

# ~ A Rock for Remembrance ~

by Ali Vali

**Disclaimers:** The characters in the following story are of my own creation. Any similarities to anyone living or dead are purely coincidental. No part of this story may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from me, the author.

If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed move on, literally.

Sit back and enjoy the story, any comments can be sent to me at [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com).

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Beth, Jaden, my Florida buddy, and Ken, you are all godsend. I bow to your grammatical knowledge.

*I would like to bid a Happy Valentine's Day to the woman who shares my life and owns my heart. This as with all my tales is dedicated to you and the joy you bring into my life. I am extremely blessed to have someone so special love me. For as long as I have voice, I will try to always tell you how much you mean to me and how much I love you.*

I would also like to thank all the wonderful people who take the time to read these stories. Thank you for all the great notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

February 14, 2004

Brown eyes watched from across the desk as Julian Bernstein Lowe signed her name to the letter she'd just dictated. If there was one thing Julian did with flair, it was sign her name with the old Mont Blanc fountain pen that was her favorite. In Darlene's opinion, it was the only flamboyant thing about her boss, who in all other arenas was a little shy and a lot unassuming.

The problem though, was that no one else shared that opinion. Julian was the kind of person other people just loved to admire or loved to hate depending on their disposition. The hate part of the equation came not because she was obnoxious or a bitch, but because Julian had a golden touch. More than one financial and business magazine had called her a modern day Midas, and it was an accurate accolade. During her short tenure at the helm, the Lowe shipping empire and name had returned to the prestige it had when her grandfather sat in the big leather chair in the president's office. It was as if she'd used the old wood and brass ship's wheel at the corner of the two glass walls to steer them back into profitable waters.

"Will that be all, Ms. Lowe?"

"Yes, thanks, Darlene. Take off and feed your husband and all those cats you have, and for God's sake, call me Julian." The thick linen page scraped along the desk as Julian picked it up and

handed it back. "I get to call you Darlene, so I think it's only fair." She pulled the letter back a little as if something had just occurred to her. "Unless you don't want me to call you by your first name? I'm sorry I never thought to ask before now. Would you prefer Mrs. Rampling?"

"I like that you care, but Darlene is fine. It's a cliché to say this, but Mrs. Rampling is my mother-in-law, and if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not be compared to the woman."

"She sounds lovely," teased Julian.

"To a yeti in heat maybe, but the woman is the walking definition of misery and how to inflict it on others. So we'll make a pact, you don't call me Mrs. Rampling and I'll start calling you Julian. Deal?" The petite, middle-aged woman held her hand out and smiled. Julian's return smile reminded her of a young Sebastian Lowe the day he came to work for his father and introduced himself to his new secretary, Darlene Rampling. Julian had inherited his personality and gentleness, along with the family business.

"Deal, now get out of here before your husband makes you quit because he thinks I'm a slave driver or something." She waited until the door clicked closed behind Darlene before unlocking the top drawer of the big desk.

Alone on the thirty-fifth floor of the Lowe Building, Julian put away the papers scattered on her desk and pulled out a leather bound journal. As always, the date went on the top left of the page and she sat back to think before writing anything down. A long time before, her grandmother had told her that writing things down would help keep the demons away and it had become a something of a ritual at the end of her business day.

*February 13, 2002*

*I wonder sometimes if I'm supposed to go back and read some of the entries I've made in here. Would they somehow hold the secrets to the happiness that has up to now escaped the very deepest parts of my heart?*

She stopped and turned the chair around to look out the wall of windows that took up half her office. The view was stunning as were the antiques scattered around the room, most of which came from the old country as her Nanna liked to tell anyone who asked. When her attention finally wandered back to the page, Julian had to let out a laugh.

*It's when I do re-read paragraphs like that one that I sometimes wonder if Nanna isn't full of crap. Or maybe I'm just an idiot. No one talks like that, much less really believes the horseshit that is love and happily-ever-afters that romance novelists like to go on about. Or maybe I can indulge in one whimsical thought a year without beating myself up. It can be my birthday present to myself. I can be Julian, sentimental asshole before I go back to being Julian the working asshole. The workaholic part of myself I at least understand.*

*Tomorrow is the big day. Thirty-five years of living boils down to sitting in an attorney's office and collecting on the big payday that is my trust. That's something with no what ifs; something I*

*don't need to ask or wonder about. I know without question that I'd trade the, what I'm sure by now is an amount of money I can't even fathom, for just one day. Millions for just one day to spend sitting and asking the countless questions I've had through the years about who they were and what they were like. To hear their stories from their own lips and not from everyone who were lucky enough to have known them.*

*There are the easy answers I've found in photos. I know why my eyes are blue and my hair is dark. The height comes from my father and my love of art comes from my mother. But what other things did I inherit from them?*

*The one bright spot is Nanna. My parents will forever live through her and the endless stories she loves to tell. I thank God that even after all this time, she never tires of sharing them, even though I'm sure she has perhaps wanted to move on and put the memories to rest. The pain for Nanna never truly dies. After all her family has had to endure over the years, the loss of her son and daughter-in-law was not something that should have been added to her burdens.*

*I am a Lowe. Over these past few years I've learned what that means and what responsibilities are mine alone. But once a year I like to indulge the sentimental side and ask the questions I have no time for on any other day.*

*Millions for a day? In a heartbeat.*

The journal entry wasn't much, nor very deep in her opinion but it was enough. Sometimes it was just enough to hear the sound of the pen on the paper when she wrote without thinking of the words she put down. It was February thirteenth, a day before her thirty-fifth birthday. Other children got parties and cake; Julian had always enjoyed lunch with her Nanna Lowe and then a trip to the cemetery. Nothing like the constant reminder of what else happened the day you entered the world to put you in a festive mood.

Sebastian Lowe IV had been the only child of Sebastian and Eugenia Lowe, and the next great leader of the vast Lowe holdings. He had done everything asked of him. He had been a good son, a good student throughout his academic years, followed by a good husband just before he turned thirty. During his last year at Tulane in New Orleans while he was working on his master's in business, he'd met a young woman who had slowly made it impossible for him to live without her. The one story Nanna loved to tell more than any other was when it finally hit Sebastian that he had fallen helplessly in love.

Roberta Bernstein, or Birdie to all her friends, was an art major working on her own master's degree when she literally ran into Sebastian on the Tulane campus. The petite redhead was no match for the one time starting wide receiver who was too busy clowning around to watch where he was headed. She later admitted that she would have put him in his place had it not been for the hypnotic blue eyes and wind blown jet colored hair. For weeks after that they were seen together at sporting events and art openings.

They cared for each other a great deal but after school was over their paths spilt and they ended up on two different continents, but still they committed to not letting what they had die.

Sebastian's future was to learn the Lowe company structure so that he could eventually take his father's place, and for Birdie it was art. Because of her experience, Birdie had been offered a once in a lifetime chance to work as a curator at the Louvre. For three years the long distance romance continued over vacation breaks and long telephone conversations at least every couple of days. It was Sebastian that had cracked first.

It was after he'd been working for his father for a while that Sebastian decided he couldn't live another day without Birdie at his side, and it was time to do something about it. After work he visited a jeweler, bought a ring, then drove to the airport and bought a ticket to Paris. The long distance romance ended when he showed up on the doorstep of her flat as she was getting ready for work and dropped to one knee. Wedding bells rang four months later.

Julian opened the door of the private bath in her office, stripped off her clothes and threw them in the hamper in the closet. There were more casual clothes hanging above it and the hangers rattled a little as she pulled out a new outfit. In the office, the door opened again and someone let themselves in without asking permission first. The older gentleman closed the journal and placed it back in the desk drawer without ever looking at the page. He would never betray Julian's trust with idle curiosity.

"Rudy, is that you?"

"Who else would it be at this time of night? I swear just because the old woman gave you the big chair, it doesn't mean you have to close the joint down every night. It's not like they're going to fire you." His suit as always looked freshly pressed and the shoes were shiny enough so that you could comb your hair in them. Those were the things you could count on about Rudy, along with his feisty personality.

The leather sofa creaked when Julian sat down to put on a pair of boots that went better than the Italian loafers she'd had on with the business suit. "You don't want my Christmas bonus to be smaller this year, do you?"

"You tell Eugenia Lowe you want a Christmas bonus and she'll take you out back of the building and have you shot. Or does the Jewish religion have folks who do exorcisms if you catch Christianity?"

"You're not buying that I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior at lunch?"

"Finish getting dressed, trouble maker, and I'll bring the car around."

The second boot slipped on and Julian stood. "You go on without me, Pops, and I'll see you at home later. Tell Rebecca not to hold dinner for me. You guys go on ahead and eat and I'll see you in the morning."

He stepped a bit closer to her and tried to read her emotions by looking closely at her face. "Are you sure? She made your favorite tonight."

Julian accepted Rudy's help with the suede coat in her hand and kissed his cheek when they were done. For a couple who had wanted nothing but children and couldn't have them, Julian had been the child of their hearts. They had started their careers with Eugenia but followed Julian when she felt it was time for her own place. Now Rudy drove her whenever she had some place to go and his wife Rebecca ran the household staff. They were both paid well, but if necessary, they would have stayed just to stay close to Julian.

"Everything Rebecca makes is my favorite, but I just feel like a walk tonight. Don't worry, I just have some things to think about and need some time to clear my head."

"Just something only J.J. can help you with, huh?" asked Rudy, referring to Julian's old college friend who now owned a nearby bar.

"You make me sound like a lush, old man." Julian took his arm and walked him to the door. About twice a week the president of Lowe Inc. left the office dressed in jeans and walked out the front door to the bar five blocks away. On the days she did, J.J. left the bartending to her other employees and spent her time talking to Julian. Considering J.J. always listened without ever passing judgment or questioning Julian's life except as a friend, it was like having a shrink who poured a mean glass of scotch.

"Nah, if I didn't have to get my ass home I'd go with you. Have fun and tell her 'hi' for me. Just don't stay out too late. It doesn't matter if you're on your way to forty, Rebecca doesn't go to sleep until she hears you walking around upstairs, and knows you're safely home."

The button for the elevator lit up under her finger and she kissed Rudy one last time before tugging him on after her. "Thanks for caring and tell her not to worry. She should save it for facing Nanna in the morning."

"I'll make sure I have some cloves of garlic up front with me before we ride over there to pick her up. Your grandmother could put the fear of God into anyone."

The elevator stopped on the first floor and Rudy held the door for her. "Who are you kidding? If it wasn't for Rebecca you would've run off with Nanna years ago."

"Girl, go have your drink before I have to put you across my knee."

The night watchman assigned to the front door waved before buzzing her out. Since Julian had started her treks to J.J.'s the guy at the front door had always waved and disengaged the lock. They had never spoken and in reality he thought she was one of the underlings from the bottom floors. On the nights she left with Rudy, she rode to the basement with him where the car was parked.

A slew of dead leaves blew past her as a strong gust of wind came off the river. Poydras Street in New Orleans was lined with tall buildings owned by various corporations that were mostly oil field related. The exceptions were the Superdome that was at one end, the Mississippi River at the other, and the federal court building right in the middle. It was a canyon of brick and cement

that became almost eerily silent at night except for the few nightspots that could be found every so many blocks.

Julian turned up the collar of her barn jacket and started toward the Superdome. J.J.'s bar was just a block shy of the largest building in the city. On game days you had to be a regular to get into the place that was regarded as just an old fashioned joint. To Julian that meant there were plenty of dartboards, pool tables, comfortable barstools and not a fern to be found.

Her nose was frozen by the time she got to the door and one of the three waitresses took her coat to store in the back office. "Thanks, Boo, how's it going tonight?"

"There's enough guys in here running up monster tabs to keep us in pantyhose and peanuts. I'm glad you showed up tonight, the boss has been waiting for you."

The tall brunette laughed imagining what J.J. might have on her mind. During their college days the even taller blonde had talked Julian into more than one stunt that had landed them in the Dean's office. The word expulsion had been used more than once through the years as a threat to calm them down, never to any avail though. Their friendship had been forged for life when Nanna had pronounced J.J. a bad influence.

"What's your pleasure, sailor?" asked J.J.

"Small blondes in the moonlight, but if there's a shortage of those I'll have a beer."

"Beer? What, you got a pay cut I don't know about?" It was said in a teasing voice but J.J. reached into the cooler behind her and pulled out a green bottle. She twisted the top off with her bare hand and put it on the bar without a mug to go with it.

"No, I just don't want to have a hangover tomorrow. I'm having lunch with Nanna and I don't want to make promises I won't want to keep just because I'm experiencing a moment of weakness due to alcohol."

"Y'all's annual drive to visit the folks huh?"

"This one will be a little different than all the others, and it isn't only an annual thing for me anymore."

J.J. leaned closer and looked at her best friend. For all they had been through, she never really thought that anyone, including herself, knew the real Julian Lowe. That one part that defined her and her true self was always hidden from the world. The bar owner could only come up with one explanation. It was the sense of loss the woman always carried with her that kept her from reaching out to anyone. *How would I have dealt with being an orphan from the minute I came into the world?* The question ran through J.J.'s head and there was no way to answer unless you had walked a mile in Julian's shoes.

"Why, pal? It isn't healthy for you to keep dwelling on this. Tomorrow will mark thirty-five

years, so don't you think it's time for you to start living in the here and now? I never met them either, but I'm guessing they would've wanted you to enjoy your life. Hell, Nanna and I have never seen eye to eye on anything, but I think this is the only thing we agree on." She pointed her finger inches from Julian's face and prayed she wouldn't snap it off.

"If there's one thing life has taught me, it is that you and Nanna get smarter with age. I go not because I dwell on their death, but because I find the place peaceful. I love my job, but sometimes it gets to be too much and I need someplace where I can go and the phone's not ringing and no one's telling me we're behind schedule on our next tanker." Julian took a sip of her beer and pointed back. "Besides I waste more time here with you than I do at the cemetery where my parents are buried."

"You know what you need?"

"Will hitting you over the head with this bottle be the only way I can stop you from answering that question?"

"Not unless you want to arrive at Eugenia's with a black eye tomorrow." J.J. pulled out two bottles when Julian drained the one she'd been drinking. "What you need is a nice girl to go home to, or at least to keep you company and get you out of the house every so often. I love spending time with you, Bernie, but goddamn it, will it kill you to be just a little social?"

"Now you're sounding more and more like my grandmother. I swear if you say 'I know this nice Jewish girl I want you to meet,' I'm walking out of here and never coming back."

"You're the only Jewish girl I know, so put your fears to rest. I just don't want you to end up alone and bitter."

"Then maybe I should wish for that when I blow out my candles tomorrow."

J.J. held up her bottle and waited for Julian to tap hers against it. "Then here's to birthday wishes, may all yours come true."

From there the talk turned to sports and some of the memories they loved to relive whenever they had occasion to talk about them. At midnight Julian stepped out and hailed a cab and headed for home. Behind her J.J. looked toward the ceiling of the bar and offered up a rare prayer to whoever might be listening for her friend.

