten Adventure before Emma’s blue-green eyes shut. Olivia loved this quiet time with her daughter. It gave her a peace of mind that never failed to help her relax. Until recently, Emma had been the only thing she felt she had done right in her life. Now she had Natalia and Francesca to add to this list, but it would never change her bond with her middle daughter. For so long, it had been just the two of them.
Olivia leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to Emma’s forehead. “Love you, Jellybean,” she whispered and then stood and turned off the table lamp before leaving the room. She quietly pulled the door shut, then headed down the hall to the nursery. She could hear Natalia singing a lullaby to Francesca.

“Hiya, sweetheart,” Olivia said quietly as she entered the room. She moved over to Natalia and placed a kiss on her lips. “Have you talked to your mother yet?” Olivia asked the younger woman as she took their sleepy infant daughter from Natalia’s arms and placed her in the crib.

“No. Not yet. I don’t know what I’m going to say to her. The last words we spoke were in an argument. Actually, that’s not completely true. Papa was yelling, Mama wasn’t saying much at all, but she wasn’t stopping him either. And I was a mess.” Natalia looked over at her little daughter, who was already soundly sleeping.

“I remember my abuela was always so kind to me. She lived with us in our apartment in Chicago. I missed her so much after I was kicked out.” As she spoke, Natalia’s voice had become so quiet that Olivia had to strain to hear her words. “When I was at the unwed mother’s home, I’d send letters to her, but every one of them ended up in my mailbox marked with ‘Return to Sender’. I don’t think it was her...who was turning them away. But I don’t know which of my parents was responsible.”

“Oh, sweetheart. Come here.” Olivia reached her hand out to Natalia and pulled her into a standing position, and then enfolded her into a tight hug. After a little while, the younger woman pulled back; track marks from the tears that silently streamed down her face plainly evident.

Olivia ran her hand down Natalia’s arm until she reached her hand and took hold of it, leading her out of the nursery and to their room.

Once inside, Natalia climbed up on the bed. She sat with her back against the headboard and pulled her knees up to her chest. Her chin came down to rest on the arms she’d crossed on top of her knees. A few strands of dark hair tumbled down over her face, having escaped the ponytail.

When she spoke, she looked up at Olivia but didn’t change her position. “I cried myself to sleep more times than I could count in that first year. I was scared and alone, except for Rafe growing inside me. I didn’t know what to do. They were my parents. How could they just dismiss me like that?”

Olivia moved over to the bed and climbed up to sit next to Natalia. She rested a hand on the other woman’s arm. The older woman thought for a moment before she spoke, since she wasn’t sure how to broach the conversation without sounding insensitive to her
partner's state. "I don’t mean to detract from anything you’ve told me, but I do actually know what that feels like."

Olivia paused; her voice sounded a little strained as she continued. "Only unlike you, I didn’t want the pregnancy. I didn’t think it was any gift from God, or anyone. Sure I love Ava like crazy now, but when I was pregnant, all I could think of were the circumstances surrounding her conception." She brought a hand up to touch Natalia's face as she drew it towards her own; making sure that the other woman could see her sincerity.

"At least now, you have the opportunity to interact with your parents as an adult; a confident, beautiful woman with so much love it overwhelms me at times. I never had the chance, and I want that for you." Olivia finished softly.

"Thank you." Natalia spoke with more conviction now than she had had all evening. Gathering her strength, she reached for the portable phone on the nightstand. “Well, if I’m going to do this, I might as well do it now. Do you have the number?”

Olivia fished the slip of paper with the information from Natalia's mother out of her pocket, where she’d stored it since the afternoon, and handed it to the younger woman. She was about to get up from the bed when she felt a firm hand on her arm, holding her in place.

"Please. Stay," Natalia pleaded. "I need you with me. You give me such strength, and right now I can use all of that I can get."

"Okay." Olivia leaned back against the headboard and pulled Natalia towards her and the younger woman rested against her for a moment before she dialled the number for her mother.

A weary but familiar voice answered the phone and Natalia shivered. The strained tones of her mother's voice brought her memories from twenty years ago back into sharp focus.

"Mama?...Yes, this is Natalia." She paused a moment and frowned. She glanced at Olivia and saw her frown as well, apparently reading her tension. Natalia continued, "Mama, I didn't take my own sweet time getting back to you, I wasn't home when the call came...It was a shock to hear from you, that is all."

The tension in Natalia's face seemed to spread through her and Olivia could feel it. The hotelier strengthened her hold on the younger woman and pressed a kiss against her forehead, hoping to give her comfort as the conversation continued.
“Mama, I have a family I had to take care of...Yes...Can we please not get into this right now?” Natalia sighed, wearily. “How’s Nana?” At her mother’s lengthy response, all the fight seemed to drain from Natalia and her head dropped to Olivia’s shoulder.

Olivia curled her partner more tightly against her own body, feeling the sobs shake the woman’s form. She felt the phone drop onto her chest from Natalia’s hand. When Olivia heard a questioning voice come from the other end of the line, she picked up the phone.

“Hello? Mrs. Rivera. My name is Olivia Spencer. I’m a friend of your daughter’s...Not at the moment. She’s very upset...That’s neither here nor there. If you could give me the information about Mrs. Hernández, I’ll relay that to Natalia shortly.” She listened as the other woman told her about the condition Natalia’s grandmother was in.

“Thank you. We’ll be driving up first thing tomorrow morning...No, that’s okay. We’ve already booked a hotel room. Thank you.” Olivia felt a small amount of smugness over the tone of frustration in Natalia’s mother’s voice as she disconnected the phone call and reached over to place the phone on her nightstand, and then returned her arm to rest around Natalia’s body. Nobody was going to treat Natalia with any amount of disdain, no matter how related by blood they were.

Both women were emotionally drained by the time they’d changed into pyjamas and curled up together, drawing comfort from one another. While sleep came relatively quickly for them, it was an uneasy sleep as they both were plagued by memories of the past.

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ACT 2

When Natalia awoke, she noticed her partner was already up. From the scent of coffee wafting up from the kitchen, she guessed that Olivia was making breakfast. She pulled on her robe that was at the bottom of the bed and made her way to the bathroom, and when she was done she checked the baby’s room. Not seeing the infant, she headed downstairs and saw Francesca curled into the crook of her partner’s arm with her small head resting on Olivia’s shoulder.

Olivia was on the phone making final work arrangements in preparation for their trip, so when the other woman gestured that she could take over, she passed over the little girl to her mama. The hotelier switched the phone to her other ear as she grabbed a couple plates from the shelf, and listened as her banquet manager laid out the week’s bookings.

“Thanks, Greg. If you need us for anything, I’ll have my Blackberry with me...It’ll be a few days at least. Thanks again.” Olivia disconnected the call and laid the portable phone back in its cradle on the counter. She moved over to Natalia and gave her a kiss on the forehead.
“Hi, sweetheart. Emma and I have already eaten and there are a couple of toasted bagels on the counter, along with some coffee for you. Look, I need to go check on the ‘Bean; see how much stuff she’s packing. You know, I think she gets her packing skills from you - everything but the kitchen sink.” Olivia laughed when her partner gave her a gentle push. “While you get Francesca sorted out, I’ve got to call Em’s school and get her homework assignments. Meet you down here in about thirty minutes?”

“Sure, that sounds like a plan.” Natalia smiled and tipped her head up for a kiss, which she knew Olivia would happily give her.

Olivia pulled away and headed upstairs to check on her other daughter. It looked like a small tornado had blown through the nine-year-old’s room as clothes were strewn over the bed and floor, with a few items actually in the suitcase. Emma was lying on the floor, partially buried underneath her desk.

“Hey, Jellybean? Whatcha doin’ under there?” Olivia asked with more than a hint of amusement.

“Getting The Velveteen Rabbit; it fell off my desk last night.” Emma called out, her voice partially muffled.

“Okay, Em. Let’s get this cleaned up and get your stuff packed up to go to Chicago. We need to get you enough clothes for a week. I also need to call your teacher and get your homework.” Olivia started around the room, picking up items of Emma’s discarded clothing and sorting through them. “Em, which of these are you taking with you?”

Emma located the book she wanted and came out from under her desk to help her mother. After a few minutes, they had most of the girl’s things packed, and her books placed in her backpack.

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Olivia came through the kitchen door with her cell phone balanced precariously between her cheek and her shoulder as she held her day planner in one hand and tried to make notes on it with the other. At Natalia’s questioning glance, Olivia mouthed the name of Emma’s teacher.

“Okay, thank you, Ms. Warner. I’ll let you know if we need to have Emma out of school any longer than that.” Olivia placed the planner on the table and closed up her phone before she moved over to Natalia. “Are you and Sweet Pea ready? We should get going soon.”

“Yes, just finished getting her things all packed and my stuff is already by the door.”
“You’re so organized,” Olivia said, as she kissed her partner’s cheek.

“I’ve had to be.” Natalia shrugged wistfully and then exhaled with a deep breath, as she looked at the pile of luggage. “I don’t remember things being so hectic when Rafe was an infant. Mind you, we really didn’t go very far, so I didn’t have to pack much.” She tied her still damp hair up into a knotted ponytail, to get it out of the way.

“And now you’ve got me to pick up the slack.” Olivia smiled teasingly, her eyes reflecting the seriousness of her love behind the light banter of words.

Natalia moved over to face Olivia and covered the other woman’s hands, bringing them close to her chest in a familiar gesture. “I love that...I am with you. You make me so happy.”

“Never forget that. No matter what happens in life, I am, and we are, your family.” Olivia moved closer to press their foreheads together and then angled her face and pressed her lips to her partner’s, then deepening the kiss as she felt Natalia respond.

When the women separated, Olivia looked at her partner, with a wry grin. “Now, let’s get moving before I get too mushy.”

“Can’t have that,” Natalia punctuated her statement by leaning up against Olivia and kissing her again. Smiling contentedly, she pulled away and then picked up the car seat containing an already strapped-in Francesca. The baby was wide awake, gurgling happily as she looked up at her parents. She heard Emma bound down the stairs behind her, followed by a thump-thump-thump of something heavy hitting the steps. When she turned around, the girl had reached the bottom with her little pink suitcase.

“T’m ready!” Emma announced, excitedly. “Are we going now?”

Natalia shook her head and laughed at the girl’s energy. “Come on. Let’s get you girls in the car and secured, and then Mommy and I will get our suitcases and we can go.” Once Emma and Francesca were in their seats, Natalia went up to the house and met her partner coming out. “Oh, hi. I was just coming in to get our luggage.”

Lost in thought as she went over the list of “Things to do before they left”, Olivia hadn’t noticed the younger woman’s approach. Only when Natalia spoke did she raise her head. She pursed her lips, hesitant but knowing she had to ask. “Sweetheart, did you call Rafe?”

Natalia put her hands up to her face. “Oh, God, no. I forgot.”
Olivia smiled, reassuringly. “That’s okay, Natalia. Just give him a call now and let him know what’s going on.” Olivia went back in the house and upstairs to check to make sure they had everything they needed.

Natalia leaned against the car as she removed her cell phone from her pocket and brought up the number she needed. The young woman dialled Fort Bragg, where her son was stationed, and then had to wait a few minutes before she was connected to the drill sergeant. She was informed that Rafe was out on field exercises and couldn’t be called in, so she asked the instructor to pass on her message. She waited until she got a confirmation from the man before she disconnected the call.

“Everything okay?” Olivia asked, as she came out of the house.

“I don’t know. His commanding officer said he’s out on field exercises so he couldn’t get hold of him. I left a short message letting him know I was going to be out of town due to my abuela’s death. I asked if he could have Rafe to call me as soon as he was able.” Natalia dropped her head. “This is not how I wanted him to find out.”

Olivia reached out and grasped her hand. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry," she said as she drew her into a hug. They stayed like that for several moments and then Olivia pulled back slightly, as she cupped a hand on the other woman's cheek. “At least he'll know.” She leaned in for a quick kiss. “Oh, you know what? I should call Doris and let her know what's going on. It will only take a few minutes and then we can go. I just want to ask her to look in on the house while we're gone.” The older woman pulled away and moved back to the house.

Natalia nodded and finished putting everything in the car before she got in herself and got some tunes going. When she looked out the car window, she saw Olivia laughing after she locked the front door, and then become slightly somber as she spoke. The young woman saw a nod from the hotelier before Olivia hit the disconnect button on her Blackberry and put it in her pocket. She turned around when Olivia opened the car door and dropped herself in.

“What did Doris say that had you laughing?”

“Something along the lines of meeting the in-laws never quite being the same, particularly after being married to Spauldings.” Mindful of small ears, she didn't elaborate, but she gave Natalia a pointed look and knew the younger woman understood her meaning; that the town's most influential family were a world unto their own. She'd had plenty of trouble from the Spauldings since she'd come to town a decade earlier, and had been married to not one, but two of them. She knew that Natalia’s own experiences with being married to a Spaulding had been eventful as Alan tried several times to sabotage the young woman's union with his son. However, Olivia refused to let that poison her Emma's relationship with Phillip, who had certainly turned his life around in the past nine months. Pushing aside
those thoughts, Olivia smiled and said, “Then she said she wished us the best. Okay, let’s get moving.”

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The Spencer-Rivera family arrived at the Hyatt Regency and deposited their things in the suite before they headed over to the hospital. At first, Olivia had offered to stay back with Emma at the hotel, allowing Natalia some time alone with her parents and her grandmother, but the brunette declined, wanting her partner nearby. When the four of them arrived at the hospital, Natalia went to the reception desk and asked for the room number for her abuela’s room; Olivia stayed back with Emma at her side.

“She’s on the fourth floor; medical unit.”

“Natalia, are you sure you want Emma and I there?” Olivia paused. She placed her hand on the younger woman’s cheek, and lowered her voice before she continued. “It could be really uncomfortable for you. They threw you out for being pregnant at sixteen; I don’t think they’re going to be very accepting of you having a female partner.” She leaned in and placed a kiss to the younger woman’s forehead, before casting a glance at Emma, who was engaged in a game of peek-a-boo with Francesca.

Natalia leaned into her partner’s hand. “I don’t care about that, Olivia. You’re my family, too.” She paused, gathering the strength their bond provided. “I don’t think I could do this without you. I need you.”

Olivia closed her eyes, and pressed her hand to Natalia’s cheek. Slowly raising her eyelids, she looked into the soft brown eyes of her partner. “I just wanted you to know you had options. I’m…I’m glad you’ll let us be there for you.” The shadows of their past lingered in the hesitation of Olivia’s words.

“Always.” With that one word, Natalia banished the ghost of doubt once more, and she smiled, taking Olivia’s hand and twining their fingers together. Using the other hand to guide the stroller toward the elevator, she said, “Come on. Let’s do this.” Emma grasped her mother’s other hand, and they proceeded as a family.

Natalia led them up to the medical unit where her grandmother was located. When she reached the nurse’s station, she caught the attention of one of the nurses.

“Can I help you, Miss?”

“Yes, I’m Natalia Rivera. My grandmother is on this wing – Cecelia Hernández. My family called me to let me know she was here. Can you tell me how she’s doing?” She nibbled her lower lip nervously.
“Ah, yes, Ms. Rivera. How much has your family told you?” The nurse looked over at Natalia, and then at the family that accompanied her.

“Not much other than she had a stroke.” Natalia shifted her weight from one leg to the other as she felt the scrutiny of the older nurse.

“Yes. Your grandmother had a stroke two nights ago.” The nurse looked down at the grandmother’s chart, flipping a page for further information before looking back up the young woman before her. “She’s very sick. She’s partially paralyzed on her left side. She’s on an oxygen mask, as her O2 levels are very low.”

Natalia closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. “Is she conscious?”

The nurse tilted her head to the side. “She’s in and out. The doctors have ordered her some medication to keep her comfortable, which also makes her drowsy. The medications may make her confused, but she has been aware of her surroundings and recognizes her family.” She gave her a sympathetic look as she looked between both women.

“May I go in to see her?” Natalia began to fiddle with the strap of her purse, and then glanced back at her partner.

“I think your family is in with her now if you’d like to go in.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I haven’t seen my family in a long time. Maybe I’ll just wait.” Natalia gave another glance back at Olivia, her anxiety increasing, and she soon felt her partner’s hand on her lower back as she turned back to face the nurse.

“If that’s what you want, Ms. Rivera.” The nurse nodded in acceptance. In her years of practice, she had seen how family dynamics changed with an illness of one member; it could strain the relationships further, or it could bring them together.

Natalia nodded then headed back to her partner.

“Natalia?” Olivia asked the younger woman when she noted the sadness etched on her face.

Natalia all but crumpled into Olivia’s arms; hot tears steadily ran down her cheeks. “God, Olivia. It’s one thing to hear about it on the phone; now that I’m here, in the hospital where my grandmother dying, it’s real.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Olivia ran her arms up and down her partner’s back. “Do you want to sit down for a minute?” She felt a nod against her shoulder and then she directed Natalia
over to the bank of chairs against the wall. Emma had already taken up residence there and had her coloring book and some colored pencils.

“Mommy, what's wrong?” Emma looked up from her coloring to question her mother.

“Natalia's upset about her grandmother being so sick. But it's also been a long time since she's seen her family.”

Emma got up from her seat and went over to Natalia and stood next to her side. “Don't be sad, Ma. I don't like it when you're sad.”

“Oh sweetie, I don't like it when I'm sad either. But you know what? You and Francesca and your mommy make me so happy, so I will always remember that. Even if I am sad, I'll remember.” That seemed to content Emma, and the young girl melted against Natalia.

Olivia looked up when she heard voices coming from the direction of the nurse's station. An older woman with bobbed hair, and with a worn, dark grey sweater pulled close around her body, accompanied by an older man, dressed smartly but hunched over with rounded shoulders, came out into the hallway. Olivia looked over to her partner, who hadn't yet noticed the additions to the waiting area. When she looked back to the older couple speaking with the nurse Natalia had spoken to, Olivia observed several similarities between the older woman and Natalia, down to the pursing of lips and the furrowed brow that the younger woman exhibited when she was anxious and worried. After a moment, the couple returned to the room, with not even a glance in the direction of Olivia and her family.

Olivia looked down when her youngest daughter began to fuss; the little one was still ensconced in her stroller with a blanket wrapped around her. She peered closer at the little scrunch up face as Francesca geared up for a wail. To head off the oncoming cry as much as she could, she picked up the infant and held her close. When it became apparent to her that Francesca wasn't going to easily settle, she patted the baby's bottom and felt a full diaper. Olivia looked over at her partner to see that she still held Emma and spoke quietly with her. She was reluctant to leave Natalia to go change Francesca because she wanted to be near when Natalia's family came back, but she knew the little girl needed to be looked after.