*Send her someone to make her forget the pain. Make it someone who'll love her as much as she deserves to be loved. And if it's not asking too much, make her short, blonde and cute.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The front door of her house clicked closed softly behind Julian, since she didn't want to wake Rebecca and Rudy if they were sleeping. One of the reasons she'd picked the place, even though it was really too big, was the suite it had downstairs just past the library. It gave the older couple

plenty of room and privacy since Julian used an office adjacent to her own rooms on the second floor.

A stack of mail drew her attention after she'd locked up and set the alarm, so she didn't see them standing in the foyer close to the staircase. When Rudy cleared his throat, envelopes flew in every direction.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Julian held the one piece of mail that hadn't escaped her grasp pressed against her chest. "What are you two still doing up?"

Rudy and his wife had moved to the door when they heard the key go into the lock from outside. They felt comfortable enough around Julian to have their pajamas and robes on.

"Sorry, Julian, it's just that we wanted to wait up and see what arrangements you made for the morning," said Rebecca. Her face looked slightly different because of the rollers in her hair. They were rolled so tight it gave her a sort of frozen expression.

"You waited up to ask me about my breakfast order? That's a little over the top even for you."

"Did you talk to someone named Deanne Lightener today?" asked Rudy.

"I vaguely recall the conversation. She's someone I went out with a few times years ago." She snapped her finger as it all came back. "Yeah, she called and said she was heading to Europe for awhile and she wanted to leave something with me for safe keeping. Strange request but I didn't see any harm in saying yes. If someone dropped it off, just throw it in a corner somewhere."

"She tell you what it was?" asked Rebecca, wondering if Julian had enjoyed one too many beers or had zoned out while she was on the phone with the woman after her answer.

"I had a meeting so we didn't get into details. Why, it isn't something weird like a snake or something is it?"

"Not a snake, no," answered Rudy.

"Then put whatever it is in the wall safe in the study if you think it's valuable and we'll give it back whenever she returns. I just hope she remembers it's over here." Julian was on her knees picking up mail so she didn't see Rudy and Rebecca exchange looks.

"I don't think she'd appreciate that, and from now on ask lots of pertinent questions when someone asks for a favor." Rudy's comment caused Julian to look up as she grabbed the last piece of mail.

"Have you two been in the liquor cabinet or something?" Julian had just finished her teasing question when the mail fell from her fingers again. At the top of the stairs was someone she didn't know looking down at them. "Someone want to explain?"



"It's all right, sweetheart, you can come down," said Rebecca to their guest. "This was Ms. Lightener's delivery, and I doubt seriously if we can keep her in the wall safe or the corner until she gets back. She didn't happen to mention when she'd be returning, did she?"

Julian shook her head as she watched the slow progress down the stairs. "What's her name?"

The little girl heard the questions so she stopped on the bottom step and held up four fingers. "I'm Summer and I'm four." Four of her fingers came up as high as she could hold them in case Julian didn't understand, as she walked across the floor and looked right into the blue eyes. "My mama said you'd take care of me and not send me away. You promise to?" It was close to one in the morning and Julian wondered if children were always this perky. "This is Binky," continued Summer pointing to the rabbit under one arm. "I can't sleep without him so you hafta promise not to send him away either."

"Ah...", was the only thing Julian could get out as she stared at the really short blonde who was giving a running commentary about herself.

"Come on, Summer, it's time to go back to bed," said Rebecca holding her hand out to the little girl. "We'll have plenty of time to talk about how we'll handle this in the morning," Rebecca said to Julian. "I put her in the room next to yours upstairs so pull out some really nice pajamas tonight."

"Who in the hell leaves their child with someone they haven't seen in years?" Julian asked Rudy once the child was out of hearing range. "And the saddest part is she didn't leave a number where I can find her."

"Maybe that was her intent, but it's done now and there's no sense in bitching about it."

Rudy's words were ringing in her ears as she climbed the stairs to her room. There was one thing left to do before she went to bed and over the years it had always helped her fall asleep the night before her birthday. In her office next to her room, placed in a location where they could safely burn until the next night, were two candles. One for her father and the other her mother. *Yartzeit* candles that would burn in remembrance of their lives and the light they had brought into the world when they were alive. As Julian struck the match like her grandmother had done earlier in her own home, she thought of all the stories her Nanna had told her over the years. She had never felt their light but she was a product of what they had meant to each other and Eugenia had always told her it was a comfort to realize what true love could create.

"May your light shine eternal," was all she said as she finished her prayers.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the dawn broke through Julian's windows it silhouetted the small body looking out at the back yard. From the large bed Julian was surprised to find the child in her room and wondered what was weighing down someone so young. Julian looked at her for quite a while before opening her mouth. Studying Summer reminded her of herself, the only difference was that she had never had

to try so hard to fit in. From their short talk when she had gotten home, Julian knew the toddler was very unsure of her place in the world.

"Good morning," said Julian, making Summer jump and clutch Binky to her chest. "It's all right, there's no reason to be afraid. No one in the house is going to hurt you." The girl still looked frightened so Julian softened her voice a little more. "Will it help if I promised again to not send you away and take care of you while you're here?"

"You didn't do it."

Long fingers ran through the dark hair as Julian tried to figure out what Summer meant. She swung her legs over and rested them on the floor. When she couldn't deduce what the child meant she had to ask. "I didn't do what?"

"Promise, you didn't promise."

Julian patted the mattress next to her and smiled. In only four years Summer Lightener had gotten really smart. "How about you join me and I'll do just that." Summer handed over Binky so she could climb onto the canopy bed, eager to get attention from someone. Julian held out her hand and waited for Summer to take it so they could shake. "I promise you'll be fine until your mother comes back and we won't send you anywhere you don't want to go. You want to shake on it?"

Summer shook as hard as she could but she was looking in awe as her hand disappeared into Julian's fist when she closed her hand. "You got really big hands and big feet."

"If I were a man just think of the catch I'd be," said Julian with a laugh. She wanted to laugh harder at the blank expression on the kid's face but didn't want to add to her confusion. "Never mind about that now, now we have to get ready to go. Do you have any clothes?"

The little girl nodded and looked to the bed coverlet, feeling like Julian was getting ready to dump her somewhere. "Yeah, my mama brung my stuff with me."

Summer's mournful look continued through Julian's birthday breakfast and all the way to the office. With a quick glance to the back of the sedan, Rudy wondered what Julian had in mind. He couldn't see her as she was hidden behind her paper, and not for the first time he thought she was much too set in her ways for someone so young.

"Let's stop at the front of the building today, Rudy, then I'll call you when I'm ready to meet Nanna. We may have to change our plans for lunch and the trip to the lawyer's office."

"You got it." He turned onto Poydras from St. Charles Avenue and decided to keep his promise to Rebecca. "Do you want us to keep Summer today?"

"Nope, I'll take care of daycare today. It was, after all, my idea to open one in the building for our employees. I'm thinking they'll let me use the services."

A few people recognized Julian on the way in and tried to engage her in conversation, pleasantly surprised to have all their points and questions answered. She inserted her identity card into the slot in the elevator and pressed the button for the fourth floor. This security system had been put in place to keep anyone from wandering into the childcare area who didn't belong there.

At the front desk there was a flurry of activity with parents removing coats, gloves and hats. In the middle of it all was a woman on her knees welcoming all the children back for the day with a hug. She stood up when she noticed Julian and Summer just standing as if waiting their turn.

"Can I help you?"

"I need to sign Summer here up to spend some time with you. What's involved in doing that?" asked Julian.

"Do you work here? It's the only way to be able to sign your little girl up."

Julian looked down at what had to be the most relaxed employee in the building at that moment. The jeans, sweat shirt and running shoes would've had you physically removed from the top floor if you'd had the nerve to try and come to work that way.

"No I just was walking by and this seemed as good a place to leave her as any. I didn't realize there would be rules."

"Either you're an idiot or a smart ass, give me a few more minutes and I'll let you know my decision," said the woman as she stood on her toes to be able to reach Julian's ear so Summer wouldn't be able to hear her. "Wait here and I'll go get your paperwork."

"And your name is, or should I just call you mistress?" asked Julian not caring who heard her.

"My name is Katherine, but my friends call me Kiki. Feel free to call me Katherine." She laughed as Julian put her hand over her heart and grimaced as if she was wounded.

"How does this look?" asked Julian of Summer. She put her briefcase down and lowered herself down to one knee as she waved her arm toward what they could see of the play area.

When she'd gotten the idea to shuffle around some of their offices and open up the fourth floor for this project, Julian had stocked it with everything she could think of to make every kid in there happy. There were computers loaded with games and educational material for the nerds among them. And for the more hands on, there was every conceivable toy to keep their interest. Once the daycare had opened, Lowe's employee absentee rate had dropped dramatically.

"You'll come back and get me, right?"

"I promise I will as soon as I'm finished working. You know what the best part of this place is?" Summer shook her head and didn't say anything. "I work here," Julian pointed her finger up,

"Right above here."

"Really?"

"Really, so you can have someone call me if you need to talk to me about something." She put her hand on the little girl's shoulder and smiled. "So what do you think?"

"It kinda looks like fun."

"Good girl, now go over there and have a seat while I fill out all this stuff," said Julian as Katherine loaded her down with paper.

"What's your name, honey?" Katherine asked Summer. It never hurt to try and get the new children to feel welcome as soon as you could.

"Summer Lightener." The little girl gave her a small smile. "And this is Binky."

"Nice to meet you both." Katherine took her by the hand and led her to the play area where everyone was getting a morning snack. "Everyone this is Summer and her friend Binky. Can everyone say good morning and welcome?"

A din of "Hey Summer!" could be heard from all the children sitting in the dining room by the windows outfitted with tiny tables and chairs. Katherine found her a seat next to a little boy named Tiger, confident that he would loosen Summer up quickly with his gift for gab.

"Summer, this is Tiger and if you want he'd like to be your friend." One of the other workers brought out another blueberry muffin and a glass of milk. "You ok?" she asked Summer getting a nod. "Ok then, I'm going to go see how your mom's doing with the registration. Katherine stood up before Summer could correct her.

"You need any help with the big words?"

Julian looked up and wondered if this woman was this sarcastic with everyone who stepped out of the elevator. All that was left to do was sign her name at the bottom and hand it back. After she did, her favorite pen was capped and went back into her jacket inner breast pocket. With a little smirk she handed the papers back over to Katherine and sat back and crossed her arms waiting for her to review it. Sometimes it was good to be a Lowe.

"I think I spelled everything correctly, but you could always grade me on penmanship."

Katherine wasn't really in a position to flirt, but there was something about this woman's edgy humor that made her want to. It didn't hurt that she was also the best looking person to ever walk into the nursery. The daycare worker had always played a mental game when meeting or coming across new people. It was one her father, a detective with the New Orleans Police Department, had taught her from an early age.

"Just look at a person, Kiki, and you can learn a lot about them before they ever open their mouths," Katherine could remember him saying. So now she studied people and made up stories in her head to strictly entertain herself. The tall woman sitting there with her arms crossed with the twinkling blue eyes looked like someone who was always in complete control of herself and the world around her. It was the pose that gave that away. The coat, suit and spotless shoes spoke of someone who took time with her appearance, but the lack of jewelry except for a nice watch, and the lack of makeup said she wasn't consumed by it. The pen that had been so lovingly put in a place over her heart instead of the slightly battered leather bag was something she valued. The overall picture made Katherine want to get to know her better.

Realizing she was staring, Katherine snapped her eyes closed for a second before turning her attention to the form in her hand. She had printed the whole thing in the neatest handwriting Katherine had ever seen, but a majority of it was left blank. Aside from Summer's name and age, there was no other personal information.

"Don't you want to put her birthday and stuff on here? We give the kids a party and some treats when it rolls around. Nothing fancy, just a cake and some ice cream, but they love it and I'd hate for Summer to be left out."

"This cake, you buy that with company funds?" asked Julian with a bit of a stern voice.

*Why do they have to be such assholes when they're this good looking?* The question made her click her mouth closed from the dressing down this idiot needed, since Katherine didn't like to do that in front of the children. "I make the cake myself and the staff chips in for the ice cream. Don't worry we're not costing the Lowes any money. You can look at our paychecks if you don't believe me."

Having her joke backfire, Julian stood up and started for the elevator. "I left my extension on there if you need me for anything. What time does this place close?"

"We're here till six thirty, if you have to stay later than that then I suggest you complain to your supervisor," answered Katherine, shoving the forgotten application under her arm. "Because from experience the asshole that runs this place doesn't give a damn how late you have to stay."

"I'll tell her you told me to if it comes to that since I'll be seeing her in just a little while. Have a good day, Katherine." Before Julian made it to the exit, there was a slight tugging on her coat. When she looked down Summer was pulling at her pocket.

"You won't forget about me, right?"

"I'll be back in a little while, don't worry. Have fun ok."

"This is my new friend Tiger," Summer pulled him forward presenting him to Julian.

Julian held her hand out and instantly found the little boy's pressed against it. "Nice to meet you, Tiger. Take good care of Summer today, ok?" As she waited for the elevator to open Julian heard

part of the conversation the two had on the way back to the table.

"She's got big hands, huh?" Summer asked a nodding Tiger. "She's got big feet too and she said it would make her a good catch if she'd been a man."

"What's that mean?" asked a confused Tiger.

"I didn't ask that."

The doors closed to Julian laughing so hard she was wiping her eyes. An incredulous Katherine finally remembered the application and looked to see who the hell would tell that to a four-year-old.

Julian had scratched through parent and replaced it with the words temporary guardian. "That explains the lack of information," Katherine muttered to herself. She twirled a piece of blonde hair around her index finger like she had from an early age. It was when she got to the name right after that, that she came close to tugging a chunk of her hair out from shock. She read it five times before the name, Julian B. Lowe registered in her head.

"Della, what's the name of the company CEO?"

"I would imagine it's a Lowe but I've never met any of them so I really don't know," answered one of her co-workers.

"I got that from walking in here every morning with the name in big blue letters stretched out across the top of the building and all, which Lowe?"

"Julian, is the current head tuna at the moment," chimed in Chris, another of their workers.

"Please tell me Julian is a man," said Katherine with her hands pressed together as if in prayer, crumpling the application between them. "You would make me feel so much better than I feel right at this moment if you tell me he's a he."

"Tall, good looking, but I'm sorry, definitely not a man," said Chris. When the other two looked at her like she was crazy she cocked her head to the side. "I don't know her but she was in the company newsletter last month standing next to Sam's dad, you know the guy from up on fifteen, and you know how tall he is. Well this chick topped him by at least a couple of inches. It was her picture that made me read the article. Julian Lowe is different looking, but in a good way if you get my meaning. I could only imagine what she would look like if she'd really smiled for the camera."

"I'm so dead," said Katherine now banging her hands against her head. *Of all the people to call an asshole this morning, it had to be the head asshole.*

"What'd you do, hit her car this morning or something?" asked Della.

"Or something, so if security comes and tosses me out don't act surprised."

"Come on, it can't be all that bad. Whatever it is I'm sure she'll forget about it before lunch so I wouldn't worry about it. Actually you won't have time to worry about anything."

Katherine stopped her smoothing of the papers in her hand and looked at Chris like she'd already heard of her being fired for being so pissy. "Why, I have to go home already?"

"No you have sixty little people ready for your undivided attention." Chris pointed to the room where the kids were already heading for their favorite toys. They had to be vigilant since the morning was when the little turf wars over stuff were the most common. By ten everyone was happily playing with whatever was handy.

"What, everyone else is going home instead and I'm on my own?" asked Katherine pulling out her supplies for her group's first project.

"Today's sing along day, and we all get to participate, so go put your paints away for awhile, Madame Picasso."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Good morning, Darlene, how's the cats and the husband?"

"Good morning, they're all fine and happy birthday," answered the secretary as she followed Julian into the office. When Julian turned around from hanging up her coat she found Darlene tentatively holding out a small box. "I'm horrible at shopping but I thought you might enjoy this."

"You didn't have to do that, but thank you." The paper was ripped through and Julian found an antique sterling bookmark in the shape of an old cruiser. Since boats were their business, she collected ship memorabilia. "This is great, thank you for thinking of me."

"You're quite welcome, I hope you have a great day. Your grandmother called this morning and wants you to call her back. Do you have anything pressing you want me to do this morning before I start on the stack from yesterday that we didn't get to?"

Julian saw Darlene's trusty pad come out before she opened her mouth. "I need two things actually before you worry about anything else. First, use whatever means you have to and find Deanne Lightener. She should be somewhere in Europe by now if what she told me yesterday was true, but start with wherever she lives state-side."

"Deanne Lightener, got it, what else?"

"Access the personnel files from everyone working down in the daycare, including salary information, then have the head of human resources call me in about fifteen minutes."

It was a strange request but Darlene had found success as an assistant after she learned a valuable

lesson. Never under any circumstances question your boss about anything, even when it seemed like they had lost their minds. There was that and the fact she kept meticulous records and backed up all her work. "I'll get right on this, but I'll start with the easy one first. It shouldn't take any time at all to access the personnel records so I'll email them to you for review, unless you want the hard copies."

"Mail is fine, thanks."

After she reviewed her messages from the morning, Julian took off her jacket and tossed it in the visitor's chair across from her desk before picking up the phone. A friendly sounding staff person picked up the phone on the other end making Julian smile at the perkiness despite the woman's age. "Good morning, Alice, how are you?"

"If it isn't the birthday girl. Happy birthday, love, I got you a little something so don't forget to find me when you come to pick up her highness."

"You never do forget, Alice, and that's one of the many reasons I love you. But speaking of the old woman, is she up yet?"

The long time Lowe housekeeper laughed and looked around before answering. "If you're not good I'm going to tell her you call her that behind her back, but she's up, let me go find her."

"I already know what she calls me behind my back, woman, so give me the phone." Eugenia stood in the doorway of the kitchen in her robe with a slight frown on her face and her hand out, but her old friend knew it was just for show. If there was one person on the planet the matriarch of the Lowe family would learn to do back flips for, it was Julian.

If there was such a thing as knowing each other's thoughts, it could be said of Julian and her grandmother. As she grew up, Julian had a lot of people who cared about her, even though they were paid staff, but Eugenia took on most of the child raising duty, and even though Julian loved to tease her Nanna, she still couldn't imagine an existence without her as the rock that anchored her life.

"Hello, Bernie, happy birthday."

"Thanks, Nanna, pretty soon I'll catch up with you." Eugenia laughed at the jibe since it was a well-known fact around town that the last birthday she acknowledged was when she'd turned fifty-nine. It wasn't that she was fond of the number; she just didn't feel like counting any higher.

"Well you'll have millions of reasons to remember this one, sweetie. What time do you want to come by and pick me up?"

"Any more talk like that and I'll ask you to be my Valentine."

"That's just one more religious day that went horribly off track. I eat chocolate all the time, I don't need to set aside a special day for it, but it doesn't mean I don't want great grandchildren



and a granddaughter-in-law to help keep you in line." Eugenia took a sip of her coffee so that she could keep up the constant lecture of finding someone for Julian to share her life with. "Since it's your birthday you should know that you aren't getting any younger. You need to find a nice Jewish girl and make babies." It had been a shock to her when Julian had told her she was gay, but Eugenia had taken it all in stride and embraced her granddaughter for being honest with her instead of trying to hide what was such an important part of her life.

"Out of what, gingerbread? I don't need to find a nice Jewish girl, Nanna, I have you."

"Julian, honey, I'm almost seventy years old and my tits are all shot to hell. It's not a pretty sight I tell you, so think younger, yet with all my endearing qualities."

The leather chair Julian was sitting in creaked as she leaned back and laughed. Being born on the one day most of the world set aside for romance had always been a bit of a bore, but it had its high points, like no one really making a fuss over something as silly as turning another year older. She had never come out and admitted it to anyone, but falling in love and putting her heart on the line was not something Julian ever intended to do, no matter how incredible the girl was. Julian loved Eugenia without reservation, but unconditional love for someone else was a gamble, and if life had taught her anything it was that life always seemed to be stacked against you. The death of her parents had been the prime example of that.

"Therein lies the problem, Nanna, where am I ever going to find anyone like you?"

"Ok, enough kissing ass, you're getting your trust today no matter what so there's no need. Come by in an hour and I'll be ready to go, then we can head out and have lunch."

"You got it, buttercup, and dress warmly, it's cold out today."

The soft beep of the intercom on the phone scared Julian as she replaced the receiver. "Julian, I have Ms. Lightener on line two for you. I took the liberty of assuming you wanted to talk to her," said Darlene from the outer office. Julian's computer also softly chimed indicating an incoming email. When she looked it was the files she'd requested.

"I think you deserve a raise you're so efficient. If something ever happens to me I'll recommend Nanna hire you for my job."

Darlene glowed at the compliment. "No thank you, I see the hours you keep."

Releasing a deep breath, Julian answered the phone. Not that she minded taking care of Summer for a short while, but her life had gone strangely off kilter the day before and she wanted to know why. Why would someone she barely remembered have entrusted her child to her care?

"Deanne, care to tell me where you are?"

"You could say hello first before you start screaming," said Deanne in a curt voice.

"I'm not screaming, I just want to know where you are and why your daughter is now my responsibility. Since it's not like watching a lamp or a book until you get back I think I have the right to know."

Deanne waved an impatient hand toward the cab driver waiting on her and tried to sound friendlier. She wanted to take some time off from her life and Julian was the safest person she could think of to leave Summer with, at least that's what she remembered of her when they had gone out those couple of times. "I'm in London at the moment, but I'm on the run so we have to make this quick."

"No, not quick, we need a lengthy conversation so let's get cracking."

"Look, Julian, I've got some stuff happening in my life right now and I need your help, that's why I called you yesterday. Summer was sort of a surprise four years ago and I've never really recovered from the experience of motherhood. A friend of mine invited me to go on a trip with her and I felt I deserved some time to find myself."

Julian was up and pacing wondering what in the world she had ever seen in this woman who walked around campus with a cat in her book bag. Anyone who had anxiety separation from her pet should have sent up a big red flag with whacko written on the back. "I understand you might be having a rough time of it, but how do I fit into that equation?"

"I trust you, Julian. I trust you to keep Summer safe and healthy until I'm ready to come back."

*Till I'm ready to come back? Danger Will Robinson, danger!* The alarms went off in Julian's head that this could turn out to be a long-term arrangement as far as Deanne was concerned. "How long do you plan to be gone?"

"It could be two weeks, or it could be two years. You can't put a timeline on finding yourself, Julian, you should know this."

"I know exactly where I am, so don't compare us, and any more time than two weeks is unacceptable."

"I have to run, Julian, someone's waiting for me. I promise to call you soon," said Deanne as if Julian had never spoken.

"Wait!" screamed Julian into the receiver hearing only a dial tone in return. "For the love of God, why do I always attract the strangest people walking around out there?" Every bad date she'd been on came flooding back and it was another set of reasons never to settle down. "Darlene, see if you can do the impossible and track that nutcase down again. If it takes me flying across the big pond and dragging her back here by her hair, then that's what I'll do." Her finger came off the intercom as she dropped back in the chair. Her eyebrows hiked when she opened the file Darlene had sent.

"I was able to catch her at the front desk of the hotel she's staying at, so give me a little bit more

time now that she's on to the fact I work for you, and it seems like she doesn't want to talk to you." The burning desire to ask Julian what was going on was great but Darlene tried to control the urge to blurt out any questions. "But don't worry I'll keep working at it."

"Thanks, and thanks for the information." Julian rolled the track ball on her mouse and scanned down the file she'd opened and looked for the name Katherine. She found it toward the middle of the page.

Katherine X. Breaux, was twenty-eight years old, wasn't married and had one child. She lived in the cusp of the French Quarter, which Julian quickly surmised was insane for safety reasons, and she had a master's degree in child development. Katherine had been one of the original employees hired to man the daycare and had only missed three days of work in two years. Overall her annual personnel assessments had all been excellent, and she had gotten more letters praising her efforts with the children from the rest of the Lowe employees who had children enrolled than almost all of the others combined. The one thing that did stick out, and Julian wondered why since she tried to pay competitive wages, was the salary of everyone working on the fourth floor.

"Sorry to bother you with so many bizarre requests in one day, Darlene, but could you call Simpson from H.R. and get him up here right away?"

"You can request bizarre things all day, that's what I'm here for."

About five minutes later a short, slightly over weight man with a buzz cut popular in the fifties knocked on the door. He could feel the sweat rolling down his back having gotten a call to report to Julian's office. In all his twenty five years with the company he'd never stepped foot on the top floor, even when he'd gotten promoted to head of the personnel department.

"Mr. Simpson, I have to leave in a minute so we'll have to keep this short. Why are we paying third world wages to everyone in the daycare center? Are we having some sort of cash flow problem I don't know about?"

Harold pulled on his collar like it had shrunk two sizes in the time it had taken Julian to ask her questions. "I thought I'd start low and see how they worked out before going up. They're just babysitters after all, so I thought what I offered was fair."

The way Julian's eyelids lowered a little was the first clue his answer was slightly off center of the target she was aiming for. "I see, and you know they're just babysitters since you're down there evaluating their performance weekly?"

"Hell no, I don't really like kids so I send my assistant. She has her daughter down there so why suffer if you don't have to is my motto."

"Funny thing, that's my motto as well, so get up and get out."

"What?"

"It's an easy enough request, Mr. Simpson. Leave before you make me suffer any more with your company." Her finger was back on the intercom button before he reached for the knob. "Darlene, could you step in here please?" The assistant stood back as if she found Harold offensive before walking to Julian's desk. "Did you know Simpson is an asshole?"

"We've met and he does leave you with that impression doesn't he?"

"Thanks for sharing. Anyone else I should call security about and have them escorted out of the building? You can write that down by the way. I want him out of here as soon as humanly possible. Then have his assistant come up here when you get the chance. If my assumptions are correct, she's forgotten more personnel policy than Simpson ever knew."

"I've met her too, and all I can say is, you have the instincts of Eugenia Lowe," said Darlene with a smile.

"I hope that's a compliment."

"Trust me, it is."

An hour later Lowe had a new personnel vice-president and everyone in the daycare had gotten a raise. Along with the expanded benefits Julian threw in, was a new purchasing account for birthdays and other treats the staff wanted to get for themselves and the children. Julian laughed when Darlene told her the staff in H.R. had stood up and applauded as Harold was shown the door.

She put her jacket and coat back on and called for Rudy to meet her outside. It was getting late and if she didn't leave she'd be late picking up her grandmother. "Darlene, call me on my cell if you need anything. I have an appointment with Eugenia this morning then we'll probably go and have lunch."

*Translation, I have an appointment with the lottery office to collect my winnings,* thought Darlene with a small laugh. "Sorry, I just thought of something my husband said. Have fun and tell your grandmother I said hello." The phone rang as Julian started for the door and Darlene had no choice but to snap her fingers to get her attention.

"I'm sorry, I know that's rude but there's a young lady on the line and she says there's a Summer Lightener downstairs and she needs to see you before you leave. Should I tell her you're already gone?"

"No, I think I can squeeze that in before I deal with Nanna."

*I wonder if she'll let me call her Kiki once she opens her next paycheck?* Julian laughed at the thought, contemplating going down and handing out the next payroll herself.

\*\*\*\*\*

Summer was standing next to the counter when Julian stepped off the elevator. The little girl had her ever-present rabbit and she looked a tad upset. One of the workers Julian had yet to meet was standing next to her with her hand on her shoulder trying to comfort her.

"Hey there, it looks like you lost your best friend. What's the matter?" asked Julian dropping down to her knees.

Chris looked at the two of them and smiled. Nowhere in the newsletter did it say that their boss had children. "She was playing and it suddenly hit her that she hadn't seen you in awhile so we thought we'd call and see if you weren't busy." She explained to Julian in case Summer was too choked up to answer.

"Testing me out huh, kid?" She didn't want to grow attached, figuring she could get Deanne to come and get her before too much more time went by, but Julian couldn't stand the lost look on Summer's face. With a quick thump her briefcase hit the floor and she opened her arms, finding them full of tiny blonde as soon as she did. "I told you I was just a phone call away, sweetheart, so stop worrying. You're going to get wrinkles before your time."

"I thought you'd forgotten about me." The statement was almost a mantra for the kid Julian noticed. She wondered how many times her mother had dumped her somewhere and forgotten about her in her quest to find herself. The concept was even more horrible than her own life. At least her parents were dead. What would it feel like to go through life thinking you weren't wanted?

Julian leaned back and looked down at the sad little face. With gentle fingers she combed the fine blonde hair back and tried to get the green eyes to stay with her. It was amazing to feel how soft Summer's hair was and how easily she accepted affection. If Deanne wasn't careful that could come back to haunt her one day if she dumped her daughter with the wrong person.

"You know the only thing I forget all the time?" she asked Summer. Small fingers clung to the lapels of her coat and Summer just shook her head. "I forget to take my vitamins in the morning. That's it, so don't ever think I'd leave here and forget to come and pick you up. I just thought you'd have more fun here all day than sitting at home watching television and have only Rudy and Rebecca to play with. Don't get me wrong, they're both great, but I bet the folks here play a better game of go fish than they do."

"Tiger's my best friend, he told me so."

*Ok, that has nothing to do with the conversation we were just having, but let's go with the flow.* Julian put a serious look on her face and nodded. "He is huh? Well that's a start. It's only your first day and you already have a best friend. By tomorrow you'll have enough people as your friends for a good game of poker."

Chris cleared her throat and shook her head. "That's not one of the games in our daily routine."

"Shame, it's lots of fun after a long day. Maybe I'll teach you at night before you go to bed," Julian told Summer. "Are we ok now?"

"I just wanna ta see you. Can you come and eat with me? Today's peanut butter and jelly day." She may have only been four, but Summer had learned to do a good begging face. "Please."

"Let me get to the meeting I have set up and then I'll be happy to come and have lunch with you." Julian hugged her before turning Summer around and scooting her back in the direction of the playroom. "I'm Julian Lowe," she held out her hand to Chris.

"Chris Breaux, it's nice to meet you."

"Thanks for calling me. Summer's going through some tough times I think so don't think you're bothering me if she wants to see my face every so often. I might not be able to come right down, but I'll try." She bent down and retrieved her bag figuring it was the only way to get the young woman to let her hand go. "Is it all right for me to come down here and have lunch with her."