“Natalia, I need to go change Francesca. I'll be right back.” At Natalia's nod, Olivia picked up Francesca's diaper bag and headed in the direction of the restrooms.

A few minutes later, she returned, Francesca gurgling with laughter at the faces Olivia made at her. The young girl reached out for the longish blonde-highlighted strands of hair that hung alongside Olivia’s face. When Olivia went to push the strands back behind her ear, Francesca's face scrunched up at the loss of such a fascinating toy. When the strands
fell forward again, Francesca’s face lit up in a big grin that brought out the dimples she’d inherited from her mother. The baby reached out a fist to try to capture the strands again and giggled as she was successful. Olivia smiled and lifted Francesca up in her arms to press her forehead to the infant’s.

Natalia looked up from where she sat cuddling with Emma and a wide smile crossed her face to see her partner and daughter so affectionate. Absolute joy rolled off the two of them and Natalia couldn’t have been more proud of this family that she had helped create. However, that smile quickly fell and turned to apprehension as she caught a voice she hadn’t heard in more than half her lifetime. Neither Natalia nor Olivia had noticed her mother’s arrival in the waiting room.

“Natalia,” the voice repeated a little louder. Apprehension enveloped the older woman as she approached her daughter and the other woman, but she stopped short of actually reaching them, wondering if it had been the right idea to call her.

Natalia looked over at her mother. “Mama,” she spoke hesitantly. She looked up at the older woman and took notice of her appearance. Though her mother bore the same features she remembered as a child, Natalia thought she looked much older than her sixty-two years. She pursed her lips, and then sighed.

From Olivia’s perspective, it appeared as though mother and daughter were at a stalemate, neither really sure how to broach the divide of years. Uncomfortable with the prolonged silence, she stepped in and extended her hand. “Mrs. Rivera, we spoke on the phone last night. I’m Olivia Spencer.”

It took a moment before Carmen Rivera turned her head to acknowledge Olivia’s presence. “Sorry. What?”

“I’m Olivia. I talked with you last night after you spoke with Natalia.”

“Ah yes, Ms. Spencer,” Carmen said, as she shook Olivia’s hand. “Thank you for going out of your way to help Natalia. I’m sure she appreciates her friends being here.”

“I’m happy to be here for her.” Olivia turned her attention from Mrs. Rivera to look at Natalia, and then added, “Always.” She drew back towards her partner’s mother. “And it was no trouble. How is her grandmother?”

Mrs. Rivera looked back and forth between her daughter and Olivia, not sure where she wanted to direct her attention. “She is very sick. As I mentioned last night, my mother had a bad stroke.”
“Was it unexpected?” Olivia’s own experience of her mother’s untimely stroke and subsequent death had undeniably colored her perception of that type of illness.

Latching onto the familiar ground of courtesy, Carmen replied, “It wasn’t entirely unexpected; she’s been having mini-strokes for the past year or two. After each one, she would lose more ground; changes in sensation, speech patterns, memory lapses.” The older woman ran a shaky hand through her greying hair. “The doctors warned us then that she would very likely have a big stroke at any time.” Carmen brought her purse around to her front and hugged it to her chest.

Olivia looked over to her partner to find Natalia’s expression crestfallen, even as her hair hung forward and partially obscured her face. She badly wanted to go over and hug the younger woman, but with Mrs. Rivera there, she wasn’t sure how that would appear. As if by some divine intuition, Emma glanced at her mother and then moved closer to Natalia and wrapped a small arm around the brunette’s back. Olivia could see from the way Natalia closed her eyes that her partner was clearly soaking up the support. From the stories Natalia had told about her grandmother and how close she had been to her, Olivia knew that the younger woman was really bothered by the fact that her abuela had been getting sicker and she never knew about it.

Natalia looked up at her mother. “Can I go see her?” she asked. She hated the fact that her voice sounded like she was a scared sixteen-year-old girl again, looking to her parents for approval. She was better than that now, stronger. Natalia unhooked her arm from Emma’s back and straightened herself up, stood and then moved closer to Olivia and her youngest daughter. She felt her partner’s hand rub her lower back and she sighed deeply as she drew strength from their connection.

“Yes, she wanted to see you...” The unfinished words of before she died trailed off but were understood all the same.

“Thank you, Mama.” Natalia turned to her little daughter and kissed her forehead. “See you soon, Sweet Pea.” Francesca gurgled her response, and then curled back into Olivia’s shoulder and Natalia smiled.

“Take your time, sweetheart,” Olivia whispered into Natalia’s ear. She placed a quick kiss there before she pulled away and let the brunette head towards her grandmother’s room. It took a moment for her to register that Natalia’s mother had spoken to her while she’d been watching the younger woman move away.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“I said you must be very good friends. You care a lot about her.”
Olivia wasn’t sure if Natalia’s mother was just being nice, or insinuating something, but she didn’t have the energy for pretenses. “We are; best friends. And I do care very much about her.”

“I’m glad.”

“You’re glad?” Olivia questioned.

Carmen nodded, and readjusted her purse back over her shoulder. She appeared to relax a little after Natalia left the room, despite not knowing this other woman who was her daughter’s friend. “Yes, that she has a friend that will come help her at a moment’s notice. Your husband must be very understanding. Especially to allow you to bring your children with you so far from home.”

“My husband?” Olivia felt like she was somehow trapped in the Twilight Zone.

Mrs. Rivera pointed out Olivia’s gold band she wore. “You are married, are you not?”

“It’s complicated.” Olivia simply responded and she sincerely hoped the elder Rivera woman would leave it at that.

“Do you have any other children?” the older woman inquired.

Olivia smiled. “A daughter, Ava. She’s an adult now.”

Assessing the other woman with narrowed eyes, Mrs. Rivera commented, “You look pretty young to have an adult daughter.”

Olivia sighed, trying to gauge the elder Rivera’s motivations in her comment. “I was young when I had her.”

“It must have been difficult raising a child at such a young age,” Carmen spoke with just enough insinuation in her tone to put the other woman on the defensive.

Uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, especially from someone she’d never met before and didn’t know, Olivia hesitated to answer. She looked at her daughters, almost wishing Francesca would start crying so she could avoid responding to Carmen’s baiting but nothing was forthcoming. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the scent of the infant tucked into her arms, taking comfort from the baby. “I didn’t raise Ava. I gave her up for adoption.” She looked at the older woman whose expression was unreadable. “I couldn’t raise an infant, and raise my younger siblings at the same time.”
At that moment, Francesca began to fuss against her mother's shoulder and Olivia was never so happy to believe wishes do come true. The plaintive cries of the baby, interspersed with quick breaths of air were felt by Olivia and she pulled back a little to look at her little girl. “Hey, Sweet Pea. Are you hungry? I bet your Mama put an extra bottle in your bag this morning.” Olivia walked over to the stroller and scanned through the diaper bag until she found what she wanted, and then sat down on the row of seats next to Emma. Francesca reached out for the bottle Olivia held and Emma giggled at her little sister.

Mrs. Rivera watched the scene as it played out in front of her, before moving back by the nurse’s station.

“Mommy, how come you didn’t tell Natalia’s mommy about you and Ma?” Emma asked quietly. “I thought you were excited about that.”

Olivia sat still and fervently hoped Mrs. Rivera hadn’t heard Emma’s question. But when she looked up to see where the elder woman was, nothing about her, from Olivia’s observation, seemed to give any indication that she had heard.

Olivia reached over and ran her hand over her middle daughter's head. “I am, Em; very much so. It’s not the time, right now, Jellybean.”

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Natalia closed her eyes when she first entered her grandmother's hospital room. It wasn’t the machines that had shocked her, as she’d gotten familiar with them because of Olivia’s heart transplant and subsequent care requirements; but what she hadn’t been ready for was the absolute frailness of her grandmother. The once lively and animated older woman of her childhood bore little resemblance to the woman now in the bed; an oxygen mask covered most of her face and wires to a cardiac monitoring system snaked under her gown. Hot tears ran down Natalia’s face as she approached her grandmother and she sat in the adjacent chair.

After a moment, Natalia reached forward and picked up the older woman’s hand in hers and caressed it in her own. “Abuela, it's Natalia, I'm here. I don't know how much you can hear me, or understand me. I've missed you so much.” Her tears flowed more freely as she sat there quietly; the only sound came from the consistent beeping of the machines and her own breathing and sniffles.

“So much has happened and I don't know where to start.” Natalia's head was bent down and she rubbed her free hand back and forth on her lap with nervous energy.

“Al principio, niña,” came the distorted voice of the older woman.
Natalia’s head whipped up at her grandmother’s voice. “Abuela?”

“Sí, Natalia. Como estás?” Cecelia Hernández asked, as her hand curved slightly to grasp Natalia’s.

“Why? How come this happened?” Natalia asked. She felt a jumble of questions run through her head but she sighed and tried to order her thoughts.

“I’m an old woman, Natalia.” After a moment, Mrs. Hernández held up the nasal prongs to her granddaughter. “Could you switch this to the tubing? It’s difficult talking with the mask on.”

“Is that okay?”

“It’s fine for a little while.”

“Okay, I just hate seeing you so sick.” Natalia disconnected the tubing from the mask and connected it to the nasal prongs and laid it on the bed. Then she lifted the mask and its elastic from the elder woman’s head before replacing the prongs into her grandmother’s nose and threading the tubing around her ears. Natalia returned to her seat and held her abuela’s hand.

“I’m all right. It’s my time.” The older woman’s voice remained gravelly despite the switch of oxygen source.

Natalia dipped her head as the tears began anew. She looked up as she felt a squeeze of her hand. When she looked into the brown eyes that were so much like hers, she could see that her grandmother had made peace with her destiny.

“Tell me about yourself before I need to sleep again. Are you happy?” the elder woman asked.

“I’m very happy, for the first time in a long time.” Natalia smiled brilliantly as she thought of Olivia and their family.

“Good. Tell me about him.”

“Him? My son, Raphael?” Natalia asked.

“No, Natalia. The one who gave you this beautiful ring.” The older woman smiled as the fingers of her other hand traced over the slim band on Natalia’s finger.
“It’s complicated.” Natalia didn’t know if she could tell her grandmother. But then she realized that she probably would not have the opportunity to tell her later. She’d always been honest with her grandmother; the elder woman had often been a confidante when she felt she couldn’t talk to her parents. “And a long story, but the person who gave me this ring, Olivia, she means the world to me.”

“She?” Mrs. Hernández asked. Then she continued, “Mmmm. And this Olivia makes you happy?”

“Very much. Aside from my children being born, she’s made me the happiest I’ve ever been.” Natalia’s grin lit up her face with a warm glow.

“Good. You deserve that.” The skin around Mrs. Hernández’s eyes crinkled as she matched her granddaughter’s grin.

Natalia paused for a moment in confusion, and then asked, “You don’t have a problem with me living my life with another woman? What about what the Church says?”

“Life is too short for recriminations and being unhappy. Never mind what the Church says. They’re a bunch of old fools. You know that God loves you. You’ve made peace with that. I see that in you.” Mrs. Hernández coughed and became short of breath. After a couple moments she settled and her breathing evened out.

Natalia had been about to get up to go get the doctor, but the older woman’s tug on her hand stopped her.

“I’m fine. Just an old woman,” she said with a smile. “You said you have a son?”

“He’s grown up, now, Abuela. 19 years old. He’s in the Army.” Natalia retrieved a picture of Rafe in his uniform from her wallet and handed it over to her grandmother.

“A young man, then.” Cecilia ran her finger over the photograph and smiled. “So handsome.”

“Thank you.”

“How did you and this Olivia meet?” the elder woman questioned with a grin.

Natalia smiled at her grandmother. “That is a very long story… and complicated. But the short version is I looked after her after she had a heart transplant. Even though we butted heads more times than I could count. I helped look after her daughter and her business as she got better. I bought a house with her help, and she and her daughter moved in, so I could take care of them both.”
Her face softened as she spoke, as she recalled her relationship with Olivia. “We got closer until the line between friendship and more blurred. I panicked and did something really stupid. A couple things, really.” Natalia shook her head as she continued. “I don't know why she stays with me sometimes.”

“She loves you,” her grandmother spoke with conviction.

“I know. And I am very grateful for that, everyday.” Natalia paused, and then quietly asked, “Would you like to meet them? Olivia and our daughters?”

“They're here, mi niña?” Mrs. Hernández’s eyebrow raised in curiosity.

“Yes, they're outside in the waiting room.”

“Sí, I would love to meet your family.” The older woman’s eyes closed and Natalia hesitated.

“Do you want me to get your nurse?” Natalia began to stand, a little hesitant because of her grandmother's condition.

“No, querida, I'm just tired. Go. Bring in Olivia and your family. I can rest later.”

“If you're sure?” At her grandmother’s nod, Natalia left the room to go get Olivia and their daughters. A few minutes later, they all returned, with the stroller in tow, and Natalia holding her youngest daughter against her hip. Mrs. Hernández still had her eyes closed. Natalia moved closer and placed her hand on the older woman’s. “Abuela? They're here.”

It took a moment for her grandmother to reopen her eyes, and when she did it took a moment to focus. “Hello.” Mrs. Hernández turned to the older of the new entrants and held out her hand as far as she could. “You must be Olivia. I'm Cecelia.”

Olivia took the older woman's hand in her own. “It's lovely to meet you. Natalia's spoken highly of you.”

A faint blush brought color to the elder woman's face as she looked to her granddaughter. “And who are these little girls?”

Emma stood tall and stepped forward. “Hi, I'm Emma. And this is my little sister, Francesca. But we call her Sweet Pea, too.” The girl tilted her head to the side as she thought about something. “You're Natalia's grandmother that taught her to make wishes on New Years and to stay up to see the ball drop?”

Mrs. Hernández laughed slightly at Emma's exuberance. “I am, sweetheart.”
“Cool! We did that last year and I wished for big purple dreams. Bestest wish ever.” Emma’s face lit up and she clapped her hands.

“I’m glad. Little girls deserve the best dreams.” The older woman looked at Natalia. “Now, show me this little one before I need to sleep.”

Wiping moisture from the corner of her eyes at Emma’s declaration, Natalia stepped forward and lowered the infant so her grandmother could see. “Abuela, this is Francesca. She’s the newest addition to our family. Francesca Mariissa Rivera. Or, as Emma said, Sweet Pea.”

“She’s so beautiful, Natalia. You both must be so proud of your family.” The elder woman’s warm smile spread as she reached out and caressed the baby’s arm.

“Thank you. We are,” Natalia replied. Francesca had fallen asleep in her arms so she placed the baby back into the stroller and lowered the back; the young girl hadn’t even stirred.

“Do you have any other children, Olivia?” the older woman asked gently.

Olivia nodded with a smile. “I have another daughter, Ava, who’s 25.”

“You must have been rather young,” Cecelia said softly.

“I was.”

“Ava’s great. And I’m going to be the best big sister for Francesca like Ava is for me,” Emma chimed in.

Cecelia nodded. “I think you’ll do a great job looking after your sister.”

“Thank you.” Emma beamed with joy at the praise from the older woman.

Olivia noticed that the older woman’s energy was fading, and she asked if she could switch the mask back on so the Natalia’s grandmother could get her rest.

Mrs. Hernández nodded her assent, and when Olivia moved closer to replace the mask with the tubing, the older woman spoke quietly, but with feeling. “Do you love my granddaughter?”

“With all my heart and soul,” Olivia replied, her voice hoarse with emotion.

“I’m glad. Take care of her and make her happy.” The older woman’s eyes were clear and bright, and her voice, though weakened, was sure.
“For the rest of my life and beyond. She means the world to me.” Olivia’s voice was choked up as she responded. She brought one hand up into a fist over her heart and the other held fast to Mrs. Hernández’s hand.

Mrs. Hernández nodded her head slightly and Olivia placed the mask on her as the older woman began to cough. As the coughing subsided, Natalia leaned over to her grandmother and placed a kiss on her cheek.

“I love you, Abuela. Sleep now. Get some rest.”

“Te amo, Pequeña.”

Olivia directed their daughters out of the room and Natalia soon followed; tears created tracks down the younger woman’s face. Olivia enveloped her partner in her arms. There were no words offered or needed, the touch providing support from one and giving comfort to the other. After a couple minutes the couple moved apart.

Natalia looked up at Olivia. “I should go find my mother. I’m sure she’ll want to stay with Nana for a while.”

“She asked about us, your mother did, in a roundabout way. I didn’t say much because I didn’t know how much you wanted to tell them,” Olivia said gently, conscious of her partner’s unease where her family was concerned.

Natalia stood up straight and with a determined voice, stated, “I’m not ashamed of you, of us.”

Olivia smiled. “I’m not suggesting otherwise. But I didn’t feel it was my place to tell her when you weren’t here.”

“Thank you. Although when I do tell my parents about us, I want you there with me.” Natalia looked over Olivia’s face and settled on the other woman’s eyes.

“I will be there with you whenever and wherever you need me to be. You know that.” Olivia pressed a kiss to Natalia’s forehead.

“Have I told you lately how much I love you?” Natalia picked up Olivia’s hands in a familiar gesture and brought them to her own chest.

“Last night, if I recall. Oh, and this morning.” Olivia grinned broadly. “But who’s counting?”

“Thank you,” Natalia started. “I heard Nana’s questions to you and your answers.”
“And I meant it,” Olivia said softly, with a smile.

“I know.” Natalia brought Olivia’s hands up her face and kissed them. “Now, I need to go find Mama and Papa.”

“I think they went to the cafeteria. Your mother mentioned going for some tea.”

Natalia drew back and looked at the older woman. “Do you mind staying here, in case they return before I find them?”

Olivia nodded. “No problem. Francesca’s sound asleep now anyways and Emma and I can read from one of her books.”

“Thanks.”

When Natalia left to go find her parents, Olivia moved over to where Emma sat reading. Once seated, she felt the young girl shift closer and curl up against her side. Every once in a while Olivia would look up and check on Francesca, who slept soundly in the stroller.

“I miss Granddad Alan,” Emma said softly as she rested her head against her mother’s shoulder.

Feeling her daughter’s sadness, she curled her arm around the girl and brought a hand up to caress her head. “I know you do, Jellybean.”

About twenty minutes had passed before Carmen and Hector Rivera returned, with Natalia following slightly behind. Olivia could almost feel the nervous tension that rolled off her partner. The younger woman moved away from her parents and closer to Olivia and their daughters.

“Olivia, Mama and Papa are going to stay here for a while longer. They’ve invited us all for supper this evening.”