"I doubt PBJs are your usual lunch fare, but we encourage our parents to come down and have lunch with the children whenever they can. Sometimes working takes up huge chunks of our day, so it's nice to have a moment to sit and listen to your three-year-old tell you about their day."

"Thanks, Ms. Breaux, I'll be back in a little while."

Chris turned and laughed when she saw Kiki hiding behind one of the large stuffed animals trying to listen in on their conversation. "It's safe now so you can come out. I'm not real sure what you're worried about but she seems really nice. What's the deal?"

"She came in this morning and gave me a little attitude, almost like she owned the place."

"Wait let me guess, you gave back in spades, right?" Kiki nodded her head as she chewed on the corner of her thumbnail. "And what do you know, she owns the place."

"Come on, how many times do you talk back to someone and they turn out to be the one person who can have you fired?"

"It's happened to me once already today as a matter of fact." The tease got Chris a hard slap to her arm. "Let's tidy up a bit, the boss is coming to lunch."

Kiki was about to say something when she felt a tug on her sweatshirt. "Hey, sweetie, do you have to go to the bathroom?" she asked Summer.

"No, Miss Kiki, I wanna to tell you that today's Jubian's birthday. Miss Rebecca made her pancakes with candles in them this morning. Neat, huh?"

"That is neat," Kiki looked at Chris as they both went through a mental inventory of what supplies they had on hand. "We'll have to sing to her when she comes back. Do you know the

birthday song?" Summer went back to play singing the song as loud as she could. "I'll take that as a yes. Do we have any cake batter handy?"

Before Chris could answer the elevator opened again so Linda Lamm from HR could step out. "Should I send you all flowers or would you prefer chocolates?"

"I'd prefer tequila, but if those are my only choices, I'll take chocolate." Both of the other women laughed at Chris' response knowing it was totally honest. "What? I'm expecting my period and a good piece of milk chocolate always hits the spot. To what do we owe the pleasure of your company? Your boss get bored and decide to stop buying us toilet paper?"

"My boss got an earful from Julian Lowe and then got his ass fired. I figured I was next when I got called to the penthouse, but when I arrived she gave me his job and had me do a slew of paper work. Call me Santa girls, because when I'm done you all are going to be some happy Lowe employees."

The memo she handed them outlined everything she and Julian had discussed but the clincher was that Julian had made the raises retroactive from the date of their employment. It was like getting a Christmas bonus a couple of months late.

"I'm not real sure what she was doing down here this morning, but after getting a lecture from one of you, she reviewed the structure and pay scale, and made some major changes. Just sign those and send them up whenever you can for processing. Don't spend it all in one place and try not to dawdle. I want to be able to cut those checks for this payroll." She snapped her fingers in front of the two shocked women before heading back to her desk. "Congratulate everyone for me. I know how much Sandy loves it down here, so I'm glad you're finally getting appreciated for your hard work."

"I'll be damned," Chris and Kiki said simultaneously.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Sign here, here and here and we're done," the trust attorney pointed to the appropriate spots on the page he'd handed her. In the years the money had been in their care it had grown to an almost obscene amount. Enough so that Julian could walk out and not work a day in her life until her great, great, great grandchildren were ready for a retirement home.

"Thank you, Maurice, you and the firm have done a wonderful job over the years. I'd be nice to her now, and maybe she'll retain your services," said Eugenia from her place next to Julian.

"There is one more thing, Mrs. Lowe."

"You're throwing some money into the pot?" joked the old woman.

"Before your son passed away so tragically he came in to make provisions for his new child." The silver haired attorney turned his attention to Julian before he went on. "That was a long time

ago and I believe I still had some black hair mixed in up here," he pointed to his head, "But I can still remember him sitting in that chair telling me about you. He was so excited, enough that he almost kept pinching himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. The one thing he knew for sure was that you would be taken care of no matter what happened in the future. You and your mother were his life." From the top desk drawer Maurice pulled out an envelope. "Just like you, Sebastian inherited the bulk of his trust when he reached the age you are now. Your grandfather was still a part of his life, but he wondered what would have happened if his life had been cut short."

If Julian afforded herself any nervous ticks it was twirling things between her fingers. The pen she loved so much, because it had been her father's, moved steadily from one end of her hand to the other. "What does this story have to do with me?"

"Your father was a progressive thinker, Julian. He was preparing to be a new father and he wanted to do the best job he could so he told me he had sat the night before he came to see me and wrote you a letter. It was his intention to be sitting here with you today when you came for what he considered a right of passage. When he received the money his father had set aside for him, he considered it not a time of growing older and leaving behind his youth, but a time to anticipate what the rest of his life held. Being a good father and a good husband I think topped his list, but in the eventuality that he couldn't be here for you, he left you a piece of his heart on paper." Maurice extended his hand and gave her the last thing Sebastian had ever written. "I'm sure it's a poor substitute but I've safe guarded it all this time and it gives me great pleasure to fulfill a promise to an old friend."

Julian's fingers felt numb and the pen fell without grace to the top of Maurice's desk. The heavy linen paper of the envelope felt bumpy under her fingertip as she ran her fingers over the letters on the front. It was addressed to Baby Lowe. "Thank you," she said through a tight throat filled with emotion.

"I hope when you read it you find the essence of the man who loved you from the day your mom told him you were on your way. Happy birthday, Julian."

With the paperwork complete, they left the office and decided to go to the cemetery. "Are you going to open it?" asked Eugenia. Julian had fallen into silence from the time they had left Maurice.

"Eventually, but not today."

"Aren't you curious as to what your father wanted to tell you?"

"More than anything in the world, I want to hear his words, but it might be nice to savor the fact I can hear them at all for just a little while longer. Is that ok?"

"My Julian, of course. It's your letter after all, and he wrote it with you in mind, so you read it whenever you want." She patted her granddaughter on the leg and looked out the window as the car rolled toward the river. In the middle of an old street in the uptown section of the city was a



small plot of land that held the graves of the Lowe family.

When Rudy stopped and opened the door, Julian helped her Nanna out and across the entrance. From her coat pocket she produced two stones and handed them to Eugenia before pulling out two for herself. They stood together in silence for over fifteen minutes before laying the rocks on top of the headstones marking Sebastian and Birdie's final resting place. They were just a sign that they had been there to remember the people they loved. Her grandmother started to walk away from her to head a little more to the left, but stopped when Julian's hand came to rest on her forearm. From her pocket she pulled another stone and gave it to Eugenia. She bent down so her Nanna could place a kiss on her cheek for her thoughtfulness. Next to her son was where Eugenia had buried her husband.

"So are you finally taking an old woman's advice and taking out a young beautiful woman?" asked Eugenia as Rudy headed in the direction of her house. Julian had apologized and promised an early dinner instead of lunch if her grandmother would forgive the change in plans.

"She's cute and she's definitely young, but don't get your hopes up, I don't think it'll last."

"Does dinner come with an explanation?"

"If you want we can eat at my place and you can meet her," Julian gave no other hints.

"She's living with you already and I've never heard of her? What's she after?"

"Not my money for sure, but I'm guessing a bit of my time will earn me a friend for life." Julian kissed Eugenia's cheek when the car pulled under the portico of her house. "Go take a nap and I'll see you at six thirty."

"If you need me for anything today just call."

"I do need one more thing," Eugenia waited hoping Julian would let some of that pain she carried out. "Would you be my Valentine?" asked Julian.

"Get off my property before I have Alice come out here and fill your butt with buckshot." They both laughed as Julian offered her arm to help Eugenia to the door.

"Happy birthday, Bernie," yelled the maid when Julian opened the door. She handed over a brightly wrapped box and smiled as Julian ripped through it.

"Alice, if you could give Nanna great grandchildren I'd ask you to marry me," said Julian as she looked down at the dozens of brownies stacked in the box.

"If I could give the old buzzard great grandchildren I'd take you up on the offer."

"The world just doesn't appreciate older women," said Julian as she waved before leaving.

On the way back she sat in the front with Rudy and shared some of her gift so he'd have time to brush his teeth before Rebecca could find out he'd been eating sweets. After the emotionally wrenching morning she was looking forward to seeing Summer again. It was nice to have someone who depended on her, if only for a short while.

\*\*\*\*\*

There were streamers with little hearts on them hanging from the ceiling around the dining tables and cardboard cutouts of Cupids stuck to the windows. Julian stood back unobserved and took in the whole room as all the women who worked with the children led them through a medley of songs. All of the toddlers had a stack of small white envelopes in front of them, and Julian was surprised to see a stack in front of Summer.

"Ok everyone, look through your stack and find the one that has this name written on the front." Kiki held up a big card with the name Amber on it. "Pull it out and hold on to it," she instructed.

"I can't find one, Miss Kiki," said a little girl at the head of one of the tables.

"That's because everyone else is going to give you one, honey. Everyone lets give Amber her Valentine's." A mad rush to the small redhead ensued after Kiki's suggestion. It went on for about twenty minutes as the kids really got into it and waited as Kiki worked her way through the alphabet. In the end every child had a stack of Valentine's Day cards with special treats like stickers sitting in front of them to enjoy.

A vague memory of kindergarten ran through Julian's mind of experiencing the same thrill when a little girl in her class had given her one. She still felt slightly guilty at having nothing to give in return, but it was great to see that Summer wouldn't have the same problem to worry about years later because of these thoughtful women.

"Hey, everyone, it's our special guest Julian. Can everyone say hi to Miss Julian?" asked Kiki when she spotted the tall brunette leaning against the counter.

Julian waved and told them hi back, blushing slightly from all the attention. "I'm not too late for lunch am I?"

"Just in time, boss," said Chris pulling out a small chair between Summer and Tiger. "We had the kitchen staff pull out the good jelly in your honor."

Kiki laughed at the giant sitting so close to the ground surrounded with little people. If the chair had been any lower, Julian's knees would've been wrapped around her ears. "Look at all my stuff," Summer held up all her cards to show Julian.

"I see that, it must be nice to have so many Valentines."

"What's a Balentine?" Summer slightly mangled the word.

"It's a person who cares about you and every year on this day sends you a card and maybe some chocolate to let you know they do," Julian watched Summer get up effortlessly from her chair, thinking she wasn't going to be so lucky when the time came.

"Who's your Balentines, Jubian?" A little hand landed on her shoulder.

"I don't have one, sweetie."

Both Tiger and Summer pulled a card from their stacks and handed it to her. "You can be my Balentine," said Summer.

"And mine too," Tiger chimed in. Kiki was stunned by the transformation of the handsome face when Julian really smiled. It was hard to believe someone so gorgeous wouldn't have someone who was waiting at home with some red lingerie and a card to let Julian know how they felt.

"Thanks, guys, my cup runneth over."

"You sure say some funny stuff, Julian," said Tiger.

"Tiger," Kiki dragged out the name as if she disapproved of something.

"I mean, Miss Julian."

"No problem, buddy, and maybe all I need to do is start watching cartoons then I won't say such funny stuff. What do you think?"

"Cartoons are my favorite."

"Mine too," added Summer from the other side. The bookends talked through the whole lunch entertaining Julian with their limited experience in life. It was something very different from her usual day, since even as a child Julian had never been much of a talker.

"You two have a good afternoon. I have to go back to work," said Julian after two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She had to fall forward on her knees before she could contemplate standing up.

"Not yet, we aren't done," said Kiki from right behind her. The kneeling woman noticed a large bonus and pay raise had softened Katherine's tone considerably.

"What I'm missing cookies for dessert?" She turned her head slightly noticing the yellow specks mixed in with the sparkling green in Katherine's eyes she was standing so close. *I wonder what she would look like in a black evening dress and pumps?* The question popped uninvited into her brain and Julian shook her head a couple of times as if to make it pop out of her left ear. "Any more sugar and you'll have to peel me off the ceiling."

"A little sugar never hurt anyone, so have a seat."

"And you were having a salad for lunch because?"

It was flattering in a way that Julian noticed anything about her. "I was saving myself for dessert." Her voice sounded a little huskier than Kiki was comfortable with so she straightened out and started toward her office. She looked back and pointed a finger at Julian. "Don't move, I'll be right back."

With help from Tiger and Summer, Julian was able to get back in the little torture chamber passing for a chair for whatever Katherine had planned. She almost fell out of it again when the blonde came out carrying a cake with thirty-five lit candles on it. Chris had a few sheet cakes on a cart behind Katherine and put her hand up in direction so the children would start singing. One big blow later, they all broke out into applause.

"It seems I've been missing out hanging out in the ivory tower," Julian told Katherine as she took a bite of the yellow cake with chocolate frosting. It was not a professional job and she wondered if Katherine had made it for her. She held up a forkful and smiled, "This is delicious by the way. Now that you have money to spend at the bakery, is this your last creation?"

The blush was cuter than hell and Julian's smile got bigger having guessed right. "No, it's one of the best things about this job and one of the saddest."

"Why sad?"

"When they get a year older, they're a year closer to heading off to school. After you spend all day with these little ones you grow attached. I hate seeing them go, but I feel good that we've taught them enough of the basics that they do well in real school." Kiki had taken Tiger's chair when the little boy finished his cake and went off to play with his new sidekick Summer.

"Where's your child during the day?" Kiki licked the rest of the icing off her fork as she hiked a brow in Julian's direction. *I wonder what she would look like in a black evening dress, with pumps and licking icing off my lips?* Julian ended up shaking her head again to clear her thoughts but it didn't do any good.

"Is there something wrong with your head, and how do you know so much about me?"

"The idiot we had in H.R. asked you a bunch of illegal questions on your application and I read them when I requested everyone's records after you told me I was paying you squat. I guess that means you can sue me, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't. Attorneys can be such a pain in the ass."

Kiki's laugh was heartfelt and it made Julian join her. "I'm sorry about this morning so I guess that makes us even. To answer your question, I spend all day with my son," she pointed to Summer's companion. "He's four going on forty when it comes to negotiating for something he wants, but I love him anyway."

"Ah, that explains the working for peanuts."

"I used to teach, but then a friend told me about this place when you were putting it together. In the classroom I didn't have the ability to spend this kind of time with him, so the salary was a small compromise. Whose idea was this?" She waved her arm to point out the whole facility.

"It was mine but I let other people finish it for me. Teach me not to follow through huh? Thank you for lunch, the cake and the great job you all do. And I'm sorry about this morning too. I was joking with you about the money but I'm glad you reacted the way you did. It helped me correct the royal screw up Simpson did to you. I'll be upstairs for the afternoon if Summer needs anything."

"Thank you for what you did. You were way too generous but we'll take it anyway," joked Kiki. "I really thought you'd end up firing me when I found out who you were."

"Well you'll get fired if you turn it down, Katherine, so keep up the good work." Julian put her hands on the small of her back when she was finally able to straighten it out. "Have a good afternoon."

"Just one more thing, Ms. Lowe," said Kiki before she walked away too far. She got her own raised eyebrow in return. "You can call me Kiki."

"I see that Summer isn't the only one lucking out today making new friends, thank you. You can return the favor and call me Julian." Julian winked loving the return of the blush.

\*\*\*\*\*

Julian was totally amazed with the way her grandmother had taken to her new houseguest, and wondered what it would be like to have a child of her own for Nanna to spoil. Growing up it had been a blast to find the surprises Eugenia was always leaving around for her to find. Seeing her with Summer made her think any child she might have would think of the old woman as their own living fairy godmother.

"What you need is a bicycle, a pink one I'm guessing," said Eugenia to her captive audience. "And a little bell on the handlebars so Julian can hear you around the yard when you ride."

"I don't know how to ride."

"Summer, when you're speaking with an adult you have to use the words ma'am and sir if you want to be polite," corrected Julian softly.

"Sir, I don't know how to ride," Summer tried again.

"In this case we'll go with ma'am, ok?" Julian jumped in again.

"Let's make it even easier and go with Nanna." Eugenia lifted her glass in her grand-daughter's direction not as a toast but to get her to shut up and stop interrupting her. "When Saturday rolls

around we'll go shopping and pick you up a few things."

"Nanna, Summer's mother will be coming back soon and we don't want to burden her down with too many things."

"Julian, when you're four you can never have too many things. When I was growing up my parents were poor but we still had lots of things. Sometimes it was a stick and a ball of string, but they still belonged to me and I loved to play with them. Now I'm not poor and it would give me great pleasure to buy Summer a bicycle. You would sit there and deprive an old woman of that simple gift?"

"Old woman my..."

"Ah, don't say another word or I'll have Rebecca come in here with a bar of soap." Eugenia turned back to Summer and laughed. "What kind of bike would you like?"

"A Barbie bike. Do they make those, Nanna?"

"Do you like Barbie?"

"I love Barbie."

"Then we'll get you that kind. You know when Julian was growing up," started Eugenia only, to be stopped by the subject of the upcoming story.

"There is no reason for Summer to hear about anything I did growing up, she needs to be her own person."

"I raised you, so that means I have the privilege of making fun of you, so hush." She pointed at Julian as a warning not to butt in again. "When Julian was growing up she didn't like Barbie."

"Why?" Summer looked at her caretaker for the moment with a mortally wounded expression.

"Because Barbie was a little materialistic, sweetie."

"Well she is," Julian said with conviction. "Who else has their own hot pink aisle, both sides mind you, at the toy store?"

"What's that mean?" asked Summer, having still not recovered from the fact Julian didn't like her idol.

"It means Barbie likes lots of stuff," supplied Eugenia. "But you know what?"

"What?" parroted Summer.

"Now she loves Barbie."

"You do?" Summer looked back at Julian feeling her world tilt back to center.

"Yes she does. It happened around twelve, I think."

"Ok, time for bed," Rebecca jumped into the deep end of the pool Eugenia was swimming in and rescued Summer before the two dueling relatives really got after it.

Julian laughed as she walked Eugenia out to the car after Summer spent ten minutes kissing and hugging her newly anointed Nanna good night. Julian could see that the youngest and oldest person in the room looked rather sad to see the evening come to a close. "Don't get too attached. She's not a puppy and we have to give her back in a couple of weeks," Julian told her grandmother.

"Just a few things she needs then I promise to be good. Tell me again why her mother left her with you?"

"Because I'm an easy mark who won't turn the kid over to protective services after finding her on my doorstep. After I spent ten minutes talking to her though, I would never do that to Summer. She seems like a lost little soul starved for attention, but she should be getting it from her mother not me."

Eugenia reached up and patted Julian's cheek. "She's lucky to have found you, my darling. I know your attention has always been the greatest blessing of my life."

"I love you, Nanna."

"I love you too. Now get inside and tuck your new little charge in for the night."

The only thing Julian could see above the blankets when she walked into the room was a little blonde head and long rabbit ears. "Hey, you need anything before I turn out the lights?"

"Why doesn't my mama like me, Jubian?"

Her face stayed motionless but Julian felt like someone had cold cocked her. "My name is kind of hard to say isn't it?" Every time she heard Summer try to wrap her tongue around her name the Julian came out differently but always wrong.

"Kind of, I'm sorry if I'm not saying it right."

Julian put her hand on top of the blanket and held it open, not having to wait long to find a smaller one lying in her palm. "My oldest friend in the world calls me Bernie."

"Why?"

"Cause my middle name's Bernstein and she thought I looked more like a Bernie than I did a

Julian. The other reason is she thinks it bugs Nanna." She got a giggle from the last statement. "If you want, since we're good friends, you can call me Bernie. And we're good friends, right?"

The question got Summer to scoot up a little to get closer to Julian, showing off her Barbie pajamas. "We're best friends like me and Tiger?"

"That's right, so you have two people who care about you and want to be your friend."

"But my mama doesn't."

"I think your mother loves you, she left you with me didn't she? And I love having you here so that's a plus. Sometimes people need time to see how special the people in their lives are, Summer, and when they do you won't have to ask why something isn't and just know something is." Julian found herself with a lap full of little girl and rabbit. "Does that make sense to you?"

"I'm glad my mama left me with you, Bernie. You're lots better than all the other times."

She had a hard time fighting down an irrational amount of anger before she opened her mouth again. Deanne was turning out to be a bigger shit than even Julian had given her credit for.

"When she comes back I'll tell her that if she ever has to leave again I want her to bring you to stay with me."

"Really?"

"Really, you can come as often as you want, but now it's time for you to leave and go to dreamland so tomorrow you'll be ready to go to school and see Tiger. Do you need to go to the bathroom or something?"

Summer reached up and kissed her cheek before crawling back under the covers. "No, Miss Rebecca made me go before. I love you, Bernie."

In a second Julian's eyes teared up and she felt warm all over she felt so good. "I love you too, sweetheart. Sweet dreams and come and get me if you need to." She pulled the covers back up to her chin and reached down and kissed Summer's forehead.

Before she turned in, she sat at the desk in her study and pulled her journal out of her briefcase. Turning to a new page, Julian pulled out her pen and uncapped it.

*February 14, 2002*

*I sit here at home and can say I lived through another birthday. This one is a little different since it was a sort of coming of age with an extraordinary amount of money as a bonus. I expected the money but I never expected a letter from my father. How many times today did I find myself reaching into my suit pocket to feel the texture of the envelope as if to convince myself it was real? I guess the better question is why I haven't opened it yet?*



*It's sitting here right in front of me and still I have yet to slip the opener through the edge and slit through the paper and into my past. No amount of staring is making me want to ruin the anticipation of what he might have put on those pages. Call me a shmuck, but I don't think I'm supposed to open it today. My plan is to lock it in the safe and wait for the right time. It's just comforting to know it's there and he had the foresight to think it might be needed.*

*Oddly enough what I discovered today is that I am needed. How can a kiss on the cheek from a little slip of a girl make me want to take on the world to keep her safe? And who can I hire to beat the shit out of her mother? On second thought, if given the opportunity, I might do it myself for filling Summer's head with so much self-doubt. Summer showed me today that the smallest of gestures can go a long way in someone's life.*

*God I sound like a sentimental asshole again, but why shouldn't I. I've found myself thinking the weirdest things today. Maybe I should blame the sugar I consumed at lunch. Well I imagine it won't be so bad to be a sap every so often to make other people happy, even if all you have to show for it at the end of every day is a bad back from sitting on miniature chairs and a kiss on the cheek.*

*Another birthday Mama and Papa, and I'm still around to look toward the horizon. I gave a gift in your honor to the art guild, Mama, and a late bonus to some under appreciated daycare workers in your honor, Papa. One will help children see the beauty in things, and the other will just help children.*

*Rest well and know that I love you.*

Julian waited a moment before closing the book, so the ink would dry and not smudge, before opening the safe and placing the treasure she'd been given earlier inside. Her last act was to blow out the *Yartzeit* candles.

The wisps of smoke curled toward the ceiling, but for once Julian thought of Summer's sorrow instead of her own. What she didn't realize was Summer was the key to opening her heart.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Did you run out of sweatshirts this morning?" asked Chris as she plucked at the pink cashmere sweater Kiki had on over a pair of blue slacks.

She wanted to die when Chris leaned closer and noticed she had put on a light coat of pale pink lipstick to go with the bizarre choice of outfit for work. In the course of a day they dealt with so many finger paints, glue and sticky little hands that it was a disaster waiting to happen if you wore nice clothes. "I felt like dressing a little differently today, shoot me."

"Just felt like a change, huh?"

"Yes, it happens you know. I just wanted to change my routine a bit."

"And here comes the reason now," said Chris looking at the two stepping off the elevator.

Julian had chosen a dark pinstripe wool suit with a shirt so white the two women studying her thought it had just come out of the package and a pair of Italian leather shoes Eugenia had ordered custom-made for her. On one arm was a long black cashmere coat and her briefcase, and tucked snugly in the other hand was Summer's.

In unison, Kiki and Chris let out a long breath and fought hard not to moan when Julian smiled at them. There was something about the way the skin around her eyes crinkled that made her seem sexy. Julian was like a citified, female version of the Marlboro man. Healthy and rugged were two words that popped into Kiki's mind as she watched her lead Summer to where they were standing.

"Good morning, ladies. We're ready for our second day," Julian said looking down at Summer.

It had scared the crap out of Julian when she opened her eyes that morning and found the little girl's face inches from her own, but she managed to smile instead of letting out an expletive. Over breakfast she noticed that her little charge was starting to get an appetite and now laughed at every joke Rudy told her.

"Good morning, Summer." Kiki got down on one knee and helped her off with her coat and hat. "Miss Chris is going to take you and get you ready for your morning snack ok."

Miss Chris gave her a cross between a frown and a smirk before taking Summer's hand. "Wait, Miss Chris," said Summer, digging her heels into the carpet.

"Don't you want to go in and play?"

"I wanna to tell Bernie goodbye." Summer pulled her hand free and ran back to Julian. "See you later, Bernie. Remember I love you."

"I love you too, sweetie. Be good today and call if you need anything."

"Will you come eat with us again?"

"If all my big boats are where they're supposed to be, we'll see. Go have fun." Julian watched her go until they turned the corner out of sight. She found Kiki smiling, at her expression she guessed, so it was just best to ask. "What?"

"You don't look like a 'Bernie'."

"'Julian' was just giving her a hard time is all."

"I'm not questioning your reasoning, I just think it's adorable as hell." The elevator closed and Kiki knew their time was about to get cut short by someone getting on at the first floor. "You're welcome to come back. We're having chicken nuggets today."

"My cholesterol level and waistline may never be the same again."

"Actually the woman who owns this place buys peanut butter with no sugar added and all white meat non processed chicken, but don't tell anyone. It'll be our secret."

"She sounds so generous I may have to go to accounting and see what's going on here," Julian teased back. Kiki had crossed her mind more than once that morning and on the way in she found herself anxious to see her again.

"We named her 'The Goose' after she dropped off her golden egg yesterday, so don't say anything bad about her, we think she's the best."

"I see. You love her only for her money, huh?"

"It's the all white meat, non processed chicken actually." Kiki continued her teasing but finished on a serious note. "The money was nice but it was taking up for us that was the most valuable thing. It's nice to be taken seriously and having the boss think we do a good job."

The dark head nodded and Julian heard the bell behind her announcing more incoming parents and children. "I'll tell her when I see her, Miss Katherine." Julian leaned forward a little and lowered her voice as she felt the people by the door stop, probably wondering what she was doing down there. "I wanted to tell you something before I go."

After running through a catalog of smells trying to pinpoint what Julian's perfume reminded her of, Kiki narrowed it down to citrus combined with the ocean. If there was such a smell as crisp, it was filling her nostrils as Julian got close to her. "What?"

"You look very nice."

It was when the pleasant smell disappeared that Kiki noticed her eyes had been closed the whole time and Julian was in the elevator. Kiki could've sworn her boss had winked before the doors slid shut. For what seemed like an eternity she was frozen in place with the hair on the back of her neck standing at attention. It had been so long since she'd had that reaction to anyone just whispering a compliment. *Relax, Kiki, she probably tells everyone she runs into how nice they look.* She tried to convince herself of that but it wasn't working, but she had until lunch to make it stick. Kiki was in no position to be accepting anything from Julian except a job. Attraction or whatever the hell she was feeling was out of the question.

Lunch came and Julian joined them again for a little while, this time sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her to get a little more comfortable. She had come without the jacket and if the staff had thought she looked good that morning, the more relaxed Julian looked ever better. At one point when she smiled up at Kiki, the small blonde managed to pour a glass of milk on Chris' head, stopping only when she heard the howl of outrage.

Three days, three lunches and three spilled beverages later it was Friday, to Kiki's and Chris'

relief. The blonde needed the weekend to get her perspective in alignment with her reality, sure of the fact that by Monday, she'd be fine. Every night when she was lying in bed trying to go to sleep, Kiki wondered what it was that was happening to her. Julian was always polite, cordial, but never outright flirted with her, so Kiki felt like her feelings were insane like some sort of hormonal imbalance.

"Are you coming down for lunch today?" Kiki asked Julian as she walked her to the elevator.

"Actually I have a lunch meeting with the Cat Diesel representative, so I won't be down here bothering you today."

Kiki put her hand on Julian's forearm and just as quickly pulled away. "You're no bother, and Summer and Tiger love when you come down here and read to them. I'm glad they're getting along so well, and Summer likes being here." *Shut up now, you're babbling.*

"Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, just tired. Have a great day and we'll miss you."

"I'm sure Armand's will be a huge disappointment over..." The tall woman cocked her head to the side and smiled.

"We're having pizza and banana pudding," Kiki filled in the blank.

"Pizza and banana pudding, but I'll be back Monday." Julian reached out and squeezed her shoulder briefly before pressing the button of the elevator. "Have a good day, Kiki. You know I have good ears if you need to talk about something." It didn't hurt to try just one more time.

*And a good ass, hair, eyes, hands, mouth,* Kiki could have listed twenty things in less than twenty seconds. "Nope, nothing to talk about here. Go to work, Bernie, before you get fired." The nickname had stuck with Kiki from the first moment Summer had said it but she only used it when there was no one else around.

She stood staring at the closed elevator doors for a moment. "With any luck I'll be hit by a bus on the way home today." Kiki wiped her now sweaty palms on her oldest sweatshirt wondering what was happening to her and how in the hell she stopped it from getting worse.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Bonjour, Ms. Lowe. Table for two?"

"Thank you, Pete, we'll take whatever's available." He shook her hand and grabbed two menus as he pocketed his tip. It didn't take long before they were shown to one of the nicest tables in Armand's.

"This is a treat. I've read about the place but haven't had the opportunity to try it out," said

Cassandra, the representative who sold Julian all her ship engines.

"Give me a big enough discount on my next purchase and I'll treat every week."

"With these prices I might just have to do that." Cassandra loved spending time with Julian, if only to look at her from across a table or desk. Julian Lowe to her was the total package, the only problem was she didn't seem very interested, and the Lowe account was so important she didn't want to blow it by making a false move. The only bright spot was that Julian hadn't sent her packing back to the office like the previous two reps the company had assigned to her. "Is the ship ready enough for us yet?"

"I called the foreman this morning and he's thinking maybe in two weeks. Are all my parts in?"

"I have three warehouses set aside for you. Not that I spend lots of time in the shops but I love when you have something new in construction. It's not often I get to walk into a piston, or that I see valve chambers that actually have doors. I'd hate to see your gas bill."