“That’s fine. What do you want to do now?” Olivia glanced down at her watch and noticed it was after two in the afternoon, and neither she nor Natalia nor Emma had eaten. “We could go back to the hotel room and order in a light lunch or we could find a restaurant close by. We can decide what we want to do after that in the meantime.”

“Food. Oh that sounds great. I… I just need to get out of here for a while. And Emma must be bored silly.” Natalia looked over at her daughter who had a book in her hand, resting on her lap.
“I’m okay, Ma. Mommy and I were reading Alice in Wonderland.” Emma grinned up at Natalia.

“That’s a good book. I read that when I was a little girl, too.”

“Really?” Emma asked, curiously. She looked between her two mommies. “Did you read it when you were my age, too, Mommy?”

“I did. But you know what? We’re going to go get some food, and maybe find a park to play in. How would you like that?”

“A park? With swings and slides and merry-go-rounds?” Emma was getting excited.

Natalia smiled at her daughter’s reaction. She sighed as she realized it would also give her time away from the hospital for a while and away from some of her worries.

“Sure thing.” Natalia turned to Olivia and continued, “There’s a deli not too far from here. We can pick up some sandwiches and drinks and then head over to the park.”

“Sounds good to me. Why don’t you let your parents know what’s going on and give them our cell numbers in case they need to get a hold of us? I’ll get Em all packed up here and check Francesca’s things and we can get moving.”

Natalia did that and returned and the two women and their children headed out of the hospital.

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The sunny spring day brought many parents and children to the park to play on the playground equipment or kick a soccer ball around. Olivia, Natalia and Emma had finished their lunch and Emma was anxious to head over to a group of kids her own age to play. Once the young girl had left, with the warning to stay within sight, Olivia turned to Natalia. She could tell by the way the brunette fidgeted with the hem of her sweater that her mind was elsewhere and from the look of things there was much unrest behind those big brown eyes. Olivia reached a hand out to halt Natalia’s fingers.

Once she got the younger woman’s attention, she spoke. “Sweetheart? What’s bothering you?”

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?” Olivia asked gently.
“So much has changed. I don’t know where or how to begin. The last time I was in my parents’ apartment I was sixteen years old and pregnant, and they threw me out.” Natalia sighed deeply and felt Olivia's hand squeeze hers. “Actually, that’s not entirely true. They gave me the option of staying and giving my baby up for adoption or being sent to a home for unwed mothers.”

“You said that things have changed. Don’t you think your parents might have changed as much as you have?” Although she knew her partner was hurting tremendously, Olivia tried to give Natalia a way to see that the chasm that had been created over time and distance had not yet become un-crossable. The young woman’s mother had done the initial reaching out; Natalia needed to make the next move. It wouldn’t be easy, but as Olivia knew well, things worth fighting for seldom were.

“I suppose. It just hurt so much.” Natalia bowed her head, and drew in her lip before turning to face her partner with saddened eyes. “What if they can’t accept us as a family?”

“What if... Natalia, we can’t live our lives with ‘what if’s’. Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it together.” Olivia was secure enough in their relationship to not have the misgivings she had when dealing with Rafe’s objections. “Besides, they can’t be all that bad. They raised you well, taught you how to love and cherish other people. They taught you to be strong when you needed to be.”

“I can certainly be stubborn when it counts,” Natalia said with a grin as she looked up at Olivia.

Olivia laughed as she drew Natalia into a hug. When she released her, she smiled at the younger woman, and then spoke. “You’re the only one who’s stubborn enough to out-stubborn me. You broke through my barriers like they were nothing and set up shop and refused to let go, let me go. More than once, I might add.”

“I suppose I am,” Natalia said as she giggled. Then after a moment, she tilted her head in thought. “I’m kind of surprised by my grandmother’s acceptance of our relationship.”

“Why? I could see that same spark of intelligence in her that I see in you. She might be old, but don’t discount her experiences in life.”

“She always seemed so devout and I just assumed she’d follow church teachings.” Natalia’s sighed with melancholy. “I’m just sorry that I didn’t have more time with her, that I couldn’t have known her as an adult; that Rafe didn’t get to grow up knowing her.”

Olivia grasped her partner’s hand in her own, then tilted her head until she met Natalia’s gaze and held it. “I know, sweetheart, and I wish you could have had that as well. But you know what? You taught me that everything that happens, does so for a reason.” She briefly
raised their joined hands and kissed the back of Natalia's. "We can't change the past, as much as we might like to sometimes. And what's happened in our lives brought us together, and I will never regret that."

Natalia smiled. "What made you so wise?"

"Don't you know? I'm Olivia 'Freakin'' Spencer, Business Mongrel Extraordinaire." Olivia sat straight up with her chin held high.

"You're not that funny," Natalia commented with a wry grin.

"Yes, I am. And you love it."

"Yeah, I kinda do." Natalia brought her hand up to cup Olivia's cheek.

"Kinda?" Olivia's right eyebrow rose.

"Fine. I do." Without looking to see if anyone else was in sight, Natalia leaned forward and pulled Olivia into a kiss. Neither had noticed that Emma had come up beside them.

"Mommy! Ma! Can I go play with the soccer ball with some friends? We'll be just over there," Emma said as she pointed to a small group of children with their parents standing close by.

"You've made friends already, it seems. Fine; just stay where we can see you," Olivia told her daughter.

"Thanks. Bye!" Emma took off in the direction of the other children as they started to kick a ball around.

"And there she goes. I swear sometimes that girl needs an electronic monitoring system attached to her." Olivia grinned wryly.

"Of course she's made friends easily. She has 'people skills'." Natalia giggled before she continued, "Oh, and that electronic monitoring system thing? She'd probably hack it somehow."

"You're probably right." Olivia shook her head at the ingenuity of her daughter. Then again, given her gene pool, she shouldn't exactly be surprised at the breadth of talents Emma had inherited. "Speaking of Emma, I suspect it's going to be crazy the next few days. I'd like to call Jane and ask her to come to Chicago. Maybe she could take her to the science museum or the aquarium. I think Em would really enjoy those."
“That sounds like a good idea. Francesca’s really too little to keep Emma occupied for long, and I don’t know if any of my cousins have children her age.” Natalia paused and shook her head slightly. “I also have no idea if my sister has children. She’d be about Ava’s age, so it’s possible.” Natalia shrugged her shoulders, at a loss. Because of the years that had passed without contact, she’d just realized that she really didn’t know her family, and that saddened her.

Taken aback by the mention of a sibling, Olivia nonetheless hid her surprise as she softly said, “You’ve never talked much about your family. I didn’t know you had a sister.”

Natalia nodded and then sighed. “I know. I should have said something sooner, but I made myself forget them. I had to, in order to be strong enough to stand on my own.” She shrugged sadly. “I guess I just got used to not talking or thinking about them.” Wistfully, she said, “Leyla was just five years old when I left – she may not remember me. Leo, he was seven years older than me and so much like Papa. He wanted to be just like him. As a little girl, I loved him so much, even though he was only my half-brother.”

“What did your father do for work?”

“What didn’t he do? Mostly janitorial, construction, and some security work as far as I can remember. He came to the U.S. in the 1950’s with his parents as an immigrant from Puerto Rico. He was always very strict with us growing up. His rules or else. He never hurt us physically, but he could be quite controlling.”

“How so?”

“He never approved of any of the girls that Leo brought home. Always said he could do better. And me, I wasn’t allowed to date at all. When I wasn’t in school or at church, I had to be home.” Natalia shook her head to dispel the unease growing from her memories. She tightened her grasp on her partner’s hand. “And I had to be very careful who I was friends with.”

“So when you started to date Gus…” As she spoke with Natalia, she kept watch on Emma’s little ball game, making sure she could see where she was.

Softly, Natalia spoke. “They didn’t know at first. Nicky was the first guy to pay any sort of attention to me. I was shy and awkward. I spent more time in the library than not. So, I kept it a secret from them, meeting him at lunch times, let him steal only a few kisses. There was a school dance, Homecoming, and I’d had to beg my parents to let me go. There were a couple girls in my class who were going by themselves, too. Anyway, Nicky met me at the school, because there was no way I would have been allowed to go with a guy to a dance. It was a great night. I had so much fun, and I felt so special dancing with him.” Her voice had taken on a dreamlike quality as she recalled the fond memories of her times with Gus,
and then she frowned as she continued telling her partner about her past. “Gus kissed me and Leo saw that. He’d come to pick me up from the dance.”

“What happened?” Olivia asked her gently.

Natalia shook her head. “I was grounded. If anything, it felt like being a prisoner in my own home.”

“Then how did you even get to go out with Gus?” the hotelier asked with curious disbelief.

“I snuck out of the apartment,” Natalia admitted abashedly.

“So that’s where Emma gets it from.”

“Ha ha.” Natalia looked back down and began fidgeting with her sweater again. “On our first date, Nicky took me to dinner at this old burger shack. It should have been condemned, but it had good food. One night, a few weeks later, we were there again fooling around in his car, and one thing led to another, and we were having sex. God, it was awful.”

“The sex? The place? Or just that you were unprepared for the enormity of it?” Olivia asked her gently as she once again reached over and placed her hands over her partner’s fidgeting ones to try to calm her. The hotelier turned the other woman’s hands in her own and threaded their fingers together.

“All of that. And the fact that, at least according to the religion I grew up with, it was a huge mistake; a sin. I was so scared after it happened, I didn’t talk to him for a couple weeks. He must have thought I didn’t want to be with him anymore.” Natalia stopped and pressed her lips together; a frown marred her forehead. “Anyway, he left town with his family and I never heard from him again. I went to his old apartment and the landlord said there was no forwarding address. A few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant.”

“Oh, God, Natalia. I’m so sorry you had to go through all that on your own.” Olivia disengaged one of her hands and brought it up to caress Natalia’s cheek.

Natalia shrugged. “I did what I had to. When I was kicked out, I had to find a way to survive. I not only had myself, but I had a baby to look after. It was hard. More than once, I wondered if maybe my parents were right; that maybe Rafe would have been better off in a house with two parents who loved him.” Natalia shook her head. “But I knew that Rafe was God’s gift to me, no matter how he’d come into this world. And I knew I would love him and give him a home. That was what mattered to me.”

Olivia realized that in many ways she and Natalia were both survivors; they’d just taken different routes to get there. Now they had each other to rely on and to support one
another, and Olivia was determined not to let anything break that bond. If she had to fight
for her family from now to eternity, she would, because they were so worth fighting for. “I’m
with you; always.”

Natalia placed a kiss to the hand that the hotelier had brought up to her face. “I know.
However, as Emma’s about to come back here at any moment, I suggest we pack this stuff
up and head back to the hotel. I don’t know about you, but I need a little rest before we
head over to my parents’ place.” The young woman leaned a little closer and kissed her
partner.

“That sounds wonderful.” Olivia said as she pulled away and started to pack up the
remnants of their lunch. She threw the trash into the garbage bins, and then she called
Emma over. The young girl bounced over with plenty of energy. “Hey, Jellybean. We’re going
go back to the hotel room for a little while before going over to Natalia’s parents’ home
for supper. Why don’t you say good-bye to your friends and we’ll get moving.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

“Listen, Emma. I’m going to give Jane a call to see if she can come on up this evening and
keep you company while we’re here. It’s going to be really busy the next few days. As much
as you love your Ma and me, I think you might find it boring.”

“What about Natalia’s grandmother? Can we go see her again? She was really nice.” Emma
looked hopeful as she looked between both women.

“She was very nice. But sweetie, she’s very sick. And we can’t wear her out.”

Emma’s shoulders deflated. Then her eyes brightened slightly as an idea came to her.
“Okay. Can I make her a card?”

“I’m sure that she would love that, Jellybean. We can work on that tonight, okay?” Olivia
drew her daughter into a hug.

“Okay Mommy. I love you.” Emma hugged her mother and then turned to Natalia, extending
her arms around the young woman. “I love you, too, Ma. I’m sorry you’re so sad.”

“So am I, sweetie. But you know what? Hugs from you and your Mommy and Francesca?
They make things so much better.” Natalia bent down and kissed Emma’s head.

“From Rafe and Ava, too?”

“Definitely. My big family. You’re my heart and I love you all.” Natalia hugged Emma back
and the little girl just soaked up the attention.
“Okay, enough with the mushiness,” Olivia interrupted. “Let’s get packed up and into the car. I don’t know about you, but I hear a bed calling my name.”

Emma scrunched up her face, shaking her head and smiled. “Beds don’t call names, Mommy. That’s silly.”

“Oh yes, they do.” Olivia and Natalia loaded the kids into the car, and the stroller and bags into the trunk before leaving the park for the hotel.

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ACT 3

The bustling city streets of Chicago could be heard through the open windows of the hallway outside the Rivera’s apartment as Olivia, Natalia and their daughters awaited entrance. Natalia had knocked on the door, but there had been no response initially. She had her hand up to knock again when the door started to open.

“Marco, if that’s you, I told you…” The voice that answered the knock stopped abruptly as the door opened fully, revealing a young woman with a big smile and dimples gracing her cheeks. Olivia was struck by the physical similarities to her partner.

“Not Marco,” Natalia responded.

“Natalia?” the woman asked, curiously. She had only vague memories of her sister and an old, worn school photograph of her. “How…” she paused as she stared at the new arrivals. “When...did you get here?”

“We got here this morning. Hi, Leyla.” Awkwardly, Natalia shuffled her feet where she stood. “Didn’t Mama tell you I was coming?”

Leyla shook her head in confusion. “Sort of. I was on the other line with Marco when she called. I was distracted.”

“I can tell,” Natalia commented with a smile at her sister’s reaction, realizing that she’d been expecting someone else at the door. “May we come in?” Natalia asked. It was her childhood home, but she wasn’t going to be presumptuous and just walk inside. She hadn’t set foot across the threshold since she was sixteen years old. Leyla nodded and stepped aside to allow them through the door. “Leyla, I’d like you to meet my family: This is my partner, Olivia.”
“You’re a family, huh?” Leyla commented curiously.

Not wanting to obfuscate the issue, Olivia responded simply, “Yes.” Given the Rivera family’s response to the teenage pregnancy aspect of Natalia’s life, she was sure that the ‘I’m engaged to your daughter’ aspect probably wouldn’t go down very easily, but she wasn’t about to lie about her relationship with Natalia.

Leyla looked at them a moment, and then glanced at the way this woman, her sister, gazed at Olivia with such familiarity. She shrugged her shoulders, very much aware from her social circles that families were made up of all different kinds of people. She didn’t ascribe to her parents’ narrow-minded perceptions of what families should be. Nodding, she smiled when she looked back at Natalia. “Looks like you found your Princess Charming.”

Natalia shared a smile with Olivia before returning her glance to her sister. “I have.”

“That’s great, Natalia.” Leyla asked curiously as she bent her knees, to get level with Emma. “So, who are the beautiful girls?”

Surprised again at the positive response from another member of her family, Natalia smiled nervously and said, “I’m sorry. These are our daughters, Emma and Francesca.” As she indicated each child, the pride in Natalia’s tone was unmistakeable.

Emma looked at Leyla and tilted her head slightly with a contemplative expression on her face. “You’ve got the same dimples as Ma.”

“I do.” Leyla smiled, charmed by Emma’s forthrightness. “And you are a little cutie.”

“My mommies call me Jellybean.” Emma paused for a second. “Do you have a nickname?”

“Not since I was a little girl,” Leyla responded wistfully, remembering a name her brother teased her with.

With a pensive expression, Natalia stood quietly a moment as she recalled a name she hadn’t heard in years. “Sprout,” Natalia responded with a giggle. “Leo used to call you that. He figured you’d sprout wings and fly away into the magical world of your books: all those stories about princesses and Peter Pan.”

“After you left, I think I must have made him read Peter Pan to me every time he came over,” Leyla said, her eyes getting misty. “I missed you so much.”

Natalia smiled. Some of the tension she’d been feeling since the return to Chicago was receding; first because of her grandmother’s acceptance of her relationship with Olivia, and
now because of her sister's. However, she didn't anticipate that her parents would be so understanding. “How are you, Leyla?”

“Good. A little tired. It's been a bit crazy in the last several months.” She sighed. “I was taking college classes and working temp jobs, but quit both and gave up my apartment to move home and help with Nana. Dad's working overtime just to cover the hospital and insurance bills.” As she spoke her voice sounded resentful of the situation.

Leyla sighed and then headed over to a chair and collapsed into it. Emotions crowded her thoughts. It had been so long since she'd seen the sister she'd idolized as a child. She never understood why Natalia had left; their parents said nothing, outright refusing to talk about it whenever the subject was broached. As a child, Leyla had dreamt up wonderful, fantastical reasons for her big sister's absence, but as she'd grown older, and had faced harshly strict regulations from her parents, she'd grown angry, believing her sister had deserted them and left her to pay the price.

When she was a junior in high school, Leyla's frustration had gotten the better of her and as a result, she'd ended up having a huge argument with her brother. She'd caught him snooping around the high school, interrogating her friends and checking up on her actions. When she confronted him, he'd said he didn't want to see another sister disappear. Pressing him for details, he'd finally broken down and told her everything that happened with Natalia. She'd asked him if he had any pictures of their sister, and later on, in her room, he'd removed a slightly tattered photograph of Natalia from a small box of things he'd kept and handed it to her. After that, Leyla's opinion of her older sister ran the gamut from impressed that she'd stood up to their parents to look after herself and her child, to saddened that they couldn't have been part of each other's lives.

Rather than focusing on the craziness of her life, Leyla decided to turn the tables and shift some of the insanity onto her sister's shoulders. “So, Natalia...aside from falling in love with Olivia, what have you been up to?”

“That is a long story.” Natalia smiled. “Lots of twists, turns, heartache and joy.”

“Sounds like a soap opera. I've got time.” She grinned as she crossed her arms over her head and pushed back on the chair.

“Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction; with all the antics that go on, Springfield seems like a soap opera,” Olivia quipped. “My life is often proof of that.”

Leyla oozed curiosity. “Oh, do tell.”

Olivia raised an eyebrow at Natalia's sister. “That would take a long time, and several martinis.”
Moving over to perch on the arm of the couch next to Olivia, Natalia tried to act casual as she draped an arm around her partner's shoulder. In that moment, the familiar activity was filled with so much nervous tension that she had to center herself by glancing at the kids. Emma was curled up on a chair, reading, while Francesca slept in her carrier, oblivious to the goings on around her. The sight gave her the courage to speak.