Julian broke off a piece of the freshly baked bread and slathered it with butter. "I always found that amusing about our business. It takes a shit load of diesel to transport the crude that will be turned into diesel and gasoline. On the other hand it's easy to build a big hollow boat with just a few rooms and big engines."

"My bonus will be so big this year from this, maybe I should take you on a cruise ship that has big engines and lots of comfortable rooms."

If the suggestion bothered her it didn't show in Julian's expression. "Cruises like that are my definition of hell. I love the ocean and I actually have a license to operate everything in our fleet but that's different. It's just you and a small crew to enjoy the solitude the water can give you. Our cruises are a little different, but it's three months of heaven."

"Then you should invite me the next time you ship out."

"In those heels, you wouldn't last a week."

"Why, Julian, I didn't think you cared, or noticed anything about me."

"You'd be surprised what I notice, Cassandra."

"Would you like to hear our specials this afternoon?" the waiter stood with his pad behind his back not really wanting to interrupt but also knowing Julian didn't like to linger over lunch unless it was Eugenia sitting across from her.

"Fire away, William, and tell me there's salmon somewhere on that list."

"You're the first person I know who would do well in captivity since you can eat the same thing over and over without ever getting bored. Salmon for Julian, and for you, Miss?"

"Let's make it easier on you and make it two." Cassandra wanted to hurry and get rid of the waiter as soon as possible now that she was making some progress with Julian. "So....,"

"So," Julian echoed.

"What else do you notice about me?" Since the first couple of responses could have been categorized as flirting Cassandra decided to take a chance.

Over the woman's head Julian caught Pete's eye, prompting him to come running over. "Is there something I can get you?"

"A scotch and cranberry if you would." She smiled up at him before focusing back to Cassandra. "Anything for you?"

"Just make it two." It didn't sound good but it would be tolerable if it meant everyone leaving them alone.

"Sorry about that, to answer your question I notice lots of things about you. The way you take care of our accounts without mistake, the fairness you show in business and the way you keep everything running smoothly on projects like the Sea Dragon." A little playing around was always fun but it was time to bring this talk to safer waters. Cassandra Jarvis was attractive, smart and witty but Julian's mind was on someone else.

"I'm sorry to interrupt again, Julian, but there's a call at the bar for you. Darlene said to tell you it's important." Pete looked mortified at having come back so soon, but to make up for it he put down two drinks.

"I'm sorry again, crazy day huh?" Julian asked Cassandra.

"That's one word for it. Hurry back." Cassandra picked up her drink and took a sip, her face breaking out in a grimace after doing so. Julian was good looking and knew a whole lot about running a shipping transport company, but her taste in liquor combinations left a lot to be desired.

At the bar, Julian looked toward the table and felt bad for what she was about to do, but the conversation had drifted into what she thought were stormy waters. She liked Cassandra and enjoyed working with her, but the thought of a romantic involvement was dangerous. If it didn't work out, she would lose the working relationship they shared and sometimes when you found someone who made projects like the one they were meeting about easy, it was worth more than a game of slap and tickle. The thing she was having trouble with was convincing herself that the same rule should apply to one Katherine X. Breaux.

"Thanks, buddy, I owe you yet another one," said Julian to Pete. The manager as well as most of the wait staff knew that when Julian ordered the strange drink, there was to be an urgent call from the office.

"Anytime. It's always nice to help a friend."

"Let me go and make my apologies, so could you have Rudy bring the car around." Julian set her face in a slight scowl and started back to the table. "Cassandra, you're going to hate me but I have to go back to the office. Please enjoy your meal and Pete's great service and I promise to make it up to you."

"It can't wait?"

*Pizza and banana pudding don't sound like something you want to eat after it's been sitting out for a while, so no, it can't wait.* "One of our departments is having a thing and I think it's best for me to be there. Call me next week and we'll make plans to run out to the storage units at your place and see what's the best way to proceed."

"Sure, thanks." There was nothing else to say as Julian shook her hand and turned to leave. The waiter was close by, so Cassandra got his attention and switched to white wine. No sense in suffering with something that tasted like it had fermented a little too long now that she was alone.

Julian leaned against the counter that contained little lockers on the other side where the staff stored the children's things during the day and watched as Kiki sat close to Summer and Tiger with a plate balanced on her lap. A hand with really delicate looking fingers combed a lock of blonde hair behind her ear, and Julian studied her with her chin leaning on her palm. There was something about this unassuming woman that she found endearing. Kiki was dressed casually again and her face was free of makeup except for a small amount of coral tinted lip-gloss. The overall effect was stunning, and Julian couldn't remember running across someone so beautiful. In a way Kiki reminded her a little of Deanne, only she wasn't insane. It was why Summer and Tiger looked like they could have been twins.

Kiki could sense someone looking at her and it made the hair she had just brushed behind her ear fall back in her face again when she whipped her head around. Finding Julian in such a relaxed pose looking right at her was the last thing Kiki expected. It had already been a long day after finding out the CEO wasn't joining them for lunch. In only one week Julian had managed to change the dynamics of the place with her steady presence for an hour or so every day.

"You guys finish up here, I'll be right back." Kiki patted both Summer and Tiger on the head before getting up and walking slowly to the counter, going around it to stand next to Julian and mirror her pose. "You're a big surprise."

A dark brow went up and Julian swiveled her head in Kiki's direction but kept her chin in her hand. "Kind of like when you get a thick envelope from the IRS?"

Kiki laughed and slapped Julian's arm. "No, Bernie, more like when someone gives you flowers unexpectedly."

"Got any pizza left?"

"I thought you had a big lunch meeting today."

"So did I, but when I was sitting at a nice table with my diesel engine rep sitting across from me flirting, all I could think about was pizza and banana pudding." *And you*, Julian finished silently.

"If that's what was on your mind, you've come to the right place." Kiki reached up and pulled Julian's arm down by the wrist almost making her smash her face into the wood surface she'd been leaning on. "Sorry, how about I buy you a slice of pepperoni to make it up to you?"

Julian looked down at the fingers wrapped around her wrist and wished for something sappy like her class ring to ask for some sort of commitment from the blonde. "I gave up salmon in a mushroom truffle sauce for sausage?"

"No for pepperoni in a delightful tomato sauce with pineapple."

"Oh well, I should stop my bitching."

The boss ended up eating four slices of pizza, finding it a strange combination with milk, but then thought of the atrocious drink combination she'd left Cassandra with and stopped herself from asking for a coke. Before she retreated back to her office she'd taken the time to read twelve books to a drowsy audience.

"What kind of person do you think Julian really is?" asked Chris as they sat in the office. She was helping Kiki do their time sheets to turn into accounting and was growing more and more curious about the woman who had been down more than any other parent. The few that had come down for their weekly lunch visits had been shocked to find Julian sitting with the two small inseparable blondes.

Kiki looked up from her paperwork and scrunched up her face trying to fathom what Chris meant. They always tried to finish stuff like this when the kids were taking a nap. Bringing up a topic for discussion like this would mean staying late. "You don't think she's nice?"

"I didn't say that, I think she's great, but I just want to know what you think of her."

"She seems noble and kind."

The redhead lifted her arms up and pretended to be playing a violin. "Come on here, sappy, it's the new millennium."

"She is, in my eyes. Julian got thrown a curve ball with Summer and she's trying to make the best of it. I never cease to be amazed at how many people drop their children off with us in the morning and then never give them another thought until they pick them up in the afternoons. The greatest thing about my day is I get to watch Tiger run around like a nut for most of it."



Chris' eyes closed a little before she continued her covert interrogation. "Could we add watching Julian read or do just about anything else while she's here?"

There was no real way to answer the question and not lie, so Kiki was as honest as she could manage. "I like that she likes children."

"Give me a break, Kiki, she's crazy about you, and considering how annoying you are it's amazing it's taken her all of a week to fall in love with you."

"I'm not annoying, I'm passionate about certain issues, and there's no way in hell Julian's in love with me."

"Hello," Chris leaned forward and tapped her on the head. "Have you noticed the way those killer blue eyes follow you around the room?"

"Please, you know I can't encourage that in my life right now. It wouldn't be right."

Chris opened her fist and cupped Kiki's cheek. "Tell me right here, right now that you're happy and I'll never bring this up again."

"Just leave it alone is all I'm asking. Julian's great, I admit, and I really do enjoy her company but that's all."

"Then do you mind if I take a shot at her?"

Kiki's eyes dropped back to her desktop so Chris wouldn't see she was upset. "Sure, it's not like she belongs to me."

*B - I - N - G - O and Bingo was his name-o. Sure you don't mind, sweetie. You keep telling yourself that and eventually you'll choke on the truth.* "Thanks, I didn't want to do anything to mess things up for you."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Bernie, you coming down anytime soon?"

Julian looked at her watch and couldn't believe it was fifteen till seven. One thing after the other had gone wrong at the construction site of the Sea Dragon then a stowaway had been spotted jumping out of one of their incoming ships. "I'm sorry, Kiki, I'll send for Rudy to come pick up Summer and bring her home."

"Not so fast, she's expecting you and we just got her to stop believing you'll forget her. I don't think she's mentioned that statement for at least two days so we're not going backwards here. Will I be shot on sight if I come upstairs with her and Tiger?"

The laugh was the only thing she'd enjoyed all day aside from the lunch surrounded in little

people with greasy hands. "I'll have the killer squad stand at ease until you make it safely into my office."

"Darlene?"

The assistant was sorry none of the windows in the building opened if only to rip the intercom out and toss it to a well deserved death on the streets below. "Yes, what can I do for you?"

"Could you meet the elevator and lead the eclectic group you'll find coming up to my office? I promise once they're safely deposited you can go home." Darlene let out the air she was holding in her lungs. "Just one more thing, thank you for all the hard work today."

"Thanks, it's nice to be appreciated." Darlene locked her desk before heading to the elevator bank in the main lobby of the upper suites.

All together there were four offices on the top floor and excluding Julian's, the other three were as coveted as gold within the company. In the east corner sat the vice-president of finances, the west corner housed the vice president of shipping and their fleet, and sandwiched in the middle was the vice-president of operations. All three reported directly to Julian whose staff took up the other side of the top floor.

The two little blondes followed by the young woman who looked like their mother made Darlene clap her hands together and smile. The three of them cut a cute picture and she hoped to any deity who was listening the only thing missing was Julian. "It's nice to finally meet the reason Julian has been disappearing on us for so long during the days. She's on the phone so if you'd all follow me, I'll show you to her office."

"The definition of stowaway is we didn't allow them on the boat, Agent Dupont. I want my boat released no later than tomorrow morning. The damn thing is full of crude so there aren't too many places for this idiot to have hidden anything. Maybe he just wanted to improve his life by coming to America, has that crossed your mind?" Julian stopped her pacing and put her hands on her hips as she looked out the window. "A week? I have your word that after that week I can have my ship back." To Kiki she looked tired as Julian put her hand on the wall of glass before her and sighed. "What choice do I have. A week then."

She took the earpiece and mike off and threw it back on her desk. With all that was going on the INS didn't take very kindly to guys trying to sneak into the country no matter what the reason was. "Having a bad day, Bernie?"

"Something along those lines." Julian blinked a couple of times but Kiki's voice did make her feel better. "Thanks, Darlene, I know you know I appreciate you, but I bet Stan would appreciate it a lot more if you went home. I am sorry for keeping you around so long on a Friday night."

"I'm in my late fifties, Julian, Friday nights don't hold the same allure as they did when I was twenty."

Kiki laughed at the older woman's humor, glad that this was who Julian got to spend her days with. Someone like Darlene seemed to be efficient at her job but also cared about her boss. "Then you should go home and get Stan to put on a suit and take you out on the town," instructed Kiki.

The assistant laughed herself before waving and closing the door behind her. With just the four of them the children ran passed Julian and pressed their faces to the windows and looking down at the street and city. The sun had set and the lights in the surrounding buildings made it possible to see into the offices that were still illuminated. Before the two adults could say anything Darlene came in with one last file for Julian to look at.

"I'm sorry, the invitations arrived and Cheryl over at the museum wanted your approval on the final design by Monday if it's possible."

Julian took it from her and placed it on the desk. "Good night, and thanks, I'll look at them this weekend. Drive safe going home."

Alone again, Julian sat on the edge of her desk and crossed her arms over her chest. "I should thank you as well. Thanks for taking the time to bring Summer up here. It's been such a long day that I think I'll just pack up and finish some of this stuff at home."

"Anything I can do to make it better?"

Julian had stepped around her desk and started to pack when she looked up and thought before answering. "Would you and Tiger join Summer and me for dinner?"

"Dinner sounds nice but I'm not dressed for anything fancy."

"Give me a minute and I'll change." Julian stepped into the bathroom and found a clean pair of jeans and her boots, deciding to keep the white shirt and just replace the jacket with the suede coat that was her favorite.

The pizza wasn't as good as the one they'd had for lunch but watching Tiger and Summer run around the restaurant playing every game they could manage made up for the cardboard with sauce. "I bet this is a little different than your usual fair, huh?"

"I've seen the commercials for this place but no, I never thought I'd stop the car in front, much less actually walk inside. With Tiger though I bet you come here all the time. He seems a whiz at that gopher thing." The plastic cup full of diet cola felt strange in her hand and the noise level was like no other restaurant she'd been in. At the daycare it seemed easy to make conversation with Kiki, but now Julian felt a little nervous.

"I try not to give in too often but he has a good begging face, so yes we come here quite regularly."

Julian nodded and looked toward the sea of balls the kids were swimming through wondering

how long the flu virus lived outside the body. She wanted to ask Kiki something but was afraid of the reaction she'd get. She liked the blonde but Kiki also worked for her. "Do you like art?" Sometimes the direct approach was the best.

"What kind?" Kiki wondered where this conversation was headed since Julian had seen her personnel file. Along with a degree in education Kiki had also majored and graduated in art.

"Eclectic."

"Is that like finger painting or something?"

The joke was meant to loosen Julian up and it worked when she laughed and her face relaxed rewarding Kiki with one of those smiles she liked so much. "It means modern to classical and everything in between. My mother loved art in all forms. It was her passion, or so I'm told. To her, anyone brave enough to put brush to canvas deserved to be praised and given a way to showcase their efforts."

"You make her sound like she was a wonderful woman and knowing you don't embellish on too many things, I'm sure she was. That's a beautiful sentiment for anyone to have. I would've liked to have met her." Kiki put her hand over Julian's and squeezed the cold fingers.

"I would've liked to have met her too."

The voice sounded so rough with emotion Kiki was at a loss as to what to say so she fell back on the old standard. "I'm sorry, Bernie, I didn't know."

"I'm not telling you all this to make you feel sorry for me, trust me, I have other motives in mind. For the past ten years or so I've been working on the Birdie Lowe collection of art to hang in the Roberta Bernstein Lowe Museum." The hand covering hers gave Julian courage. "The invitation Darlene left me before she left was for the upcoming opening and I was wondering if you'd go with me." She looked up finally and found something that looked like pain in Kiki's eyes. "Don't feel like you have to say yes, I just thought you'd might be interested."

"I am," Kiki started and wanted more than anything not to hurt Julian but had no choice, "But I can't."

"That's ok, don't worry about it."