“Long story short, Olivia got very sick and made a play for my husband. He died in an accident trying to find her. Olivia needed a heart transplant and I gave her my husband's heart. I looked after her and Emma and we got closer. I didn't realise how close we'd been getting. She kissed me to prove a point and it started us in all kinds of crazy directions. Olivia told me she was in love with me; I almost got married again, then ran away from the altar, and told her I loved her, too. We were just getting back to being a family again and I found out I was pregnant. I got scared and ran away. Came back and had to prove to Olivia I wasn't ever going to do that again. She forgave me. And here we are: another child to our family and I've never been happier.” The words all came out in a rush, with Natalia barely taking the time to breathe in between statements.

Leyla sat in silence a moment as she absorbed what her sister had just told her, and then she laughed. “Wow. That really does sound like a soap opera.”

“Oh there's plenty more craziness involved, but that's the barebones of it,” Natalia responded, with a slight chuckle.

“At some point, you're going to have to tell me more about this place; it sounds interesting.”

“That's one word for it,” Olivia said, somewhat under her breath, getting a friendly nudge from Natalia.

The front door of the apartment opened and Natalia and Leyla's parents walked in; both appeared very exhausted. Enough so that they hadn't noticed the extremely friendly way their daughter was sitting with her friend. They hung their coats up and their father headed into the kitchen. He pulled a couple glasses out of the cupboard.

Gruffly, Mr Rivera turned to his younger daughter. “Leyla, did you ask your sister and her friend if they wanted something to drink?”

“Not yet, Papa.”

The old man sighed, as he was used to Leyla's lack of hospitality. His attention shifting to her sister, he spoke, staring at them, “Natalia, do you or Ms. Spencer want something?”
“I can get it.” Natalia started to stand and get the drinks herself when she stopped herself, shaking her head, and sat back down, determined not to fall back into old habits of jumping in and ‘fixing’ things. She raised her head, meeting her father’s glare.

“Just some juice or milk. Em?” Natalia asked her daughter.

Emma looked up from her book to Natalia’s father. “May I have some juice, please?”

Pleased at the young girl’s manners, Mr. Rivera responded, “Yes, you may.”

“May I have some water, please?” Olivia asked Mr. Rivera. She’d prefer something stronger and equally clear, however, she was determined to be on her best behavior and support Natalia as much as she could.

Hector Rivera nodded and brought over a bottle of water, and some juice for Emma and Natalia before he went over to the lounge chair.

“Thank you,” Olivia said.

The phone rang. Reaching to grab it from the coffee table, Leyla exchanged a few quick words with the caller and then excused herself to take the phone into the guest room, where she was staying.

In an effort to quell some of her anxiety, Mrs. Rivera moved into the kitchen where she felt most at home. She busied herself with absently looking through cupboards, trying to think of something to offer them for supper. Not finding what she wanted, she sighed and cautiously turned her attention to the living room. “Natalia, I’ve got some lasagne in the fridge if that’s okay with your friend and her daughter. It will just take about half an hour or so to heat up.”

“Thank you, Mama. That’s fine.” Smiling at her partner and Emma, Natalia responded, “We love lasagne.”

“Natalia makes the best lasagne I ever had,” Emma stated with a big smile.

“Well, I learned to cook from my Mama,” Natalia told Emma, wistfully.


Carmen Rivera paused, unsure of how to proceed. She really didn’t know her daughter anymore or any of the people in her daughter’s life. She had a grown grandson and a new
baby granddaughter. She could see that Natalia had a close friendship with Ms. Spencer and her daughter.

Too many years had passed to ignore their history, but what she could do, though, was to try to move forward, or risk losing Natalia all over again. Since Ms. Spencer and Emma obviously meant a lot to Natalia, Carmen decided to make an effort to include them. “Well, the lasagne’s already been made, so it just needs heating. I’ve just got to make a salad.”

“I like making salads. What kind of salad?” Emma smiled widely.

“Would you like to help me make one?” Carmen smiled in response. Emma’s mood was infectious. “Do you want a green salad or a Caesar salad?”

Emma appeared to think for a moment before she answered. “Mmmm. Caesar, please.” She stood and followed Natalia’s mother into the kitchen, excited at being able to help.

“Okay. You can help me clean the lettuce.” Carmen moved over to the refrigerator and pulled out the Caesar dressing and lettuce.

“Do you put in those...hard bread pieces?” Emma asked.

“Croutons?” The corner of Carmen’s mouth turned up, as she humored the young girl.

“You have a smile like Natalia.”

The child’s simple statement struck her like a slap, bringing home how much of her eldest daughter’s life she’d missed. Those sweetly innocent words could have fallen from the lips of her grandson, instead of a stranger’s child, and the pain of that was something Carmen Rivera would have to live with for the rest of her life. “Thank you.” Carmen pulled out a bowl of water for Emma to place the lettuce in and some paper towel to lay it out on afterwards. She got the girl set up to clean the lettuce leaves then moved over to heat up the lasagne.

Olivia and Natalia sat in the living room, watching the interaction between Emma and Carmen over the counter dividing the two rooms, and sharing glances with each other. Their non-verbal communication conveyed a hesitant, possibly absurd, hope that their living arrangements and life partnership would be at least tolerated. Both women were cynical and realistic enough to realize that actual acceptance was not going to be very forthcoming.

They were jerked out of their silent communication when Natalia’s father spoke. Though gruff, he was honestly curious about who his daughter associated herself with. “Ms.
Spencer, what kind of work do you do? You were able to drop everything to be here for Natalia."

“Papa,” Natalia started to interrupt her father’s interrogation, his tone all too familiar to her from childhood.

“It’s not a problem, Natalia.” Olivia looked up at Natalia before returning her attention to Mr. Rivera. “I own a hotel in Springfield. I have a couple managers that I can leave in charge in my absence and they can contact me anytime. As for Natalia, I would be there for her in a heartbeat, whatever she needs.”

Mr. Rivera nodded as he glanced at the two women. “True friends like that you hold on to. They don’t come along very often.”

“No, they don’t. And Natalia has been there for me just as much, especially the past couple of years. She’s a very smart, caring, compassionate, and funny woman.” Olivia spoke with total conviction as she stole a glance at a bashful Natalia before returning her gaze to the younger woman’s father.

Remaining suspicious of the woman, who spoke so highly of his daughter, he asked, “Why the past couple of years in particular?” Hector Rivera took a sip of his drink before putting the glass back on the table beside his chair.

“I had a health scare. After surgery, Natalia helped look after my daughter, my hotel and me.”

“Health scare?” He was curious to know what kind of health crisis this woman could have had that led to their friendship.

“Papa, Olivia had a heart transplant.” She studied her father as she answered, but couldn’t read anything in his expression to tell her what he was thinking.

“Is everything okay now?” he asked, acknowledging the seriousness of the woman’s illness.

Olivia nodded. “It’s pretty good now. Did I mention that Natalia’s also very stubborn? If it weren’t for her persistence, I’d probably have given up the will to fight to live. I would do anything to help Natalia.” She watched his eyelids narrow as he took in what she said, and she realized how much that statement spoke to her commitment to her partner.

Natalia gave a shy smile at Olivia’s continued praise of her. She was just about to respond to deflect some of that praise when Olivia’s cell phone beeped in her purse. Since they were expecting a return call from Jane, who they’d called on the way over to the
apartment, Natalia reached over to Olivia’s purse, which was closer to her own feet. She glanced down at the caller ID then handed Olivia’s Blackberry over to her.

“It’s Jane. Excuse me.” Olivia nodded at Mr. Rivera as she stood up and hit the answer button on her phone before heading down the hall and into the bathroom to take the call.

While Olivia was out of the room, Hector Rivera looked over at his daughter and spoke. “You look happy, Natalia.”

“I am, Papa. I am.”

“Olivia mentioned you helped her out with her hotel when she was sick. What kind of work do you do now?” he asked, searchingly. For what, he couldn't pinpoint, just something to understand this person his daughter had become.

“Well, at the moment, I’m still on maternity leave, so I’m going to wait a bit before I go back to work. I’ve been Olivia’s personal assistant. She was the first person I knew as an adult who really believed in me and challenged me to be better, to do more than I ever thought I was capable of doing.” Natalia bowed her head.

Hector leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearms on his lap and clasping his hands together. He hung his head for a moment and sighed wistfully, before raising it to face his daughter again. “You know, all your mother and I ever wanted for you was that you were happy and you make a good life for yourself.”

Natalia tried to let go of the old hurts and resentments that she’d felt for her family. It was difficult. “It didn’t feel like that when I was a teenager. I felt like I couldn’t do anything right.”

“We expected a lot from our children, Natalia, as any parent does. It wasn’t easy but we did the best we could.” Mr. Rivera picked up his glass and took a sip, giving his daughter a cordial nod as he replaced it back to the side table.

Determined not to seem like the young girl she felt, she asked with a sure tone, “Did you have to get Leo to frighten off any friend I started to have? I had very few friends in school.”

“They weren’t right for you,” he responded brusquely.

“That should have been my choice, Papa.” Natalia was getting exasperated but tried not to let it show. She didn’t want to get into a fight. She didn’t have the energy for it, on top of dealing with her grandmother’s illness.
“Just like it was your choice to consort with that Nicky boy?” his voice grew harsher and more goading with each comment.

“Papa, please. Not now.” Natalia sighed, pleadingly.

“Why not now, Natalia? This is the first time we’ve seen or heard from you in twenty years.” Hector Rivera was raring for an argument to assuage his loss of control over the situation. With the gulf of years between them, the loss of everything he considered his rights as a parent became too much to handle. The need to assuage that grew into a violent need to dominate this wilful child who’d returned to his life, better for not having left it.

“Exactly, Papa. It’s been nearly twenty years.” Natalia sat forward in her position on the arm of the couch. With determination, she continued, “My children are happy and healthy. I’m happy and healthy. That’s all that matters to me.” She paused, and raised an eyebrow, in defiance. “And that Nicky boy, my son’s father, I married him.”

“Where is he now? Why didn’t he come with you?” He asked her, his tone quieter, but still challenging.

Natalia spoke softly. “He died in an accident a couple years ago.”

The deeply saddened tone in Natalia’s voice rocked him, knocking the wind from his sails. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He sat back in his chair and looked over at her pensively. “Where is your son now?”

“He’s in the Army. He’s stationed at Fort Bragg at the moment,” Natalia spoke proudly of Rafe, despite her misgivings about his career choice.

Hector nodded. “Good for him. He’ll learn a lot. Your brother is in the Army.”

“Papa, Leo’s in the VA hospital,” Leyla said exasperatedly as she came back into the living room, having heard part of the conversation. She put the phone back on the coffee table and perched herself on the chair near her sister.

“Is he okay?” Natalia turned to her sister, cautiously, unsure that she wanted to know.

“Six months ago, he lost the lower half of his left leg in a confrontation with Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Two of his best friends were killed. He’s been dealing with physical therapy as well as post-traumatic stress.” The tone of Leyla’s voice indicated that while she appreciated the fact her brother was serving their country, she disagreed with the reasons behind the war.
Natalia bowed her head, in part because of concern for her brother, but also because just the thought of Rafe being injured in any way terrified her. She knew that there were probably altercations in prison, more than the few times that she heard about. However, Rafe’s military career could have him halfway around the world, certainly more than the hour’s drive it took to get to the penitentiary, and she wouldn’t know that anything had happened until long after the fact. Natalia’s brow furrowed and her hands started fidgeting, first toying with her pantsuit, then one hand going up to her face near her mouth.

When Olivia emerged from the bathroom, a quick glance was all she needed to see that Natalia was troubled. Immediately she wanted to step in, and deflect any trouble that was heading her partner’s way. She moved over to her partner’s side and sat beside her, reaching out and capturing Natalia’s fidgeting hand in her own. Perceptibly, Natalia took a deep breath and relaxed into Olivia’s presence, the younger woman’s nervous worry abating considerably.

Leyla looked over at the two women, watching how they interacted and noting the obvious bond between them, and wondered if her father had seen it, too. By the slight narrowing of his eyes, she figured he had, but he didn’t say anything.

The tension of the room was broken when Emma emerged from the kitchen to announce that the food was ready. She had, with Mrs. Rivera’s directions, set the table for supper and was quite pleased with herself.

Checking on Francesca, who was still conked out in her car seat, Natalia decided she’d feed the infant after they’d eaten. The group seated themselves at the dining room table. Leyla and Natalia were placed opposite of Olivia and Emma, with either end being taken by the elder Riveras.

Before they started in on their meal, Emma piped up. “Are we going to say grace?” She looked up at her mother and then across to Natalia.

“Yes, sweetie.” Natalia jumped at the chance to include a piece of their daily routine in this moment. All day, everything had been out of sorts, and saying grace would be a perfect way to remind her that the normal world was still out there. She grasped her mother’s hand on one side and her sister’s on the other, while keeping her gaze firmly fixed on her partner and daughter.

Emma quickly said the grace that Natalia had taught her then looked up at the Riveras. “May we eat now?” Emma asked eagerly. Olivia grinned at her daughter’s exuberance.

“Yes, you may,” Mrs. Rivera replied with a smile at the young girl’s jubilant manner.
After a moment, Natalia remembered to ask about the phone call. “Olivia, is everything sorted for Jane to come up?”

Olivia looked up from slicing into the lasagne. “Yeah, she’ll arrive tonight at 9:15. I’ll pick her up from the station and bring her back to the hotel.”

“Jane?” Mrs. Rivera questioned.

“She’s Emma’s nanny. With everything going on, we thought Emma might get bored.” Olivia turned to her daughter. “Maybe Jane can take you to the Science Museum. I was looking on their website earlier and I think there are some things you’d really like to see.”

“She might also like to go to the Shed Aquarium,” Leyla added.

Emma was almost bouncing in her seat with excitement. “Can I do both, Mommy?”

“We’ll see, Jellybean.” Olivia reached out and ran her hand over her daughter’s head.

Before long, the meal was finished. While Natalia went to feed Francesca, Olivia and Emma assisted in the cleanup effort. Already feeling terribly exposed, Natalia chose to nurse Francesca in the privacy of the guest room. Looking around, she barely recognized the childhood room she’d shared with Leyla; gone were the brightly painted wall colors and pictures of them growing up, replaced instead with generic prints hung against muted paint tones. Once Natalia had the infant fed and her diaper changed, she dressed the girl in a sleeper and returned to the living room.

After she placed Francesca’s things in the corner of the room, she lifted the baby in her arms and settled in beside her partner. Seeing the infant reach out to her from Natalia’s lap, Olivia’s face immediately softened in gentle affection as she picked her up. Francesca wrapped a small fist around hair that hung loose along her mother’s face when she brought the girl close and kissed her forehead. Without forethought, Natalia ran her hand over her daughter’s head before she rested it on Olivia’s arm, and shifted back into the couch.

Olivia looked over at her partner then returned her gaze to Natalia’s father. Figuring that her business was a pretty safe topic for discussion, she focused on that; and if it happened to show off Natalia’s management skills in the process, all the better. “Mr. Rivera, you had asked before supper about my hotel? We’re in the planning stages of possibly expanding it to a small franchise. We haven’t focused on anything specific. Natalia and I had a brief look at some property in San Cristobel where my family is from, but we decided against that for the time being. We’d like something closer.”

“We?” he asked, surprised. “I thought you owned the hotel.”
“I do. However, I have investors, and Natalia’s a partner and she has been instrumental in some amazing changes for the hotel. When I was sick, she pretty much took control of the day-to-day business dealings with staff. Truthfully, I think they run scared when I come, but they love Natalia. She’s brilliant.” Olivia kept her focus on Mr. Rivera but her smile was all for her partner.

Natalia bowed her head in a shy smile at Olivia's praise. “I just did what needed to be done.”

“Mommy's a hotel mong...mogul,” Emma supplied as she pulled her copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit* from her backpack and laid it on the coffee table. She then sat on the floor in front of her mothers and pulled the book to her, then looked up at Natalia. “Ma, can you read me a story later?”

Natalia looked down the girl affectionately as she responded. “Sure, Jellybean. Which one?”

“*Children of the Lamp*, please.”

Mr. Rivera watched the obvious family scene play out in front of him and he seemed poised to say something when Olivia caught his stern facial expression and schooled her own to match, to challenge him.

“You live together? All of you?” His eyes narrowed in ire.

“Yes. We’re a family, Papa,” Natalia replied. She paused a moment then looked up, glancing quickly at Olivia and then directly at her father. “I love Olivia.” It wasn’t something she’d planned on telling her parents just yet, but now it was out there, so to speak. And then she waited, for what she wasn’t sure.

“You what?!” Hector Rivera shot to his feet. “How could you?” He started forward, anger making him appear to double in size. Olivia pulled Francesca close, readying for a fight if needed. “Didn’t we raise you right? Have you turned completely from God and His teachings?”

Emma looked at her mothers, and then looked warily at Natalia’s father. The child was smart enough to know what he meant, and the friendliness she felt toward the burly man was quickly fading.

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard this kind of argument or discussion. She’d overheard more than a few people talking like that about her family when they didn’t realize she was nearby. It made her mad sometimes. Natalia had told her that if people were saying bad
things about them to let one of her moms know and they would do something about it. But this was Natalia’s family that was starting to say bad things.

“Hey, Emma?” Leyla interrupted the discussion, knowing from experience the expression on her father’s expression face, and her awareness of his bigoted ignorance towards things he disliked, that it was not something the girl should hear. Turning her attention to the girl, she nodded her head towards the hall. “How about we go into my room and we can read your book? You can tell me your favourite parts.” The young woman glanced over at her sister, and then to Olivia, who was cradling the baby protectively. “Maybe we can take Francesca with us?”

Olivia nodded and Natalia breathed a sigh of thanks for her younger sister. Briefly, Olivia stood up to pass the infant over to Leyla before returning to her partner’s side. Emma gathered her book in her hands and followed Leyla and Francesca down the hall to the young woman’s room. Then Natalia returned her attention to her parents.

Natalia took a breath and steadied herself. “Papa, you and Mama taught me how to love someone and to take care of my family. I’ve done that to the best of my ability for most of my life.” Her hands began to fidget slightly. She met her father’s eyes, determined to be strong, for herself and for her family. “For nineteen years I took care of my son on my own. I very briefly had his father in my life when Rafe was a teenager. And then there was Olivia. We didn’t know what was happening, only that we’d become good friends who’d come to rely on each other. You can’t plan who you’re going to fall in love with; it happens or it doesn’t. Somewhere along the way I realized that I couldn’t live without Olivia in my life, to love and be loved, and to raise our children together.”

With an affronted tone Carmen started, “But, what about the harm you’re doing to your children?”

About to respond with an acerbic, biting reply, Olivia held her tongue at a slight touch from Natalia. Glancing over at her partner, she was not surprised to see the fire of determination fill Natalia’s eyes. Nothing brought out the “mama bear” in her lover faster than to accuse her of being a bad mother.

“What harm, Mama? They’re happy, they’re healthy, they’re loved by both of us, and by their fathers.” Natalia looked first at her mother and then at her father. “If you can’t accept that, then I feel sorry for you. You’ve already lost out on getting to know one grandchild. Do you really want to push me, and my family, away, again?”

Hector responded, indignantly. “Push you? We didn’t push you, Natalia. You had a choice.”

“A choice, Papa? There was no choice. You gave me only two options and wouldn’t even consider anything else. I was keeping my son. I couldn’t give him up. It’s not who I am.”
Carmen spoke, her voice harshly and accusatory, “You were too young.”

“Yes, I was young, and naïve.” Natalia stood her ground.

“Your friend, here, gave her daughter up for adoption,” Mrs. Rivera added derisively, recalling her conversation with Olivia earlier in the day.

Both Olivia and Natalia felt like they’d been pole-axed. Natalia was at a loss for words, but Olivia was not. She abruptly stood up and stared down at Mrs. Rivera. “You don’t know the first thing about my life. What I went through has nothing to do with what happened with your daughter. What makes you think that you have any right to talk to Natalia like that?”

“We’re her parents! We have every right.” Carmen contradicted.

“Perhaps biologically speaking, but you forfeited that right when you kicked her out at sixteen. Natalia’s a grown woman, who has spent more than half her life on her own taking care of herself and her son. So, no, you do not have the right to speak to Natalia like you have.”

“We were doing what was best for her. We did not kick her out. She chose to leave,” Hector Rivera countered dismissively.

“Best for me?” Natalia responded indignantly. “I seem to clearly recall you packing my suitcase and driving me to the home for unwed mothers. You said I was a disgrace to the family. Do you even realize how much that hurt?” Natalia clench and unclenched her hands; frustration, hurt and annoyance rolling through her like wildfire as they sought an outlet. “I also know that all my letters to Nana were returned, unopened. And I know she didn’t do that. Eventually I stopped writing to her because it hurt too much having them returned. So many nights I cried myself to sleep. So many times, I wanted to reach out, to share everything that was happening with my family. But I was alone; alone the first time I felt the baby kick, and alone when he was born. I wanted to be able to tell you, but I couldn’t. I was afraid of being rejected, yet again.” Natalia sighed and dropped her head into her hands. Olivia sat beside her, and she took strength from her partner’s hand rubbing her back.

“When Rafe got sick when he was a young boy, the doctors asked me about family medical history. I didn’t know any of that. I was so scared. I tried calling home but I’d get the answering machine every time and I never got called back. Why didn’t you ever call back?” By this time, Natalia was at her wits end and old hurts were bringing new tears. She wrapped her arms across her torso. She felt Olivia pull her back and she let herself be enveloped in her partner’s arms.
“I’m sorry.” Natalia’s mother spoke quietly. “I didn’t know.” No matter how old her children got, Carmen realized belatedly, she didn’t like to see them hurting.

Olivia looked up at Mrs. Rivera. “Didn’t know or chose not to know?”

The phone rang, startling them all in the silence that succeeded the hotelier’s question. After the fourth ring, Carmen picked up the receiver, listened for a moment, and then let it fall to her lap.

Hector noted the ashen color of his wife’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“My mother’s had another stroke. She’s on life support until we can get there. Oh God.” Carmen wrung her hands together, and then she tried to stand. At first the older woman wavered but Hector came over to steady her.

“Nana?” Natalia managed to pull herself a little from Olivia’s embrace and focus on what was going on around her.

“She’s had another bad stroke, Natalia. We should go to the hospital,” Olivia said as she moved her hand to Natalia’s back again and continued to rub the tense muscles. “Sweetheart, I’m going to go check on Emma and Francesca and get them ready. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Natalia nodded her head then got up to go to the bathroom to tidy up and wash her face. After a few moments of deep breathing, she realized how much tension she was carrying. She was exhausted. The emotional upheaval had taken a toll on her and all she wanted to do was go back to the hotel and fall asleep in Olivia’s arms. Better yet, she would have loved to just return to the farmhouse and done the same. But the day wasn’t over yet. Taking one last deep breath, she returned to the living room and found everyone ready to leave. She grabbed her purse and Francesca’s change bag. Olivia had the infant all secured in her car seat; Emma’s backpack was stuffed full and jauntily carried over one of the girl’s shoulders. Natalia’s parents and her sister were also all ready. The apartment was locked up and once down on the street, the families piled into the two cars out front, and headed to the hospital.

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Anxious to learn what had happened, they all had to wait for the physician to arrive and explain Cecelia’s condition. He reminded the family that Mrs. Hernández had signed a ‘Do Not Resuscitate” order during one of her previous visits and that the machines were only a temporary measure. “If you’d like to go in and say good-bye, you can. We can turn off the machines when you’re done. Just let the nurse know when you’re finished.”
“Thank you, Doctor,” Hector replied. He placed an arm around his wife’s shoulders and guided her into her mother’s hospital room. Olivia and Natalia stayed outside for a moment, allowing the older couple their privacy.

Natalia looked gratefully over at her sister. “Thank you so much for looking after Emma and Francesca back at the apartment.”

“No trouble, Natalia. I know how they can get sometimes.”

“Still, though, this was a long time coming.” Natalia exhaled a deep breath, and then she shook her head uneasily. “I’m still kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. That seemed almost too easy.”

“I’ll take it for what it is. We can deal with anything else later.” Olivia was equally skeptical that they’d heard the last of the elder Rivera’s thoughts on their relationship, but as she felt a familiar hand slip into her own, Olivia glanced over at her partner and recognized the young woman’s need for comfort. Olivia brought their joined hands up to her face and kissed the back of her partner’s hand.

Natalia led her family over to the chairs that lined the wall and sat down, and then Emma came over to curl up against her side. “Hey, Jellybean. Are you getting tired?” Emma nodded. “Come here.” Natalia brought her arm around the young girl and caressed her face. “It’s been a long day, hasn’t it?”

“Is your grandmother going to die tonight?” Emma asked in a tiny voice as she looked up at her.

“Yes, sweetie, she is.” The young woman pursed her lips and her eyes welled with tears.

“Are you sad?”

“Very much so, Emma. I love her very much.” Trying to find something positive to cling to, Natalia said, “When I was a child, she used to tell me stories from when she was little, and they were so funny, they’d always make me laugh and laugh.” Even through the wave of sorrow rolling over her, Natalia could sense an echo of that laughter ringing in her heart.

“Really? What kind of stories?” Emma’s attention perked up.

“Oh, about princess and dragons.”

Emma grinned as she looked up at Natalia, head tilted slightly. “Can you tell me one of the stories?”
“Maybe later, sweetie,” Natalia said as she noticed her mother coming out of her grandmother's room.

“Leyla, Natalia, if you want to see your grandmother, you should go in now.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Natalia responded, as she disengaged her arm from around her daughter and stood.

“Natalia,” Olivia started. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“I’m okay right now, but I’ll need you later.”

“Anytime, love.” Olivia stood up and wrapped Natalia in a hug before the younger woman left with her sister to go into their grandmother’s room. Mrs. Rivera followed them back in. Olivia returned to the bank of chairs where Emma sat slightly hunched and Francesca sat giggling in her stroller, playing with the attached toy rings.

“Mommy, how come Natalia's parents didn’t like you and her together?” Emma sniffled a little. “They seemed fine before they found out.”

“Come here, Jellybean.” Olivia wrapped her daughter in her arms. “They don’t know us very well, right now. Sometimes people are afraid of what they don’t know or don’t understand.” Olivia looked at Emma directly, and gently ran a hand over her hair. “Remember what happened with Derek last year and why his parents didn’t want you playing with him?” Emma nodded. “Sometimes people just don’t understand that when two people love each other, it doesn’t matter if it’s two mommies or two daddies or a mommy and a daddy. Sometimes, their beliefs teach them it’s not right if the two people are the same gender.” Olivia paused then leaned down and pressed a kiss to Emma’s head. “But you know what? Natalia and I love each other very much, and we love you, and Francesca, and Ava and Rafe. That won’t ever change.”

“Will they ever like it that we’re a family?” Emma asked softly.

“I don’t know, Em.” Olivia pressed a kiss to her daughter's head. “Maybe if they get to know us as a family, they’ll see that we're really not that different.”

“I don’t like seeing Ma sad. I don’t like it that they made her sad saying those bad things.” Emma sighed, and pursed her lips to the side, much like Natalia did when she got upset.

“I don’t either, Jellybean. But we can be there for Natalia and love her and take care of her.”

A few minutes later, Natalia, her sister and her parents emerged from Mrs. Hernández's room; the three women had tears rolling down their cheeks, while Mr. Rivera remained
more stoic. Emma was the first one up to rush over to give Natalia a hug. Olivia stood, looked to her partner for an indication of what she wanted, and at the open look of need on Natalia’s face, went to her. Gently, she caressed Natalia’s cheeks, wiping away the streaks of too many tears.

Natalia spoke softly as she leaned into her partner’s hand. “Olivia, can we go to the hospital’s chapel? I’d like to light some candles.”

“Of course, anything.”

“Thank you.” Natalia looked up at Olivia and pressed her lips together. She felt certain that if she dared say much at the moment, she’d fall apart, and right now, the only place Natalia felt comfortable doing that was in Olivia’s arms.

Leyla walked over to her sister and laid a hand on her arm. “Natalia, if you’d like, I can stay with the girls until you’re finished. We’re going to be here for a while until the doctor gets back and everything with Nana is settled.”

“Are you sure it’s not too much of a bother?”

“We’ll be fine, Ma.” Emma spoke up. “Leyla can read Sweet Pea and me some more of The Velveteen Rabbit.”

“It’s okay, Natalia. All Francesca’s supplies are in the stroller, right?” Leyla asked.

Olivia responded, “Yes. There are diapers, toys, and if she gets hungry, there is a bottle of milk in there as well. Thank you so much. Natalia and I won’t be too long.” Before she and Natalia left, Emma was taking her book out of her bag and sitting down next to Leyla. Olivia nodded and wrapped an arm around Natalia’s back and led her down the hallway towards the elevators.
When the two women entered the eleventh floor chapel, Natalia felt almost instantly at peace in the dimly lit room. The high ceiling allowed for the beautiful, tall stained glass mural windows on either side of the chapel. At the statue of Mary at the back of the room, Natalia crossed herself and paused for a moment while Olivia stood silently behind her. She moved quietly through the chapel up to the front where the stand of prayer candles was housed. She lit five candles, one for her grandmother, one for Rafe, one for her brother, one for her parents and sister, and one for her family with Olivia. After each candle was lit, she spoke a short prayer of peace.

When Natalia was finished, she went over to one of the pews, genuflected and crossed herself before she sat. Olivia slipped in next to her and reached over to hold her hand; no words were necessary to offer her partner comfort. They stayed that way for several minutes as Natalia gathered her strength for handling the coming emotional blow. When she was ready, she nodded at Olivia and they gathered themselves and left the chapel and headed back toward the medical floor where her family was.

Natalia looked down at her watch as she had noticed from the windows that the sky had darkened considerably. “Olivia, what time do you have to pick up Jane?”

“She gets in at 9:15. What time is it now?”
“Quarter past eight. I don’t know how much longer we’ll be, but hopefully we can get the
details quickly and you can drop us back at the hotel before you go. I’m exhausted and the
girls need to get to bed.”

“No problem. I’ll get Emma and Francesca sorted out while you go over things with your
parents. If they have any further questions, they know how to contact us.”

“Have I mentioned lately how much I adore you?” Natalia asked Olivia as she moved in to
hug her.

“You may have mentioned it a few times.”

“Smarty pants.” Natalia gently swatted her partner’s arm as she pulled back to look at her.
She gently raised her hand and pushed a few stray locks of hair from Olivia’s face.
“Seriously, I don’t know how I could have done this without you. You mean the world to
me, you know.”

“You’re welcome. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.” It had taken Olivia a long time to
realize how true that was until the chance had almost been taken away from her. This
family she had created with Natalia was more than she’d ever hoped for, longed for. If it
were in her power, she would do everything she could to protect her family from whatever
forces threatened to destroy it.

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They returned to their hotel room with time to spare before Olivia had to go pick up Jane,
so they got the girls bathed and changed for bed. Afterward, Natalia showered and put on
pyjamas. Emerging a little while later, feeling fresh and clean, Natalia settled into one of
the plush chairs to feed Francesca while Emma worked on her homework at the desk.
Olivia looked over some emails on her Blackberry and quietly conversed with Natalia
about some small work details until it was time to leave for the train station. Just before
she left, Emma finished her homework and asked Natalia if she could read her a story.
Olivia gave her girls and Natalia a brief kiss before she grabbed her keys and left the room.

Natalia settled a clean, dry, fed Francesca into the crib that the hotel had brought up for
them to use, and then went to lie down with Emma on her bed. The girl pulled out her copy
of Children of the Lamp: The Akhenaten Adventure.

“Where did your Mom finish off last time?”

“I think just after John and Phillipa had the same dream about their uncle in England.”
“Okay, I'll start reading from there,” Natalia said. Emma crawled under the covers and curled up next to her mother. Natalia started reading, and before the end of the chapter, Emma was fast asleep, her head pillowed on Natalia’s shoulder.

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ACT 4

When Olivia returned with Jane, she opened the door to Emma’s room to find her partner sound asleep with her daughter sprawled beside her. Jane quietly put her things on the second double bed in the room, and then followed Olivia over to the main area of the suite. En route to the hotel, Olivia had explained to Jane what had happened since they’d arrived in Chicago, so now they were just discussing things that the young woman could do with Emma over the next couple days.

After they nailed down the details for the following day at the Museum of Science and Industry, Olivia went into her daughter’s room to rouse Natalia.

“Natalia? Sweetheart, wake up for a minute, okay?” Olivia caressed her partner’s face with the back of her fingers.

A groggy Natalia woke from her slumber. “Olivia?”

“Yes, honey, Jane’s here. Come on. Let’s get you into the other room.”

“Francesca?”

“Still sound asleep.” Olivia guided Natalia over to the king-sized bed in the main room of the suite and tucked her partner in, then returned to where Jane sat at the desk. “You’re welcome to stay out here for a bit since it’s still pretty early. I’m just going to work on some business on my laptop for a little while.”

“That’s okay, Ms. Spencer. I have a book I can read in bed for a while. I’m going to try and get to sleep early. It’s going to be a busy day tomorrow.”

“Okay. I gave you the extra key card?”

“Yes, Ms. Spencer.”

“All right. Goodnight.” Olivia nodded her head as Jane turned and headed into the other room, closing the door behind her. She sat with her laptop open, working on answering some business emails and checking the news before shutting the computer down and heading to the bathroom and preparing for bed. After the long drive, followed by an
emotional day with Natalia’s family, Olivia was as tired as her partner and all she wanted at the moment was to climb into bed and curl up with her. Sinking into the mattress, she sighed in pleasure as the kinks her joints and muscles relaxed. Without waking, Natalia had gravitated towards Olivia and wrapped herself around her, leaving Olivia feeling utterly contented.

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When Olivia woke to the alarm clock from her Blackberry, she was entranced by the morning light as it filtered through the curtains of the hotel room. She also noticed the weight of her partner holding her captive. Natalia still slept soundly, which was a very rare occurrence indeed. With one arm around Olivia’s stomach and one leg curved up and over her thigh, Olivia felt thoroughly possessed. From the baby monitor on her nightstand, she could hear the muffled cries of Francesca who’d begun to stir. Olivia tried to dislodge herself from under Natalia, which only made the younger woman tighten her hold.

“Natalia, I need to get up. Francesca is waking up and I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

“Mmm?” A bleary eye opened.

Olivia chuckled slightly. “Your arm is pressed against my bladder.” She nodded her head towards the bathroom door.

“Oh, sorry.” Natalia retracted her arm and Olivia was able to get out of bed. “How long have you been awake?” She stretched out stiff muscles as she followed her partner’s movements with her eyes.

“Just a few minutes. Sweet Pea seemed to sleep well last night, just like her mama.” Olivia leaned over and pressed a kiss to Natalia’s forehead before disappearing into the bathroom.

Natalia got up and retrieved the robe from the end of the bed, pulling it around her to ward off the chill of the room. She wandered over to the crib and smiled down at her little girl.

“How are you, Sweet Pea?” Natalia asked her. The infant scrunched up her face, preparing for a cry. “That good, huh? Well, Mama’s going to get you all cleaned up and fed and then we’ll go get your big sister up.” Natalia grabbed the diaper bag and wash wipes from the stroller and got Francesca changed and dressed into a pink onesie and blue denim overalls, and then she sat back on the bed, leaned against the headboard and began to feed the girl.
Olivia emerged from the bathroom with a robe wrapped around her and a towel covering her wet hair. “Hey, is she all ready for the day?”

“Just about. Why don’t you go wake Emma and Jane and I’ll call room service for some breakfast.” Natalia had already grabbed the handset from the side table and started to dial.

“Sounds good to me. My usual and make sure the coffee is extra strong,” Olivia commented as she knocked on the door separating the two rooms. She waited for a moment before entering, not having heard anything on the other side of the door.

“Find out what Jane wants for breakfast.”

“Will do.” Olivia disappeared into the other room. Jane was easier to rouse from sleep and after a few exchanged words, the young woman headed into the bathroom, with some clothes and wash supplies. Olivia called out Jane’s breakfast request to Natalia through the open connecting door, before returning her attention to her daughter. Most of the time, Emma had a tendency towards Natalia’s chipper morning attitude, but today the young girl lay sprawled on the bed, arms and legs covering much of the double bed’s surface; the quilt in disarray.

“Hey, Jellybean. Time to get up, sweetie.”

“Mommy?” the girl’s tired voice responded without opening her eyes.

“That’s me. You’ve got a big day today,” Olivia said as she reached out to run her fingers through her daughter’s hair.

“I do?” Emma rolled over and sat up, suddenly energized.

Olivia smiled at her daughter’s quick wakefulness; she couldn’t do that without imbibing at least one cup of coffee. “Yep. Jane’s going to take you to the Museum of Science and Industry. There are some really neat things for you to see.”

“Are you and Natalia coming?”

“I don’t know. We have to check in with Natalia’s family and see if there’s anything we can do to help. And then I’ll know more about our schedule.”

“Can I see Leyla today, too?” Emma’s face brightened. Natalia’s sister reminded her a little of her big sister Ava.