"Don't do that, Bernie. I really would love to go with you but I can't." Kiki could see the curtain down behind those beautiful blue eyes hiding Julian's emotions from her.

"And I said it's all right. There was no harm in asking and there's not harm in turning me down."

Summer picked that moment to run up to the table saving Julian from having to say anything else. "Bernie, could you get me a prize?"

"Sure I can and then we have to go. How about you and Tiger pick something out and it'll be my treat." She left money on the table for the tip and grabbed her coat. "Is that ok, me getting Tiger something?"

"Sure, I'm sure he'd like to have something to remember the night by. He really does love playing with Summer. How much is our share?"

"Like I said, my treat, don't worry about it."

Both children walked out with a stuffed animal under their arm and it surprised no one that Summer picked another rabbit. She'd explained that Binky had always wanted a brother. Rudy followed Kiki's directions until they were parked in front of a small cottage in the Faubourg Marigny. There was a wrought iron fence that went around the front of the property backed by hedges and behind it a slew of forgotten toys from Tiger's last adventures.

"Thank you both for joining us. It was a new experience for the both of us I think." Julian said their good byes from the car after noticing the front door wasn't a long walk down the walk. Rudy waited at her direction until the two blondes were safely inside.

"Oh, Bernie, you don't know how badly I wanted to say yes," said Kiki from the other side of the door. At that moment every admonishment her mother had issued when she was growing up about the decisions you make came back to haunt her. "She'll love it when I call her and tell her she was right."

\*\*\*\*\*

Monday it was the same traffic jam at the entrance with parents stripping off clothes and putting away supplies, but one thing was missing. It was getting late and Julian and Summer had yet to arrive. As Kiki helped the last child with her things, the elevator opened for Summer and Rudy.

"Sorry we're running late," said Rudy.

"That's ok, we'll give her a muffin anyway," said Kiki accepting a hug from Summer. "Go on in, sweetie." The two adults both watched the little girl run off to the seat Tiger was saving for her. "Is there something wrong with Julian?"

"We had to drop her off at the shipyard this morning, that's why we're running late."

Lunch came and went, as well as the afternoon pick up and drop off for four days and there was no sign of Julian. On Friday, Darlene came down and invited Summer and Tiger up to the penthouse to have lunch with Julian, who turned out to be in the building only for that short time. By that afternoon Kiki wanted to cry, the reasons for Julian's absence were explained as just work related, but she felt like it had a lot to do with her.

When the next Monday came with no sign of Julian, she took a chance and called Julian's office. "Darlene, this is Kiki from downstairs, can I speak to Julian please?"

"I'm sorry, Kiki, I'd love to put her on the line but she's not in the building. We've had some delays on the new ship in construction right now and she's been stuck out there longer than she'd like. There isn't anything wrong with Summer, is there?"

"No, ma'am, I just wanted to speak to Julian for a moment. I'm sorry to bother you."

"Nonsense, I'm sure she misses her lunches down there with you all so I'll make sure and let her know you called."

On Tuesday Kiki reviewed her messages on her work phone before the children started to arrive. "I'm sorry I missed you yesterday, Kiki, but I was stuck on the west bank until after eight. If there's something urgent you need call Darlene and she'll handle whatever is necessary." There was nothing else, but it was just nice hearing Julian's voice. It would be Friday before Kiki would hear it again.

"Now remember Rudy's coming to pick you up this afternoon and I won't see you until tomorrow ok," Julian told Summer as they rode up together to the daycare.

"I remember. Miss Rebecca said we could go to the movies today after school since you won't be home, then I get to stay with Ellen until you all get back." After all the late nights the one thing Julian always managed to do was tuck Summer into bed, and after all the attention and regular routine she had come to think of Julian's home as her own.

Kiki's eyes took her in from head to foot when Julian stepped off the elevator. It had been two weeks too long since she'd made an appearance and it didn't hit her full force until that moment how much she missed her. "Hi, stranger."

"I feel like one after skulking around the Sea Dragon all this time. Have you been ok? I guess you took care of whatever you needed since I didn't hear from you again."

*I just wanted to see you, but how juvenile would that sound to you now.* "Just something minor so don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're back."

"Actually I'm just here to drop Summer off this morning then I'm on the run again."

The suit wasn't the proper attire for construction zones and wherever Julian was off to wasn't any of Kiki's business. "You're not dressed to do any skulking today." Kiki had accepted a long time before that sometimes being proper was beaten into submission by your heart.

"Skulking still, just at a different location. The museum is finished and I just wanted to do a final run through before tonight." Her project to honor who her mother had been and the thing she loved most in life aside from her father was done and Julian just wanted the opportunity to walk the floor alone before the crowds of the coming gala. "It was nice seeing you again, Kiki."

"You too." There was nothing else to say. When the door slid closed, Kiki had never felt such an

acute pain in her life but she had made commitments and she planned to honor them.

\*\*\*\*\*

The building had been a coffee storage warehouse built a hundred and thirty years before. When she had driven by it one day, Julian called the number on the large for sale sign bolted to the side of the building and made an offer without ever stepping foot inside. The crew she'd hired to bring it back from near collapse had been small, but they were craftsmen who took pride in doing it the old ways.

Little by little the gunk of the years was stripped away revealing the treasures that only old buildings possessed. They went in concert with the new additions that were necessary. Walls with solid wood cores in the layout of easy mazes were expensive, but necessary for the art they would someday hold. The one pleasant thing that lingered no matter how much varnish went on the old floors, or paint went on the new walls was the faint smell of coffee. To Julian it was like the building's way of saying 'I was a blank canvas when you found me, but my past will only enhance the future you have given me.'

When Rudy stopped, Julian sat for a long time just looking at the place and her mother's name now in brass letters across the front. Wearing suits and lined up by the door was the staff and the curator who had all been a large asset in acquiring all the things inside. For Julian, bringing back the company from extinction had been her gift to her father, but this was strictly for Birdie. The woman who had given her life in exchange for her own.

"Ms. Lowe," said the curator when she finally decided to open the door. He handed her the key to the front door and bent his head just a fraction. "The floor is yours."

The staff had done a masterful job of positioning the pieces. Large bronze modern sculptures captured your attention from the minute you walked in, and their outstretched arms encouraged you to touch. The metal felt slightly warm to her when Julian touched the first one entitled 'Mother.' It was a woman of disproportionate features holding a child in one arm with the other held out as if calling another. To most that saw her it spoke of welcome, but to Julian it meant belonging. Never knowing someone didn't mean you didn't belong to them.

On the other side of the bronzes, started the collection of modern art pieces that were like an explosion of color. They were hung at different heights throughout the room and all the way up the ramp to the second level where local artists held the floor. Black, white, Indian and Cajun artists mixed together to paint a montage of Louisiana much like the jambalaya dish the state was known for. Just like the first floor, the second was fun for the visual sense and Julian almost didn't want to let go to proceed to the third floor where the more serious pieces were hanging.

Here the paintings were further apart so that each could shine in its own special light and importance. The way the staff had placed them didn't give significance to one over the other, and that's what Julian had wanted. It honored, in her opinion, anyone who had had the courage to put brush to canvas like her mother had believed, so along side the Renoir was a little less known artist of the same period, and so it was all along the walls.

Then in a room at the center of the maze with two large entrances on either side of one wall, and one lone bench at its center, hung the three paintings her mother had loved most of all. On the wall opposite of where you entered hung a large Monet from his earlier works. It was still a theme of flowers but from before he owned the famous Giverny that would be his inspiration till the end of his life. On the other two walls hung two of his later works, a little smaller in scale but not in brilliance.

Julian sat on the bench and looked at the lilies from one of the many parks in Paris. In the wheelhouse of a large cargo ship she felt the part of her that was her father, but here in the quiet, looking at the vibrant colors, she felt the person who had been her mother. The moment and feeling of finally seeing it like it was meant to be viewed made tears spring to her eyes, and as they fell Julian began to laugh. Like in all Monet's works, the more your vision becomes obscured the sharper the painting becomes.

"Do you like it?"

"Randolph, you and your staff have outdone yourselves. I'm sure my mother would've been proud to have her name associated with this place." She noticed the champagne bucket in his arms and laughed again.

"I'm just glad you're pleased, otherwise you might have hit me with this instead of helping me drink it." He popped the cork slowly not wanting the liquid to spill on his spotless floors and just as carefully poured to glasses. "Here's to Roberta Birdie Lowe, may she enjoy the fruits of our labors."

"I'll drink to that."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Come up and make yourself comfortable, I'm almost finished," said Cassandra from the intercom upstairs in her apartment. After their lunch date got cut short, she hadn't expected to hear from Julian again, so being asked to be her escort for the evening had come as a shock.

"Take your time, we're not in a hurry. I'm thinking they'll hold off the ceremony until we get there."

"Make yourself a drink if you want."

Julian poured a small amount of scotch into a glass at the bar and looked around Cassandra's home. On the top of a bookshelf she was surprised to find models of all the ships the Lowe company had outfitted over the years. She was holding one in her hand when Cassandra stepped out of the bedroom. Where did you get all these?"

"Mike your head of operations gave me the first one then Darlene helped me get the whole set. I have a nephew who thinks they're the greatest things in here when he comes over." Cassandra



turned around and presented a long expanse of light brown skin for Julian's enjoyment. "Could you please?" she asked referring to the zipper.

"Best offer I've had all night." It wasn't a complicated procedure but Julian went slowly. "Thanks again for coming with me tonight."

"Thanks for asking, and before we head out can I ask you something?"

Her best client drained her glass and placed it on the mantle. "Shoot."

"Does being your date tonight mean I can hold your hand if I want to without fear of repercussions?"

"I think it's a safe bet." Julian held out her hand just to put the woman at ease. "You ready to go?"

Julian helped her on with the fur coat Cassandra had chosen for the evening and took her hand for the elevator ride back to the lobby. Both Rudy and Rebecca were in the car since Julian wanted them to be at the opening, and Cassandra leaned forward and greeted them both warmly.

"Is your grandmother coming tonight?" asked Cassandra once they started toward downtown.

"She's taking her own car so Alice could attend."

"Alice?"

"Old friend of the family and she works for Nanna." From the front seat the older couple smiled. They were in the presence of another generation of Lowe who had inherited the same sense of compassion for those close to them. "Let them park this thing, Rudy. This is no night to let Rebecca walk in alone." Julian pointed toward the valet staff hired just for the night.

Eugenia watched from just inside the door as Julian made her way in with her date. She looked like someone who should be gracing the cover of a fashion magazine and Eugenia thought she looked good hanging on Julian's arm. "Hello, love, I thought you'd never get here. I need an escort to this thing. Interested?"

"Nanna, I keep telling you they'll be no other who'll take your place in my heart."

"Then you're an idiot, dear. I'm sure this nice young lady doesn't have to soak her teeth at night."

"Neither do you, Nanna," Cassandra laughed as Julian answered her grandmother.

"Yes, but their about the only thing in its original condition I have left." Eugenia held out her right hand to Cassandra and slapped Julian with her left. "I'm Eugenia Lowe."

"Cassandra Jarvis, ma'am, it's so nice to finally meet you."

"Please call me Eugenia since we'll be sharing this big bruiser all night." Eugenia patted Julian's side and smiled. "She's nice to lean on when you're feet get tired. It's the shoes I think." Both women looked down at Julian's comfortable but expensive looking flat shoes.

"What, I'm tall enough as it is thank you."

"And the lack of a dress?" asked Eugenia in a teasing voice.

"I'm the same tomboy you've known since birth?"

"Don't knock it, Julian, I might just come back as a lesbian in my next life just for the comfort factor." Eugenia took Julian's other arm and squared her shoulders. "Come on, kids, lets make the rounds."

Julian moved from room to room accepting compliments and congratulations for the success everyone thought the museum would be. She looked around every so often, glad to see both Eugenia and Cassandra engaged in their own conversations. When she made it to the third level there weren't too many people she was familiar with so she was able to just relax and enjoy the art. She was leaning on the empty back wall of the Monet room sipping from a champagne flute when she heard the one voice she didn't expect to find in the crowd.

"You did good, Bernie. This place is amazing."

"Kiki, you changed your mind." The excitement in her voice was hard to miss. "I'm so happy you're here." *And any picture in my mind of how you'd look in an evening dress and heels fell way short of the mark.*

"We wouldn't have missed it for the world," said the woman who walked up and handed Kiki a glass of champagne. "So you're the Julian Lowe I've heard so much about over the last couple of weeks." She held out her hand and smiled. "I'm Rhonda Plessy," she pumped the almost limp hand. "I'm Kiki's partner."

"Julian Lowe," Julian added weakly. She was glad for the wall pressed against her back but was still afraid she was going to throw up. "It's a pleasure to meet you as well."

"Yeah, if it's not Kiki going on about you then it's our kid. Tiger thinks you're the best thing since television." Rhonda leaned over and kissed Kiki's cheek in a sign of ownership. She sounded pleasant enough but there was almost a back off tone hidden in her message. "It's been just great hearing all about you, Ms. Lowe."

"It's a pleasure to have met you, but could you both excuse me?" Julian didn't wait for an answer, she just walked toward the nearest restroom and closed the door. It was as alone as she was going to get in the crowded building. Every look and every innocent touch Kiki had given her since they had met played out in her mind as she splashed cold water on her face. That's exactly what they had been, innocent, nothing more and Julian felt like a fool.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, just the heat I guess." She couldn't turn around and look at the blonde. "I'm sorry I should've locked the door."

"You did, the guard let me in." Kiki took a step forward but stopped when Julian's hand went up. "Please let me explain."

"Explain what?" The answer sounded muffled as Julian pressed a hand towel to her face. "Go back to the party and enjoy yourself, Kiki, you don't owe me any explanation."

"I want to, if you'd let me."

"You work for me, which makes your personal life none of my business, so no explanations necessary."

"Then at least let me apologize to you."

Julian almost tore the towel in half she felt so angry. She felt like something precious had been stolen from her. "Apologize for what, being married and not telling me?"

"Yes."

"I'm a big girl, Katherine, I'll live. Like I said, you work for me and I don't expect anything from you except what I pay you for."

"Don't hide your feelings like that, Bernie." Julian's use of Katherine and not her nickname stung and inside Kiki was dying at how much pain Julian was in. "You didn't imagine the last few weeks, and I'm sorry for not telling you sooner but I was having so much fun myself I couldn't make myself tell you. I didn't want anything from you except to enjoy your company, which makes me selfish I guess, but I didn't want it to end."

"Please stop talking."

"Just listen to me, I don't want you to think I'm a horrible person. Rhonda and I have been together since we met in college but lately, after Tiger was born our life changed and it was too set and boring for her and we've been having problems."

"Katherine, please, I don't want to know all this stuff. You're here with her and that's fine, she's your partner like she said, it shouldn't matter what I think or feel." The nausea was coming back and Julian felt like the bathroom was getting smaller the closer Kiki stepped. "I'm not your responsibility and obviously you're not mine."

"I care about you."

"Don't say things you don't mean."

"I try never to say anything I don't mean. I care about you and I believe you care about me." Kiki stepped even closer. "At the risk of sounding crazy, could I ask you to say it out loud?"