“I don’t see why not. You like her, don’t you?” Olivia knew her daughter was trusting, but she also knew that the young girl was a pretty good judge of character.
Emma nodded vigorously. “She’s fun.” Emma paused. “Maybe she can come with us to the Museum.”

“I don’t know, Jellybean. I think she’ll probably be pretty busy with her family.”

“But we can ask?”

“We can ask. No guarantees though, Em,” Olivia noted.

“Okay.” Emma nodded and then bounded out of the tangle of sheets on the bed. Jane came out of the bathroom and headed over to the small desk in the room.

“Okay, kiddo,” Olivia extended her hand to her daughter. “Go get washed and dressed. Natalia’s ordered breakfast and it should be here soon.”

“Yes, Mommy,” Emma called out as she disappeared into the bathroom.

Olivia went out into the main part of the suite and saw that Natalia had dressed the infant before she sat down to feed her.

Natalia looked up at her partner, acknowledging her. “Breakfast will be up shortly. I also called Sister Anne to let her know I wouldn’t be able to be at the Mission this week. I completely forgot to do that yesterday morning but I didn’t want to leave her hanging.”

“How is she?”

“Good, but busy.” She looked over to her partner. “Do you get the feeling that she likes to antagonize Father Ray?” Natalia asked with a smile. She was pretty sure that Sister Anne had a few choice words for Father Ray before the Christening, which led to him donating the proceeds from a week’s monetary offering at the church to the Mission.

“I knew there was a reason I liked her.” Olivia grinned widely.

“Olivia,” Natalia chided slightly, but it lost its effect since she was also giggling at both her partner’s response and the situation.

“Hey, I’m just sayin’…” Olivia paused for a moment. “I have to say, Sister Anne is a really good listener. For a nun, she’s very non-traditional. I’m glad I’ve gotten to know her.”

“Me, too.” Natalia smiled as there was a knock at the door. She answered it and wheeled the room service cart into the room as she handed the porter a good tip.
“Jellybean, your breakfast is here,” Olivia called out to her daughter. She smiled as the girl burst into the room, mostly dressed, with a sneaker still in her right hand.

“Mommy, can you braid my hair?”

“Sure, Bean. I'll do it after your breakfast so the food doesn't get cold.” Olivia quickly poured the hot coffee from the carafe into three mugs for Natalia, Jane and herself. Emma had some orange juice to go with her breakfast. Everyone sat down at either the table or at the desk to eat, and then afterwards, they used Olivia's laptop to quickly browse the website for the museum. Emma got more and more excited as she looked at the different things she would see.

Natalia picked up her cell phone and called her parents’ home. On the third ring, the groggy voice of her sister answered.

“Hello?”

“Leyla, are Mama or Papa there?”

“I don’t think so. They were planning to head over to the funeral home first thing to get things arranged. What time is it?” Leyla asked groggily.

“Let me guess, you were sound asleep when they left.” Natalia grinned at her sister's response. “And it's 8:45am.”

“Yep. Are you always so cheery this early in the morning?”

“Yes, especially since I have two daughters who like to be up early.” Natalia's smile was very affectionate as she glanced over at Emma, then at Francesca, who was lying on a play blanket on the floor. The infant had had grabbed onto a toy ring and brought it to her mouth; she had been fussy lately as one of her teeth was pushing through her gums.

“More power to you.” Leyla paused for a minute. “Oh, Mama asked if you could come over later this morning. They've got to meet with the priest at 11am to go over the funeral Mass. She asked if you could also pick up some healthy snack stuff for the wake at the funeral home; I think she has the idea that I'd pick up chips and dip and pretzels or something.”

Natalia laughed. As Leyla continued talking, she realized that her sister had similar personality traits as Olivia. “Okay, see you later.” She disconnected the call and relayed the requests to Olivia. Then she dug into her breakfast before it got completely cold.
Olivia had already finished hers, and then got Emma’s hair braided while the girl sat on the footstool by the lounge chair. Then she started to pack up Francesca’s things and put them into the diaper bag in the stroller before picking up the baby and playing with her until the others finished. Once everyone was ready, they headed out and piled into Olivia’s car. Emma was talking a mile a minute about all the things she planned to check out. Olivia told her to make notes of what her favorite things were so that she could tell them all later.

Once Emma and Jane were dropped off at the museum, with the two intrepid museum-goers promising to call or text updates throughout the day, particularly regarding when they would be finished, the two women breathed deeply. They both knew it could be a strenuous day and they took a few moments to quietly enjoy each other’s company before continuing on.

Their first stop was at a local market where Natalia picked up a couple vegetable and fruit trays. She’d also gotten some freshly baked muffins. Olivia had gone off on her own to pick up a couple items. When she returned with a bag of potato chips, Natalia rolled her eyes.

“What?” At Natalia’s raised eyebrow, Olivia continued, “They’re for Leyla.”

“Uh huh,” Natalia responded with a smile. She knew, given half a chance, Olivia would be into the potato chips. At least the hotelier had gotten a brand of healthier chips, ones that allowed her to feel like she was snacking without undermining her health. They paid for their purchases and realized they still had some time to kill, so they headed towards Grant Park. They located the nearby access to the Grant Park North parking garage and got the car parked, then grabbed Francesca’s stroller from the trunk.

It was a reasonably mild late-April morning with only a slight breeze, so they’d packed their jackets into the stroller base and walked towards the lakefront. While both women were familiar with big cities, they’d both gotten used to the quieter life that Springfield afforded them. The wide spaces of Grant Park leading forward to the lake were bracketed by the skyscrapers and other buildings that lined South Michigan Avenue. When they arrived at the Buckingham Fountain, they found an empty park bench and sat down.
Olivia took Natalia’s hand as she realized the younger woman was distracted. “Hey, are you okay?”

The younger woman brought her attention back toward her partner. “I will be,” Natalia responded. “Thank you, Olivia.”

“Come here.” Olivia put an arm around her shoulders to draw her close. “What’s bothering you?”

Natalia laid her head on Olivia’s shoulder, and placed a hand on her partner’s lap. “I know I shouldn’t let my parents’ reactions to our relationship get to me, but it hurts.” She looked up at the hotelier and sighed forlornly. “You know, it took a while, but I could deal with the reactions in Springfield from many different people. So I don’t know why I’m having such a hard time dealing with this.”

“This is different, I know, sweetheart.” Olivia altered her position slightly so she could place a kiss on Natalia’s forehead, and then rested her own head against her partner’s. “A wise woman once told me that we have this strange loyalty to family, whether they deserve it or not. And as much as we don’t like to admit it, their opinions and comments have a powerful sway on our own.”

“A wise woman?” Natalia questioned, curiously.
“Doris,” Olivia chuckled as she mentioned her friend’s name, and then sobering up before she continued talking. “It was at a difficult time for both of us. It was last spring, and you and I were trying to figure out what we meant to each other. I was getting frustrated, mostly at myself. Doris and I went out for drinks and I made an asinine comment about her not telling Ashlee about her being gay. Even now, after she’s told her daughter and most of Springfield knows, her parents don’t know. She’d left home for university and never brought anyone home. She was, and still is to some degree, afraid to tell them.”

Olivia moved one of her hands up to caress Natalia’s face. “You know, I’m so proud of you for yesterday. That must have taken a lot of courage.”

“It did. But afterwards, as emotionally exhausting as it was, I could barely believe I had told them. It’s out there, now, and it’s a weight off my shoulders. And I’m not hiding how I feel about you any more.” Natalia ran her right hand up to cup Olivia’s cheek to draw her closer into a kiss.

When they broke from the kiss, they pressed their foreheads together, as they often did in affection. They sat together for a while, looking out over Lakeshore Drive onto the lake. Sailboats bobbed up and down in their moors or graced the lake’s light waves as their owners took advantage of the nice spring weather.

The quiet was broken with a chirp from Olivia’s Blackberry. When she retrieved it from her pants pocket, she noticed a text message from Jane: ‘JB having loads of fun - lot to tell later’.

Olivia sent back a quick text then looked at the time on her phone.

“Sweetheart, we need to get going, if we’re going to meet your parents,” Olivia said as she started to stand up, checking on Francesca as she did. The infant had fallen asleep on their walk through the park and was still out like a light.

Natalia sighed. “Okay. Let’s go. One of these days, I’ll bring you back here in the evening. It’s so pretty lit up in the dark.”

“It’s a date.” Olivia gave a quirky grin.

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Mrs. Rivera answered the door when Natalia and Olivia arrived - Francesca was perched upon Natalia’s hip while Olivia held the carrier. She invited them in and started to introduce them to the priest who stood upon their arrival.

“Natalia? Wow, you’ve grown up a lot,” the elderly priest interrupted. “How are you, dear?”
“Hi, Father Ramirez. I am - as good as can be expected. It’s good to see you.” Natalia fondly remembered the man who had presided over her Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation. She shook his hand. “Father, this is my partner, Olivia Spencer, and this cutie is our daughter, Francesca.”

Carmen Rivera stepped forward to interject, “What she means is –“

“I know exactly what she means, Carmen,” the old priest chided. “I’ve lived long enough to know that romantic love, in all its beauty, comes in many different forms.” Father Ramirez turned to Olivia and extended his hand. “It’s good to meet you, Ms. Spencer, despite the circumstances.”

“You, too, Father.” Olivia shook his hand.

The three women in the room were each slightly stunned for their own reasons: Mrs. Rivera, who was not used to being dismissed; Natalia, whose most recent experiences with the Catholic clergy had left her feeling a little jaded about the trust she placed in her priests; and Olivia, whose history with her mother’s brand of religious bigotry had left her with a distinct distrust of religion in general. Olivia fully respected and supported Natalia and so she had made the effort to honor her partner’s belief in something greater. To have not one, but two people of the Catholic clergy, Sister Anne and now Father Ramirez, be supportive of her relationship with Natalia had left her feeling a little off-kilter.

Father Ramirez took in the three expressions and moved forward. He gave Natalia a comforting glance before he continued speaking. “Now, I believe we should get down to the details of planning Cecelia’s funeral.” The Father sat down and took a sip of his now-lukewarm coffee. There was a pile of papers on the table along with an old, well-used Bible.

Over the course of the next hour, Natalia, her mother, and Father Ramirez went through some choices for the readings and the gospel and the liturgical songs for the funeral Mass. Olivia mostly listened to the proceedings while keeping an eye on Francesca, unless Natalia asked her for an opinion on something. When they finished, Natalia and her mother wished the old priest well and told him they would see him later.

When they returned to the living room, Olivia held out her hand to her partner. As Natalia grasped her hand, she looked up into the younger woman’s sad eyes and felt a strong wave of compassion. After a few moments, Natalia turned to her mother, who had sat down in one of the chairs.

“Mama, it’s getting late. Did you want me to make some lunch before we go over to the funeral home?”
“No,” the older woman responded abruptly. At Natalia’s questioning glance, she continued, “No. Thank you, Natalia, but I don’t know that I could stomach anything right now.”

“Mama, are you okay?”

“It’s just...everything seems unreal.” Carmen closed her eyes briefly. Despondently, she continued, “I knew she was sick and getting worse, but now she’s gone.”

“Nana’s at peace, Mama. She was ready to go.”

“I wasn’t. Ready for her to go, I mean.”

Remembering her sense of enormous loss when Gus died, Natalia felt wave of empathy for her mother. She walked over and laid a hand on the elder woman’s forearm. “We never really are when someone we love dies. Mama, she lived a good long life. She told me she was happy with her life, and that’s all that really matters in the end, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.” Carmen moved wearily over to the lounge chair and collapsed into it, leaving her daughter standing near her. She felt a headache starting and she pressed her forefinger and thumb against the upper bridge of her nose.

Olivia moved her hand from Natalia’s and placed it on the younger woman’s back, gently caressing. The brief period of quiet was broken when Francesca let out a cry of displeasure. Natalia leaned over to look at her young daughter and saw the girl’s fist up close to her face.

“Olivia, did she have her Advil this morning?” Natalia asked as she picked up Francesca and ran a finger along the gums of her mouth. In the planning and rushing around in the room that morning, she couldn’t remember having given the baby medication for her teething pain.

“Yes, I gave it to her while you were checking on something with Emma. Her gums are still swollen?”

“Yeah. Can you grab me her teething ring from her bag. I’ll give that to her while I get her changed.”

Olivia handed over the ring and the diaper supplies and Natalia went into the bathroom to change the baby. When the hotelier sat back on the couch, she pulled out her Blackberry to check to see if there were any messages from Jane. She smiled when she saw one, and then fired off a quick response.
“You really love her,” Carmen said, her voice flat and her expression unreadable.

“With everything that I am.”

The older woman sighed but didn’t say anything more. An uncomfortable silence seemed to fill the room and neither woman was sure how to break it. However, before it dragged on too long, Leyla came through the apartment door, her hands full of grocery bags. Olivia got up to help her, grateful for something to do other than be a specimen that Mrs. Rivera glanced at occasionally.

“Mama, where do you want these?” Leyla asked as she deposited the bags on the kitchen counter.

“Cold stuff in the fridge, everything else you can leave out. We’ll be taking it over to the funeral home in a little while. I’m going to go lie down for a bit.”

“Ooookay,” Leyla said, drawing the word out as her mother passed them heading down the hallway. She could feel the tension in the room. “What just happened?”

“In a nutshell? Father Ramirez came over to discuss the Mass for your grandmother. When we arrived, Natalia introduced me as her partner and then Francesca as our daughter.” Olivia smiled at that memory.

“Ohhh, I bet Mama loved that.” Leyla grinned in response.

“It gets better. Father Ramirez basically dismissed her by saying he knew exactly what Natalia meant by partner and about knowing love in all its forms.”

“Damn, I wish I’d been here to see that.” Leyla looked around the apartment. “Where is everyone?”

“Not sure about your father. He wasn’t here when we arrived. Natalia’s in the bathroom changing Francesca.”

“And Emma?” Leyla smiled. In a very short time, the girl had wormed her way into the young woman’s heart.

“She’s with her sitter, Jane. They went to the Museum of Science and Industry.”

“Your daughter’s adorable.” Leyla laughed and shook her head.

“What?” Olivia smiled as she asked, curiously interested in the younger woman’s perception of Emma.
“This may sound a little strange, I know. I was really young when Natalia left, but some of Emma’s mannerisms remind me of her. Natalia was usually quiet, a bookworm. She was very introspective; didn’t say a lot but she took everything in. She’d try to reassure me when Mama and Papa got into arguments, and there were plenty of those. She was fiercely protective of me, different though than Leo’s overbearing tendencies. Sometimes when it would get really loud, I would go and curl up with Talia in her bed.” Leyla smiled. “She’d read me stories.” The young woman bowed her head as tears filled her eyes. “I missed that so much after she left.”

“I’m sorry, Leyla,” Natalia spoke quietly. “I wish things had been different for you.”

Leyla started at her sister’s voice, having not seen her enter the room. “I know, Talia.”

Olivia looked at her partner and then at Leyla. Olivia had a bright smile on her face as she looked at her beloved. The three women sat down on the couch, with Francesca sitting on Natalia’s lap and entertaining them, as they regaled Leyla with stories of their family.

When Carmen came out of her room after her nap, she saw the three women nearly bent over with laughter, so great was their mirth. “Are you all ready to go?” she asked, annoyed that they seemed to be enjoying themselves even as she felt weighted down by the prospect of burying her mother.

Leyla stood up, with tears of laughter still rolling down her cheeks. “Just a minute and I’ll get the supplies to take over.

“We’ll help,” Natalia said as she placed Francesca in her carrier seat and lifted her up. Olivia grabbed Natalia’s purse, along with her own, and the market items they had bought earlier.

“Mama, why don’t you and I drive over separately; that way, if Natalia and Olivia have to go pick up Emma, they don’t need to worry about getting back here first.”

“Fine. Just let’s go. It’s getting late. I have to meet with the funeral home director and your aunts are going to be there.”

“Really?” Leyla asked sarcastically. “I know she was their mother as well, but Aunt Drea and Aunt Jo never helped you or Papa out when Nana was sick. They barely even visited her while she was here.”

“It wasn’t all their fault.” Carmen started to make excuses for her sisters’ lack of assistance but she couldn’t muster up the energy to do so.
“Yes, it was Mama. They could have made the effort. Instead they saddled you and Papa with all the medical bills and the full-time care. I don’t care if they liked Papa or not, you don’t do that to family.”

“We can talk about that later,” Carmen said firmly, effectively killing the discussion. If she had her way, it wouldn’t be brought up again.

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A few more messages had come from Jane and Emma as the day progressed, each one a little more excited. And each time, Olivia thought how nice it would be if she and Natalia could sneak out for at least a few hours and have fun with them, rather than stay in a parlour where everyone mourned the deceased. There were flowers everywhere and people she didn’t know. From Natalia’s posture and plastic smile, she could tell her partner didn’t know most of the people either. She was uncomfortable, and the way these unknown people pawed over their infant daughter did nothing to improve her mood.

“Go, get out of here,” Leyla came over ushered the two women and infant out of the room. They managed to escape into the hallway without being seen by Natalia’s mother.

“But Mama…” Natalia started.

“Mama can take care of herself. Go on. You look uncomfortable and bored to tears.” Leyla accompanied them to the front exit. “Go, and if Mama does ask, I’ll just tell her you’ve gone get Emma.” She smiled and then handed Olivia a sheet of paper with a number on it. “Oh, and text me later and get me the hell out of here, too. I would love a chance to play with my nieces.”

Olivia grinned. “Sure thing. An hour?”

“That might be a bit conspicuous.” Leyla smiled. “An hour and a half?”

“Got it.” Olivia laughed.

Natalia leaned over and gave her sister a hug. “See you later. Take care of Mama.”

“Will do. Now go on before she comes looking for you and the baby,” Leyla called over to them before she returned inside to the various relatives and family friends.

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The restaurant where Olivia, Natalia and Francesca had met up with Jane and Emma was already starting to bustle with the after-work/late afternoon/early evening crowd. By the
time they’d managed to score a booth and a high chair, Emma had already rattled through the things she’d seen in the Science of Storms exhibit. Giddily, she babbled on about the live science experiments in which she was allowed to participate. The girl was lit up with excitement and practically bouncing as she commented on this or that, or asked her mothers if they knew about this or that fact that she’d uncovered.

Her pleasure was infectious and soon everyone was laughing or giggling along with her. They were just being led to their table, when Olivia spoke.

“Hey Bean, how about you take a breath and get settled here. Why don’t you take a look at the menu and see what you’d like to have? Afterwards, you can tell us some more.” Olivia grinned at her daughter.

“May I have a chocolate milkshake, with sprinkles?” Emma’s eyes shone with hope as she questioned her mother.

“If they’ve got them, Em, sure.” Olivia was hard-pressed to spoil her excitement. She leaned over to whisper into the girl’s ear. “But at least order something a little healthy with your meal, or Natalia will have my hide.”

“Mommy, you’re silly.” Emma looked over the menu and spotted what she wanted: a bacon-cheeseburger with sweet potato fries and coleslaw.

“That’s a lot of food, Bean. You sure you can eat all of it?”

“I’m sure,” Emma answered. It was in the children’s section after all, Emma reasoned to herself.

“Okay. Besides, if you can’t finish your fries, I’ll have some.”

“Says who?” Natalia spoke quietly in Olivia’s ear, before blowing a breath along the side of her face, causing Olivia to lose her focus.

“That was so not fair,” Olivia pouted.

“I never claimed to play fair with you, did I?” Natalia grinned and winked. Actually, she would be thrilled if Olivia ate sweet potato fries. Much, much healthier. While they waited for their food, Natalia fed Francesca with one of the bottles she’d put into the change bag earlier and Emma continued to talk about the storms exhibit; her hands moving like the whirlwind she was explaining.

The duration of the meal was interspersed with comments and questions about other exhibits that Emma had seen. A few times Olivia or Natalia had to prompt the girl to take a
breath and eat some of her food before it got cold. It seemed to both women that the museum visit had been a huge hit. Supper was getting close to the end and Emma was contemplating something from the dessert menu, when Natalia put her hand on her tired daughter's arm.

“Emma, sweetie,” Natalia spoke gently. “Why don’t we wait for a while until later to have dessert, so we can get back to the hotel sooner? My sister’s coming over a little later, and she was looking forward to seeing you and Sweet Pea again.”

“Leyla’s coming over? Cool!” The young girl turned to Jane. “I think you’ll like her. She’s fun! I can tell her all about the museum.” Emma beamed.

“I’m sure she would love that, Jellybean.” Natalia smiled affectionately at her.

Olivia had motioned for the bill to be delivered and she and Natalia packed up their daughters' things. It was quickly paid and they left for the hotel. By the time they’d returned to the suite, Olivia texted Leyla, figuring it was a good time for her to make her excuses and get away from the funeral home for the evening. Emma got into her pajamas while Natalia got Francesca cleaned up and ready for bed. When Emma returned to the main area of the suite she asked Olivia for the use of her laptop.

“I want to write down everything I saw today, like a journal.”

“That’s a great idea, Em,” Jane told her. “So you don’t forget anything. Remember we have the brochures for the exhibits we saw today, in case you want to add some information.”

“Maybe I can bring it to class, too.”

“I think your teacher would like that, Jellybean,” Olivia replied, as she opened up her laptop for her daughter.

“Oh, Mommy and Ma? I forgot to tell you the best part of the museum. I got to see a Fairy Castle! You could go see so many rooms with all the mini-,” Emma stopped, unsure of the pronunciation of the word.

“Miniatures,” Jane provided.

The girl nodded and smiled. “Yes, miniatures of lots of things, statues, paintings, tables. I loved it so much. It was a little like Daddy’s house with the big rooms, but much smaller. Or maybe like from a book of princesses.” Emma sat on the edge of her seat, kicking her legs back and forth under the table, as she started to type her adventures.
“You go for it, Emma,” Olivia told her daughter as she sat back on the bed and pulled out her Blackberry, checking her messages. Something unexpected caught her attention and she excused herself to go into the other room. Once there, she quickly dialled Doris’s number. After a few rings, the Mayor answered.

“What the hell happened?” Olivia asked her bluntly. Thoughts of Edmund or one of his goons trying to get to her family scared the daylights out of her. She certainly wasn’t religious, but at that moment, she offered a quick prayer of thanks that Natalia and their girls were with her.

“I don’t know all the details yet. I’ve been waiting for Anna to get back to me, but I don’t know if she’s stalling or just really busy out there.” Doris’s voice hesitated over the phone. “All I know is that someone damaged some of the property in front of the farmhouse. I was in the police station when the call came in. The officer who took the call told me that according to the officers on the scene, it didn’t look like anyone got inside. Look, I’m just pulling up to the house now and Frank and Remy are here. Give me a minute—”

“Doris!” Olivia’s voice could be heard through Doris’s cell phone that she had dropped from her ear. Olivia growled in frustration when her friend didn’t answer. She could hear the rustle of movement on the other end of the phone, so she knew Doris hadn’t hung up on her, but being ignored was almost worse. And sadly, all she could do was sit and wait.

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“Frank, what’s going on?” Doris asked in her no-nonsense voice, as she exited her car and sidled up the police chief.

Frank got defensive. The last thing he wanted on his crime scene was an interfering Mayor. “Doris, what are you doing here? This is a crime scene.”

“It’s also the home of two of my closest friends. I came to check on the house as soon as I heard.”

“What, do you have a scanner in the car?” Frank asked, derisively.

“No, but it’s an idea.” Doris looked at the man with a smug smile, in a battle of wills. She noted with some satisfaction that Frank was the one to look away first. “I was at the police station when the call came in. Now, what happened and where’s Detective Li?” Though on a personal level, Doris found it difficult to trust the younger detective, she recognized that the woman had been instrumental in cleaning up some of the old case files of the Springfield Police Department.

“She’s on the back side of the house, checking to see if there’s any way the perp or perps got inside from there,” Frank responded dismissively, hoping she’d go away.
Doris, however, wasn’t going anywhere until she got some more answers about what happened. “Who called it in?

Frank debated telling her, given that it was a current investigation, but relented, given that she was the mayor and would find out sooner or later and it was probably better for him that it was sooner. “One of the patrol officers made a swing up by the house on routine rounds and saw something in the shadows. When he came up to the house, he noticed the barbeque had been turned over and some pots were broken. He stated he could have sworn he saw someone make a run for the tree line in the headlights, but he couldn’t be sure. We’re sending someone out into the woods to check.”

“I want to know the minute you get the information,” Doris insisted.

“Fine. I need to get going.” Frank turned around and headed back to Remy, and then both of them moved to the side of the house. A patrol officer came out from behind the bushes on the tree line, pulling out a pen and notepad from her uniform pockets before changing her direction to intersect with Frank and Remy. Doris watched the young woman being questioned, and then saw Frank nod.

“What?” Doris called out, as she made her way across the lawn to meet them.

“Officer Banks confirms the first officer’s statement of someone being here when he arrived. She saw fresh foot prints in the dirt. We’re going to get a crime scene team out here to investigate.”

Anna came around the house to meet up with Frank and Remy, and was surprised to see Doris there. She paused for a minute before turning her focus to Frank. “Chief, no signs of any break-in. Seems like the damage was limited to the outside of the house but the crime scene investigators will be able to tell us definitively what happened. My guess is that this was done mostly to scare them.”

“It scares me,” Doris spoke up. “Do you think they’ll try again?”

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “I’m sure you’ve heard about the recent rash of vandalism. It’s not the first time Olivia’s been the victim of vandalism; as you may remember, her hotel was hit with graffiti damage a few months back. Do you think someone could be targeting her?”

“I doubt it’s specifically targeting her as there have been several other properties damaged to which she has no connection,” Anna replied. “I’ve got to get back to work. Chief, I suggest that until Ms. Spencer and Ms. Rivera get home, we step up patrols around the house.”
“I’ve got a better idea,” Doris interrupted. “They’re supposed to be gone a couple more days. I can stay here overnight; I could come after work and with extra patrols in the daytime, we can all keep an eye on the place. That could work. Maybe with an extra vehicle in the driveway, whoever it was will think twice about coming back.” She sighed, realizing as she spoke, the idea was ill-thought out. She really didn’t want to be out at the isolated house on her own, especially since someone had just vandalized it.

“Sorry. It’s still a crime scene and there will be investigators around,” Frank said, and then huffed. “You’d think with all the money Olivia has, she could hire some big security company to watch the place twenty-four seven.” Frank turned and head to his unmarked patrol car.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Anna said. “I’ll set up the patrols on a regular watch.” The detective paused as she contemplated Frank’s comment about security system being set up. She realized any suggestion she presented to Olivia would not go over well, given their mutual distrust. Besides, she reckoned, Olivia could get any home security system information she needed from her hotel security team. She mentioned her thoughts on security to Doris.

“Thank you. I’ll tell her,” the Mayor responded. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other with unease. “You’ll let me know what happens with the investigation? Olivia should really know.”

“I’ll copy you on the reports.” Anna raised her hand to scratch her forehead, and scrunched her face at the request. It put her in awkward position. It wasn’t strictly procedure, but she knew that Doris and Olivia were good friends.

“Thanks. I should go.” Doris turned around and headed to her car and realized she still had her cell phone in her hand. She picked it up and saw that the call had been disconnected, but there was a text message showing: What’s going on? She quickly dialled Olivia’s cell.

“Olivia, Olivia, stop for a second,” Doris interrupted the other woman’s diatribe on Frank’s perceived incompetence. “Look, it doesn’t appear to be a break-in of the house, just minor property damage. There’s nothing written on the house, like there was at the hotel. Olivia, I think you should check with your hotel’s security to see if they can get a security system set up for the house.”

“I’ll give them a call shortly. Thanks.”

Doris leaned back against her car and looked over the property. “Anna’s going to copy me on her report of the vandalism and the crime scene investigator’s report.”
“Thank you, Doris. You’re a good friend. I owe you.” Olivia paused, realizing the hurt the mayor had recently suffered learning of the detective’s actual identity and her past history with Edmund’s family. “How did the conversation go with Anna?”

“Stilted. And a little weird.” Doris sighed, blowing out a heavy breath of air.

“Sorry. Now, I need to go break the news to Natalia.”

“How is she?”

“As good as can be expected.” The hotelier ran a hand through her hair, as she exhaled in frustration. “She had a rough time with her parents last night, so she’s been feeling down about that on top of her grandmother’s death.” Olivia paced back and forth her daughter’s hotel room.

“Oh, God, Olivia. Tell her I’m thinking about her. Is there anything I can do?”

“Thanks. Just look after the house, and I’ll talk to you later.”

“Will do. Bye.” Doris disconnected her phone and got in the car and started to drive. Before she realized it, she was parked in front of Company. She entered and plopped herself down on a bar stool. She didn’t even notice when Blake came over and put a cup of steaming coffee in front of her.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Blake asked.

“Sorry, what?” Doris responded, still thinking about Olivia’s property damage and Natalia’s grandmother’s death.

“I said, ‘penny for your thoughts’. You’re distracted. What happened?” Blake sat down beside Doris on another stool.

“Sorry, thanks,” Doris said, nodding her head to the mug of coffee. Turning her focus to the red-head, she addressed her question. “A lot. I just got back from the farmhouse. Someone vandalized the property; knocked over the barbeque, broke some pots. Not sure of the full extent of the damage but I should know more later on this evening. Frank’s pretty sure no one broke into the house.” Doris idly toyed with the bracelet on her arm.

“Oh God. Thank heavens they’re out of town and safe.” Blake reached out a hand and covered Doris’s fidgeting hand. “Do they know yet?”

“Yeah, I was just talking with Olivia. I’ll update her as I have more news. Anna’s going to increase the patrols, and have them check on the property overnight.” Her restlessness
seemed to ease as she’d been talking with Blake; Doris lowered her shoulders in relief at letting her friend know what happened. She blew out a breath, and then she brought the cup of coffee to her lips, wincing at the heat from the liquid as she took a sip.

“Good.” Blake stood up and rested a hand on the other woman’s shoulder before moving around the bar.

“Oh, I’m sure they’d want you to know that Natalia’s grandmother passed away early yesterday evening. There was a wake for her today and the funeral is tomorrow. From what Olivia said, Natalia had a hard time with her parents, too. I don’t know for sure, but I think she may have told them about their relationship. It’s kind of hard to avoid showing the kind of love they have for each other.” Doris sighed wistfully, wondering if she’d ever have someone to love her like that.

“Damn. I wish I could give them both a hug right now,” Blake said, solemnly.

“So do I. So do I.” Doris said as she dropped her head. “I should get home. Call Ashlee.” The mayor was about to stand up when she felt Blake’s hand on her arm.

“Stay. You have Ashlee’s number on your cell phone, right?” At Doris’s nod, Blake continued, “Call her from here. Stay for supper. My treat. Lynn gets back from her break soon, and then we can take one of the booths.”

Doris was about to protest when she decided what the hell, she could use the company.

“Okay, but if we're dining on your tab, we're drinking on mine.”

“Okay!” Blake agreed. “I’ll go make sure there’s a booth free and put a reserved sign on it. You’re welcome to sit up here until Lynn comes back.” Blake looked at Doris’s partially empty and probably lukewarm coffee. “Here, I’ll replace your coffee.”

Once Blake was able to get away from the counter, they settled into the booth for dinner and drinks. The two women sat talking about this and that through the evening and through the better part of a large bottle of Shiraz.

Olivia re-entered the main area of the suite. The room was buzzing with Emma’s chatter. The hotelier glanced at Natalia, who had a questioning look on her face, clearly curious about why she’d disappeared. She quickly mouthed the word ‘later’ to her and Natalia nodded. Olivia then looked at her exuberant daughter.

“Hey, Jellybean, how would you like it if I bought us a family membership for the museum?”
“Really, Mommy?” Emma lit up with a huge smile; she was almost bouncing in her chair.

“Well, I’m sure you didn’t get a chance to explore everything in just one day. It’s only a few hours away, and I’m sure we’ll be making more trips to the city for business.”

“That’s true,” Natalia added. “And then we can all go. When Rafe was a little boy, and the museums had free visit days, I would take him and he always had so much fun.”

“Maybe Leyla can come, too?” Emma asked curiously.

“You can ask her when she gets here, Em. She should be here soon.” Natalia stood up and laid a sleepy Francesca in the crib. “Emma, is your outfit for the funeral hung up? We’ll need to have it ready for the morning.”

“Yes, Ma. The skirt and blouse are hanging up.”

Natalia looked over at Emma and good see that the girl’s energy level was starting to fade. “Good. How’s your journal coming?”

“Almost done for today,” Emma said, trying to stifle a yawn.

“Do you have your homework with you?” Emma nodded her head and got her schoolbooks out of her backpack. For the next little while as they waited for Leyla to arrive, Natalia and Emma went over Emma’s spelling homework.

When she heard a knock, Emma raced over to the door. She was about to open it when she remembered her mother’s recent warnings about not opening doors without knowing who was on the other side. “Who is it?”

“It’s Leyla, Jellybean.”

Emma opened the door to invite Natalia’s sister into the room. “Hi, how are you?” she asked with a big smile.

“Good. You?” Leyla asked.

“Jane and I went to the Museum of Science. I had so much fun!”

“I bet. It’s a great place.” Leyla smiled at her niece and then looked over at Jane and extended her hand in a greeting. “Hi, I’m Leyla Rivera. Emma was telling me about you yesterday.”
Jane smiled as she took the offered hand, shook it, and introduced herself. Her employers were quite accommodating to her needs as a caretaker for their daughters, and the girls were adorable though sometimes a handful, but sometimes she felt like she didn’t have much time to herself. Finally, she had someone close to her own age nearby to talk with once Emma and Francesca were settled.

Emma looked from Jane over to Leyla, as she still wanted to tell Natalia’s sister about her day’s adventures and that she couldn’t possibly see everything in just one day. “Mommy said she’s going to get a family membership so we can go lots of times.” Emma smiled tiredly.

“And you look like you’re going to fall asleep any moment,” Olivia commented as she looked at her daughter, who was trying not to yawn again. “I’m sure if you asked nicely, Jane and Leyla would read you a story.” Olivia turned towards Jane. “Natalia and I are going to go out for a little while.”

“Okay. That’s not a problem, Ms. Spencer.”

“Emma’s bedtime is by nine o’clock unless she’s asleep before then. Francesca should be good for now. If you find her gums are bothering her, there’s some teething tablets in her change bag. If you need us for anything, you’ve got our cell numbers.”

“Got it.”

Olivia looked to Leyla, with an apologetic look. “Hey, sorry for ditching you, but we won’t be gone too long, just need a little air.” She directed her attention to her daughter. “Hey, Jellybean, come give us a goodnight kiss.”

Emma quickly went over and gave each of her mommies a hug and kiss before returning to the bed, jumping up on it to retrieve one of her books she’d left there earlier.

Olivia and Natalia smiled at their daughter’s actions and then they got their purses and headed out to the foyer.

“Where are we going, Olivia?”

“How about we go back to the fountain by the lake? It’s not quite a date, but I need to walk for a bit.” Olivia was restless after the news from Doris and she needed to burn off some energy.

“What’s wrong?”
Olivia sighed. “Can’t we just wait until we get there?”

“Olivia, what’s got you so upset?” Natalia pressed, as she stopped her partner in her tracks.

Olivia fidgeted where she stood. “Look, can I tell you while we walk? I just...I just need to move.”

Natalia nodded, knowing her partner’s tendency when she got upset. “Okay. Let’s go.” The two women left the hotel and turned right on Stetson Avenue. They walked in silence for several minutes.

“Remember when I left the room after checking my messages?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“It was Doris.” Olivia bit down on her lip. “Natalia, she called to let me know there were police at the farmhouse.”

“Police, why?”

Olivia stopped and turned to face her partner, the fingers of her left hand inadvertently tapping her chest. “Somebody vandalized the house. As far as Doris knows from what she got from Frank, the perpetrator didn’t get inside, just did some damage outside. They’ve got a team investigating. Doris said she’d let us know anything as soon as she does.”

“But you want to go back,” Natalia spoke matter-of-factly, understanding her partner’s worries.

“I don’t know. I want to be here for you, Natalia for as long as you need to stay in Chicago. You are my family.” Olivia looked down at the ground and moved her foot over a loose pebble, before returning her gaze to her partner. “And I’m glad we weren’t home.” The hotelier pulled Natalia into a hug. “I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you or the girls. But the farmhouse is our home. I want to be there, too, and know what’s going on.”

“I know, love. And you will. Besides, the funeral is tomorrow morning. After that, I won’t have any reason to stay here. I’ve done my duty to my parents and there’s nothing more I can help with. I’d be fine if we got on the road and drove home immediately after the funeral.” Natalia started to slowly rub one of her hands along her partner’s spine and she felt the other woman melt into her touch. “I’m sure we probably wouldn’t be able to stay at the house tonight anyway, if the police are still investigating.”
Olivia pulled away and started to pace as she thought about the invasion; the perpetrator may not have gotten in the house, but he had invaded her sense of security. “Probably not, but I still don’t like the fact that someone tried to destroy our home. Fuck!”

Natalia stepped into her partner’s path and gently laid a hand on the woman’s forearm. “Olivia, look. You said Doris was going to let us know what’s going on. Why don’t we just wait and see what they find out.”

“I don’t like waiting.” Olivia pouted.

“Oh, trust me, I know that.” Natalia smiled.

Olivia returned her smile. She knew there was nothing more they could do for now except await the police report and if she were in the way, it would probably only antagonize the police and delay the process. Besides, Olivia reckoned with a wry grin, Doris would enjoy being a pain in Frank’s ass just as much as she would. “Come on, let’s walk.”

The two women stayed close to each other as they headed south along N. Michigan Avenue to Grant Park and the Buckingham Fountain. Close to their destination, they stopped at a food vendor and picked up a medium tray of French fries to share. Olivia pocketed a couple packets of ketchup and they headed to a park bench as they watched the lamps around the fountain turn color, and the lights from the buildings beyond illuminate the night sky. They sat in relative quiet as they enjoyed the fries and the scenery around them.

Natalia rested her head on Olivia’s shoulder. “I know it’s not quite the date night we’d had in mind when I suggested this, but,—”

“No buts, Natalia.” Olivia paused as she turned slightly to face the younger woman, cupping her face as she did so. “We’re here, together. Our girls are safe. This is beautiful.”

“Thank you…for being here with me, with my family. It can’t have been easy.”

“I didn’t expect that it would be. Given how many years had passed and how much hurt there’d been, there was no way for it to be easy for anyone.”

“One bright spot, though, is Leyla.” Natalia smiled as she thought of her sister.

“Emma really likes her. She’s a pretty good judge of character,” Olivia grinned.

“Yes, she is. Like mother, like daughter.” Natalia smiled as she looked at Olivia. “Now, if you’re ready, we should probably head back to the hotel.”
“I’m a little beat. Let’s grab a taxi back.” They stood and made their way to South Columbus Drive, threw away their trash, and hailed a taxi, huddling close in the cool evening air.

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ACT 5

The next morning was busy as everyone got ready for the funeral. Olivia got Emma up and shepherded her sleepy daughter into the bathroom and started the bath. She stepped back into the room and laid out Emma’s clothes on the bed and then headed into the main suite where Natalia was feeding Francesca.

“Did you check to see if there were any messages from Doris?” Natalia asked, as Olivia had taken her Blackberry when she went in to get Emma.

“Not yet. Doing that now,” Olivia responded as she dug her cell out of her pantsuit pocket. “I wanted to wait until I was out of Emma’s earshot. She doesn’t need to know about this just yet.” She waited as the messages downloaded into her email program.

“Anything?”

“Definitely no access inside the house.” Olivia breathed a sigh of relief. “Police reports confirm the damage was only to outside property. At any rate, I called my security people last night. They’re going to get a security system set up for the house once the police are finished. I’ll talk with them later today to get an update.”

Pensive, Natalia paused as she’d remembered reading about other similar incidents in the newspaper before she looked at her partner. “Olivia, do you think this incident is at all related to the hotel being vandalized?”

“I don’t know. It could be. Doris mentioned something about there being a string of vandalisms in the town.”

“It just seems more than a little coincidence,” Natalia asked, concerned that maybe both incidents could be related and worried that they may be in danger. “Do you think they’re targeting you?”

“I’d like to know that myself. Doris said there was nothing written on the house, like there was on the hotel, thankfully. I really don’t want Emma seeing that.” Olivia shivered, remembering her own visceral reaction on seeing the homophobic slurs painted onto her hotel.

“Do they have any idea who’s behind these attacks?”
“Doris didn’t say. I don’t know if she has any information about that. The police are still collecting evidence, so I’m sure she’ll find out sooner or later. I’m betting on sooner, if she keeps hounding Frank about it.”

Natalia lifted Francesca to get the girl to burp. Once done, she handed the infant over to Olivia with a request to get the child dressed so that she could go take a shower.

Olivia checked on Emma after she’d gotten Francesca dressed and left her playing on the floor with Jane looking after her. The hotelier braided her daughter’s hair as Emma asked her a bunch of questions about Natalia’s family and about the funeral; particularly whether it would be different than Alan’s funeral. Olivia answered her questions as best she could and then kept her busy by reading to her. Once everyone was ready, and had packed up all their belongings to be ready to leave after the funeral, they piled out of the hotel room, pulling luggage behind them. They planned to drop Jane off at a bookstore she wanted to check out since there was no need for her to go to the funeral with them.

Our Lady of the Angels parish, where the funeral was to be held, was a moderately large church, with two aisles between three rows of pews, leading to the altar in front. Natalia’s family had gathered there speaking with Fr. Ramirez; her mother and her sister were visibly upset yet Olivia was impressed with their dignity and composure. She and Natalia and Emma advanced forward, Natalia carrying Francesca and they sat in the pew alongside Natalia’s sister and parents.

Despite the sadness, the ceremony was beautiful. Pall bearers wheeled up the plain, shroud draped casket from the rear of the church, giving everyone attending a chance to say a silent goodbye to the beloved woman. Through Father Ramirez’s homily, Olivia learned more about the woman who’d passed away; her bright spirit and her innate tendency to look out for those in need, her sense of humor and her humility. Olivia’s hand never left her partner’s except when Natalia went up for Communion. Once again, they locked hands after Natalia’s prayers, which caused a few glances their way from other, nearby parishioners, as well as friends of the family, but mostly the show of affection was ignored.

As the ceremony drew to a close, Father Ramirez anointed the casket with incense and then said a prayer before it was led out the side exit to a waiting hearse. Following behind, Natalia and the rest of the Rivera family moved to the foyer, to exchange brief words of comfort with the priest.

“Mama,” Natalia addressed her mother when Father Ramirez left. “Olivia, the girls, and I need to leave right after the burial ceremony. We need to get home.”

“Why are you leaving again?” Mrs. Rivera asked her suddenly.
Olivia was quite sure that the unspoken words of ‘with her’ were not far from the older woman’s lips, but she didn’t press the issue.

Natalia was taken aback by her mother’s brusque attitude. “Because Springfield is our home,” she responded. “And we have things to take care of, as well as a long drive ahead of us.” Natalia saw no reason to mention that their home had been vandalized because she was sure that her parents would use that to press her to return to Chicago.

“Chicago is your home, Natalia,” Hector spoke up.

“Not for a while, Papa. It hasn’t felt like home for a long time. My home is with Olivia and our children.”

“Why must you say such things in a house of God?” he asked, in a near-whisper.

“Why not, Papa? God is about love. We love each other.” Natalia paused as she held Francesca a little closer to her. “I’m not ashamed of that. I came here to honour Abuela Hernández’s life. She had no problem with my family.” Natalia winced, knowing that her words were blunter than she’d intended, but she was tired of defending her relationship with Olivia to others. Without another word, she strode past both her parents, and Leyla, and headed to the car with Olivia and Emma in tow. Natalia had just gotten Francesca into the car seat when she heard her sister calling out to her.

“Natalia, look. Let me work on them. It was kind of sudden for them to meet your new family. I’m not promising anything, but if they want to see their grandchildren, to get to know you again, then they’re going to have to learn to adapt.” Leyla smiled brightly. “Besides, Mama loves little kids, and yours are just adorable.”

“Thank you.” Natalia sighed. “I’m so glad I’ve gotten to know you again. You should come to Springfield sometime, soon. You’re more than welcome.”

“I might just have to do that. I’ll see you at the cemetery.”

“Thanks.” Natalia climbed into the car after giving her sister a hug. She gave Olivia the directions to the graveyard and they dove off.

The burial service was short with only family attending: Natalia’s parents, aunts and uncles and a few cousins, some of whom she didn’t recognize. When it ended, Natalia exchanged a few quick, bitter words with her parents and then with Leyla, giving her sister their address in Springfield and their home number.

When Natalia returned to the car she breathed out a sigh of relief. “As much as I loved my grandmother, I am really glad this is over. Does that make me sound like a bad person?”
Olivia turned around in the driver's seat to face her partner. "No, sweetheart, it just makes you human. These past few days have been exhausting, emotionally and physically. You're allowed to grieve however you like."

"Kiss me."

"That's not what I was expecting." Olivia raised her hand to cup Natalia's face.

"Just kiss me, Olivia." Natalia turned sideways and met Olivia's mouth as they kissed.

They remained locked in an awkward embrace for a few moments until Olivia reluctantly pulled away. "Mm, as much as I would like to continue this now, it's not exactly the best place."

"Sorry." Natalia smiled shyly.

"Don't ever apologize for wanting to kiss me." Olivia grinned cheekily, and then continued with her voice lowered huskily, "but perhaps we can pick up this conversation when we get home tonight."

"Oh, I'll hold you to that."

Olivia pulled out her Blackberry. "Can you call Doris? Tell her we should be back around 5. We just need to pick up Jane and then we'll be on the road."

Olivia pulled out of the parking lot and set off down the road while Natalia called and relayed the message.

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"What did she say?" Blake turned to Doris as they pulled up to the farmhouse. They had new flower pots and yard supplies to replace what had been damaged. As she out the window, she noticed Bill and Shayne getting the last section of the front fence upright where it had been pulled down.

"Just when they'd be home. We've got a few hours to get things set up."

"Why didn't you say anything about this?" Blake waved her hand towards the work being done around the yard.

"It's a surprise," Doris started as she exited the car and headed up to the farmhouse patio. "Besides, I don't think that they've told Emma about the incident yet, so no reason to
expand on things in a way that would lead to a bunch of questions. I sent Olivia an email earlier about the investigators being out here much of last night and the better part of this morning, and I’d told her that I’d supervise the installation of the security system.”

“I think they’ll like it. When are Phillip, Beth, Buzz and Lillian coming?”

“In about an hour or so. Phillip and Buzz are bringing up the new barbeque. Let’s get moving. There’s lots of stuff to do.”

Blake grabbed a bag of soil from the trunk of Doris’s car and brought it up to where Doris had put the pots, and then returned to the car to get the flat of annuals. “You know, I never pictured you getting your hands dirty like this,” Blake said with a smile as she looked over at the mayor.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.” Doris partially filled one of the large pots with soil and some plant food. “I happen to find gardening relaxing.” At Blake’s raised eyebrow, she continued, “Now, if you’re going to help, pass me those geraniums.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They had just finished four large pots when Blake heard the gravel of the driveway being stirred by Phillip’s SUV. Buzz, Lillian and Beth piled out of the vehicle and headed up to the patio while Phillip went around to the rear hatch.

“Bill, Shayne, get over here and help an old man get this big box out of the back.” The two younger men arrived and unloaded the box with the barbeque out of the vehicle, taking it up to the patio steps. They got the box opened and the parts removed trying to figure out how to put it together, disagreeing on the directions. Finally, Lillian took pity on the men and picked up the instruction booklet.

“Okay boys, it goes like this.” She read the instructions out slowly as they followed along, putting the pieces together.

“We’re going to pay for this later, aren’t we?” Bill asked Shayne as he followed Lillian’s instructions for the side extension panels.

“Oh, yeah,” Shayne replied. Phillip and Buzz stood back with Lillian and chuckled.

“What’s the word from the police department on the damage done to the property?” Beth asked Doris.
Doris sighed. "Still unsolved, but going into the folder with the other acts of vandalism. I'm hoping that they'll get some leads soon, so we can see if they're definitely random attacks or if there's a pattern in there."

“I hope so, for everyone's sake. This has gone on long enough. Does someone have to get hurt before it's taken seriously?” Blake asked.

“I sincerely hope not,” Doris said. “At any rate, I'll keep checking with Frank. There hasn't been any escalation beyond property damage yet. I want to keep it that way. At least Olivia and Natalia have got a security system set up now, for interior and exterior, so it will help protect them at home.”

A few more of Springfield's citizens turned up throughout the afternoon. Frank showed up with Remy after work; Lizzie brought Sarah with her; Rick and Mindy brought enough food and drink to feed an army, and soon, the new barbeque would be put to good use.

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When Olivia drove up to the farmhouse she noticed the parade of cars parked along the driveway and the lawn.

“Mommy, what's going on?” Emma asked as she looked over and spotted people gathered on the patio.

“I don't know, Jellybean.” Olivia turned to Natalia. “Did we forget we were throwing a party or something?”

“I don't think so.” When Olivia put the car into park, everyone piled out, and they all headed up to the patio.

“Ma, how come there's a different barbeque, and there's a bow on it? That's weird.”

Natalia sighed for a moment. There was no other way to answer it than to tell the truth about what happened; Emma was bound to hear from the other adults around about the vandalism and Natalia wanted the girl to hear it from them first. She didn't want to scare Emma, but she deserved to know the truth. She kneeled down near in front of her daughter and looked at her directly. “Em, when we were away, there was somebody who caused some damage to our property, and they broke some things.”

“Why would someone do that?” Emma asked, with a frown on her face.

“I don't know. But I bet Uncle Frank will find out and the bad people will be punished.”
“I hope so. I don’t want anything to happen to you or Mommy or Francesca.”

“Neither do I, Bean. Neither do I.” Natalia enveloped the girl in her arms and held her snugly for a moment before letting her go and picking up Francesca’s carrier seat.

The barbeque is not all that’s new, Olivia thought as she looked around the front of the house. She pointed at all the new pots and flowers. “What is all this?” Olivia asked Doris.

Doris stepped forward and gave Olivia a hug. “It’s a gift.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Olivia was a little stunned, though she realized she probably shouldn’t be, since many of the same people had helped when she and Emma moved into the farmhouse the previous fall. The past couple years had shown her that she really did have friends who cared about her well-being; though she was quite sure that was Natalia’s influence on her and on others. Olivia knew her partner brought out the best in her.

“Thank you; always works,” Doris quipped with a smile.

“Thank you, so much.” Olivia looked over at the crowd that had gathered.

Buzz and Blake approached Natalia first, with Blake pulling the slightly stunned woman into a hug. “I’m sorry to hear about your grandmother’s passing. I wish we could have done more.”

“Thank you.”

“I was at Company with Doris when Olivia called her. She mentioned the difficult time you had with your parents.” Blake pulled back from the hug. “Doris and I figured you could use your friends around you for a little while.”

“I can’t tell you how much this means to me.” Natalia was near tears.

“Come here and give an old man a hug,” Buzz said in a gruff voice. As Natalia moved into his arms, he passed on his sentiments about her grandmother’s death.

Olivia looked on fondly as Buzz hugged her partner; he was very much a father figure in her life and she appreciated the support he had given Natalia since she’d arrived in town.

On the north border of the woods, a man in dark clothes watched the proceedings, hidden and unnoticeable in the shadows of the trees. He stepped back into the tree-line and retreated. You got lucky this time, Spencer. But next time, maybe not…

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As the evening passed, many of the attendees gave the women warm hugs or kind words, along with plenty of gossip about the goings-on around town. Emma’s bedtime arrived, causing Olivia and Natalia to bid their guests thanks and farewell. Olivia took Emma upstairs to help her get ready for bed and to spend some time alone with her, while Natalia took Francesca for her last feeding before bed.

Once Francesca was fed and sleeping in her crib, Natalia returned to her bedroom, sat down on the bed, and picked up the phone to check the messages. There were a couple from local businesses to get their support with sales pitches, one from Leyla which made her smile, and the final one was from Rafe.

“Hi, Ma, it’s Rafe. What’s wrong? I was out on field exercises and I just got the message about you going away for a family emergency. Is it Francesca or Olivia and Emma? The Chief wasn’t specific. Please, call me back. I’ll try your cell phone if you don’t get this immediately.”

Natalia could hear the worry in his voice. She knew it was getting late. She checked her cell phone and there weren’t any messages from him, so she dialled the number of his base. After several minutes of calls being re-routed she finally got hold of her son. She calmed him down first by reassuring him that nothing had happened with her immediate family, and then explained that she’d been called to Chicago for her grandmother’s death. She could hear the hurt in his voice when he told her that he wished he could have been there for her, but he was glad that Olivia could take care of her. They exchanged goodbyes after assurances that they would keep in touch more often. Natalia hung up the phone and rested her head against the pillow and sighed deeply.

She looked up and smiled when Olivia entered their bedroom, walked over, and flopped herself down on the bed. “You look as tired as I feel.”

Olivia nodded, not wanting to move a muscle. But she had a message to pass on to her partner, “Emma wanted you to come in so she could say good night to you.”

Natalia smiled and managed to push herself off the pillow. “Stay and rest. I’ll be back as soon as Emma’s settled.” A wave of Olivia’s hand was the only response and she chuckled as she walked over to the door and headed down the hallway.

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“Ma, can you read me a story?”

“Which book do you want? Alice in Wonderland or The Velveteen Rabbit?”
“What about the one you said your abuela read to you, about princesses and fairy tales?”

“Okay. I’ll have to get the book from my suitcase. Leyla found it for me when I was home.” Natalia left and quickly found and picked up her copy of *La Princesa y El Campesino* and returned to Emma’s bedside. “Sweetie, this is all in Spanish, are you sure?”

“Yes, Ma.”

“Okay then. Let’s get you all tucked back in.” Natalia leaned back against the headboard, with Emma curled up at her side, and opened the book, and began to read.

“*Un precioso día, como nunca antes había sido, con preciosas mariposas revoloteando de un lado a otro y un precioso y enorme arco iris que recorría el reino entero, la reina Isabel informó a su marido de que el médico había venido a visitarla y le había dicho que estaba esperando una niña. El marido, feliz, ordenó invitar a todo el mundo a una gran fiesta para celebrar la estupenda noticia.*”

It wasn’t long before the cadence of Natalia’s voice had the young girl to sleep. When she looked up, she saw Olivia leaning against the door frame; a smile graced the older woman’s face.

“I forgot to set the alarm system,” Olivia said quietly. She approached her partner and held out a hand, waiting for Natalia to grasp it. When her partner did, she helped her to stand and led her back to their bedroom. “Have I ever told you how sexy you are when you speak Spanish?” Olivia whispered into the younger woman’s ear, and felt Natalia shiver beside her.

“Not recently.” Natalia could barely find her voice as Olivia traced a finger along her cheek, then blazed a trail down her neck and chest.

“*Sí, cariña. Muy sexy.*” Olivia’s lips followed the path her finger took, as she directed them backwards to the bed.

“Olivia sobre ese beso? No puedo esperar mas lo quiero ahora!” Natalia captured Olivia’s face in her hands, and feverishly pressed her lips to the older woman’s. She gently pushed Olivia back onto the bed.

Those were the last words spoken, as the two women spent the rest of the night as the two women revelling in their passion for each other.

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The End