"You have someone to tell you all you want to hear, you don't need me." The tears came close to getting Julian to stay, but she managed to escape back out to the floor without taking Kiki into her arms.

"There you are, I thought you'd ditched me again," said Cassandra.

"How about we dedicate this place then go somewhere a little more quiet?"

"Like a wise woman said earlier, that's the best offer I've had all night."

Julian stood with her grandmother by her side on the ramp leading to the second level. Randolph had handed her a microphone and most of the crowd was gathered beneath them with full glasses in their hands.

"I never had the pleasure of knowing my mother while she was alive, but that doesn't mean I haven't been able to get to know her through my grandmother and the multitude of friends she had who have kept her alive with their stories. The one common thread throughout all of those tales was art. It was her passion and her driving force until she met Sebastian Lowe, but even then, with his encouragement, she helped bring art into as many lives as she could reach." Julian felt her grandmother's hand come to rest on her back for comfort, to help her get through this.

"The idea for this place came after a talk I had with one of my mother's old friends. This lady told me that Birdie's philosophy was that someone who hoards art for their own self enjoyment will never know the pleasure of the canvases speaking to them. But someone who shares them with the world sees them come to life in the eyes of those who love them just as much. On her behalf I dedicate the Lowe collection to her, but I open the doors to share with you. Through your eyes may I hear the beauty she did all those years ago."

Julian raised her glass and saluted the crowd before tapping it against Eugenia's glass. "To Birdie, my mother."

It was almost a pure moment of sound as the crystal flutes tapped together simultaneously with Julian's and Eugenia's, and then just as quickly the room filled with noise when people went back to their conversations. "Will you be all right, Nanna?"

"Why, are you planning to run off?"

"Actually I am, but not if you need me to stay." Julian placed her barely touched glass back on the tray of a passing waiter.

Eugenia reached up and pulled gently on the perfectly knotted tie that was tucked into the vest

Julian was wearing. Just like her Sebastian, Julian was easy to read when she was upset. "What's wrong, my love? You've been looking forward to this night for years and now you want to leave, that's not like you."

"I can't stay."

"Is it Cassandra? She seems nice, not like someone who'd upset you."

With a tired sigh, Julian slumped against the half wall of the ramp and pulled the same knot her grandmother had and unfastened the top button of her shirt. "Cassandra's fine, I just need to get out of here and get some air."

"Bernie, you did great, pal." The deep voice caused her to smile and gave Julian an excuse to escape any more of her grandmother's questions.

"Her name is Julian, you dunderhead," chastised Eugenia.

"Nanna, it's so great to see you," J.J. continued as if she hadn't heard the insult. "Can I buy you ladies a drink?"

"I might be interested but Julian wants to leave." Eugenia looked at Julian in a way that meant their talk would not be forgotten, and then toward J.J. as a hint to get her to open up. Just because Julian was now a woman responsible for herself didn't make Eugenia stop worrying about her.

"You can't leave, pal, what would your mother think?"

Blue eyes looked down and followed their progress from one painting to the next. Every touch of delicate shoulders or their holding hands was like a poison running through Julian's heart. When green eyes looked up and locked with her, Kiki left Rhonda speaking with a woman she knew and walked to where Julian was standing. Both Eugenia and J.J. looked down to see what had Julian standing there as if in a daze, both watching the stunning woman in the black dress moving closer.

*It was what I wished for*, thought J.J. as Kiki got to the bottom of the ramp. "How about a glass of something besides the bubbly?" asked J.J.

Julian shook her head as her fingers turned white from gripping the railing. "Excuse me." She started down leaving behind a captive audience left to watch what would happen. They were surprised to see Julian pass the blonde without a word and continue toward the door.

"Interesting don't you think?" Eugenia asked J.J.

"Interesting indeed, Nanna. Who is she?"

"From my granddaughter's reaction, I would say she's the untasted wine."

They watched as a tall blonde woman moved closer and whispered something heated into the woman's ear before taking her hand and dragging her back into the crowd. "That she can't have, it seems," concluded J.J.

\*\*\*\*\*

Like she had for most of her life, Julian tried to find something to make her forget. Something to throw dirt on whatever was bothering her helping her bury the pain. Tonight she found it in the welcoming arms of Cassandra and in the lips now working their way down her throat.

With Julian's top button undone, it was easy to pull the tie apart and get to the others. Cassandra was planning on making Julian feel like she'd never want to leave the apartment much less her. "You smell so good."

The zipper made its decent a lot faster than when Julian had pulled it in the opposite direction earlier. She was almost impatient to get to the skin that had teased her earlier, and her enthusiasm was making Cassandra smile. "And you look incredible," said Julian when she pulled the garment forward. The woman straddling her lap pulled her hair back slowly making her breast jut out for Julian's enjoyment knowing the effect she was having from the blatant look the blue eyes were giving her.

"Touch me, Julian." Cassandra let her hair fall down her back and moved her hands to the underside of each breast, holding them as if in offering to the hungry eyes riveted to them. Both mocha colored nipples were hard and begging for Julian to suck on them, and when Julian hesitated a moment too long on her invitation, Cassandra put one hand behind her head and pulled her forward.

The moan Cassandra let out when Julian's lips encircled the excited flesh made Julian bite down gently on the nipple. She could feel Cassandra's heat through the dress pooled at her hips and it made her want to see all Cassandra had to offer. Without too much effort Julian stood up never letting her mouth fall away from Cassandra's chest. Figuring the bedroom had to be at the opposite end from where the kitchen was she started walking.

"Take off the rest for me," she told Cassandra when she put her on her feet next to the bed.

"You want it, you take it off." No sooner had she said it than the dress dropped to the floor. All that was left was a pair of bikini underwear and the thigh high stockings she had put on before slipping into her dress for the evening. "Aren't you going to..."

Before Cassandra could finish what she was going to say, Julian turned her around and pressed her to the front of her body. "I'm going to touch you, and I'm going to keep touching you until you say stop." Two big hands started at her shoulders and worked their way down to her breasts. Cassandra almost fell forward when Julian flattened her hand and rubbed gently over her nipples with just her palms.

"Please take your clothes off and lets lie down." Cassandra felt like her legs were about to betray

her.

Her request only got one hand to stop and slide down her body so Julian could hold her up by the waist. Julian added her mouth to the exercise and started to suck gently on her neck as her other hand moved lower. It still surprised Cassandra when Julian's fingers slid through the slick wet heat of her sex even though she knew that's where the woman's hand was headed.

"That's so good."

"Then this'll be even better," said Julian as her fingers concentrated on Cassandra's swiftly hardening bundle. She rubbed until she felt the butt pressed up against her legs start to move. Cassandra forgot she was standing up, trusting Julian to keep her on her feet. It started so slow but the ending was coming sooner than Cassandra had hoped as she felt the orgasm just a few strokes away.

"Oh God, Julian, don't stop."

The woman in her arms tensed then slumped bonelessly against her a second later, but instead of feeling good, Julian felt like a user. Cassandra wasn't who she wanted and she shouldn't have led her to believe that she did. With the same gentleness she had shown from the time they had arrived back at Cassandra's, Julian pulled back the covers and laid the woman down and kissed her forehead. "Thank you for a wonderful evening, but I have to go."

"Wait, you can't go now." Cassandra fell quiet as Julian's lips softly pressed against her own, then they were gone. "Julian, wait." Her cries went unanswered as Cassandra heard the front door open and close. "What in the hell?"

On the street Rudy just watched as Julian buttoned her coat and started walking. She didn't acknowledge him, so as much as he didn't want to, he started the car and headed back to pick up his wife. Whatever was bothering Julian a good walk usually cured the demons in her mind and kept them at bay for another day.

She walked until two in the morning and when she stopped, Julian was surprised at to where she found herself. The place was quiet and dark, not a surprise considering the hour, and it looked like something she would never have - a home. Granted she had a house she lived in that was comfortable, but this place looked like a place where a family lived. A cute small cottage built with love, with a child to share to complete the perfect picture.

It was Kiki and Rhonda's home. Not too much different from all the others on that block, but Julian's eyes took it in with almost an envious eye as her hand wrapped around one of the spikes at the top of the wrought iron fence. An hour passed before she was able to let the spike go and start toward her own place. With every step Julian took she left behind any feelings she had for Katherine and her heart laughed as it issued its 'I told you so.' Another lesson as to why love wasn't worth the chance.

"You have all your ever going to hope for, Julian, and that should be good enough. What a joke

to be born on the one day of the year set aside for lovers when you will never know what it feels like to be in love." She didn't often talk to herself, but when you were a loner by nature the sound of even your own voice could bring comfort. "I'll be ok," she assured herself as she wiped the tears from her face.

From her sofa Kiki watched the woman standing on the sidewalk studying every aspect of her house. It had hurt to watch Julian leave followed by her date who she no doubt thought was more than willing to offer any comfort Julian needed, but she was in no position to complain. She sat frozen hoping more than anything Julian would open the gate and knock on the door, but she just stood there and then she continued down the street.

"What are you doing, mommy?" Tiger stood on the side of the sofa and rubbed his eyes.

*Watching a missed opportunity walk away from my life.* "Just sitting, sweet boy. More importantly though, what are you doing up?"

"I missed you."

"Thank you but I'm here now so you can go back to bed and get some sleep." Kiki tried to shake her sadness and smiled for her son. With a grunt she picked him up and carried him back to his room. "Want me to read you a story?"

"I'll wait until Julian can do it. She makes funny voices for all the people in the book." He turned so he could look at his mother illuminated in the glow of his night-light. "Mommy, why do you look sad all the time?"

"I'm not sad, Tiger, big people just aren't always happy."

"I don't like it when you're not happy."

Kiki combed his hair off his face and left her fingers tangled in the blonde locks. "I have you so that means I'm always happy, even when I'm sad about other things."

"When we're with Summer and Bernie you aren't sad."

"That's because they're our friends, and friends make us happy."

He closed his eyes, relaxing because of her fingers stroking his hair. "Then we should be with Bernie and Summer all the time and then you'll be happy like me."

"Maybe so, huh?" she whispered as tears fell down her cheeks. Down the hall she heard the front door click closed signaling how unfair her life was and how scared she was to do anything about it. "Maybe so."

[Continued in Part 2](#)



Comments to: [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

---

~ A Rock for Remembrance ~

by Ali Vali

**Disclaimers:** The characters in the following story are of my own creation. Any similarities to anyone living or dead are purely coincidental. No part of this story may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from me, the author.

If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed move on, literally.

Sit back and enjoy the story, any comments can be sent to me at [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com).

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Beth, Jaden, my Florida buddy, and Ken, you are all godsend. I bow to your grammatical knowledge.

*I would like to bid a Happy Valentine's Day to the woman who shares my life and owns my heart. This as with all my tales is dedicated to you and the joy you bring into my life. I am extremely blessed to have someone so special love me. For as long as I have voice, I will try to always tell you how much you mean to me and how much I love you.*

I would also like to thank all the wonderful people who take the time to read these stories. Thank you for all the great notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

February 14, 2004

**Part 2**

By Monday it was like something in Julian had died. The rest of the weekend had passed with Rudy and Rebecca entertaining Summer while Julian spent the time either at the office or the shipyard where their new vessel was being built. In the end she had no one but herself to blame for the loss she was feeling. It wasn't like Kiki had ever made any promises to her.

*She just paid attention to your pathetic ass and you thought it was true love. Julian, you're an asshole pure and simple. I bet I was the butt of the joke in Katherine and Rhonda's household Friday night.* The same line of thought had haunted her since the moment she laid eyes on Katherine's partner. When she wasn't thinking about them, Julian's thoughts turned to Cassandra

and the way she had just left her that night. *The woman's going to think I'm insane if I keep dropping her like she's plague ridden.*

"Bernie?"

Julian stopped gazing out the window and turned her attention to Summer. "What, sweetheart?"

"Was I bad?"

The question caused Julian to turn a little in the car seat and look closer at her fellow passenger. "Why would you say that?"

"Cause you won't talk to me anymore. If I was bad I promise I'll try better." The rabbit Julian had gotten her at the pizza place was crushed against the little girl's chest since her beloved Binky was at home with a cold, or at least that's what Summer had declared before they left.

"I'm sorry, it's not you, Summer." She pulled the little girl into her lap when the car came to a stop in the parking garage and wiped away the few tears that had escaped Summer's eyes. "I promise I'm not mad at you, it's just that sometimes things happen to make people sad and that's why I haven't talked much."

"I could give you Izzy and he could make you feel better."

"Who's Izzy?"

"Binky's brother, silly," said Summer holding up the rabbit for Julian to see. "When you hug him you won't feel sad anymore."

Julian did just that before giving it back to Summer. "Thanks, I do feel better but I think he should stay with you today so you won't get lonely."

"No, you take him. I have Tiger to not be lonely and you need somebody."

*You ain't kidding, preferably someone with some sort of counseling experience.* "Are you sure?"

"You take him." Summer put Izzy in Julian's arm with a smile and scooted down after Rudy opened the door. "Will you come eat with me?"

"Not today, buddy, and Rudy's going to go and drop you off at school." Julian held her hand as far as the elevator.

"Why?"

"Because Julian can't this morning, sweetie, so don't give her a hard time about it, ok? I'll come by and pick you up this afternoon too so we can go and get an ice cream. How does that sound?" Instead of answering Summer let go of Julian's hand and started clapping.

"Makes you wish for the days a double chocolate cone was all it took to make you feel better, huh?" Julian asked Rudy.

"Hey, kid, don't knock it, sometimes it still does. Go on up to your office and I'll take care of the little one for you."

Julian got her usual kiss on the cheek from Summer and an extra one from Rudy before getting in an elevator alone. If there was one thing she was sure of, it was that she would never step foot on the fourth floor again while Katherine still worked for her.

"Good morning, guys, how are y'all doing?" asked Chris when Rudy and Summer arrived. Kiki had looked like shit that morning and refused to say why no matter how persistent she had been in her questioning.

"We're doing great, and glad to be back," answered Rudy for both of them. "She talked about this place all weekend."

"We give good service and have the best games in town, so what's not to talk about? Go on in, Summer, Tiger's waiting for you." They watched her run off after kissing Rudy goodbye, smiling when she and Tiger gave each other a bone-crushing hug. "Did something happen this weekend that I should know about?"

"We went to the zoo, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Not with the kid, with Kiki and Julian? She came in this morning and looks like her dog died, and now I see Julian's missing."

"What would make you think Julian is the cause of her problems?" asked Rudy with a little heat in his voice.

"Because she said the only reason to go and disturb her in her office was if tall, dark and owner of the company waltzed in here this morning."

"All I can say is that your fellow employee saw Julian on Friday at the museum opening, where I might add she met someone named Rhonda for the first time."

"Oh, no."

"Oh yes, and I think it came as quite a surprise to Julian after the last couple of weeks. I'm not blaming anyone, ma'am, but I think Julian got the wrong impression here and it'll just take some time for her to get over any hurt feelings. It would've really helped if Katherine had mentioned a spouse way before Friday."

Chris nodded her head and looked around them to make sure they had a little privacy. "I'd tell you a story, Rudy, but it's not mine to tell. Rhonda isn't really the museum opening type, but

Friday was a potential client meeting place and she couldn't say no. The woman will put up with a little culture if there's something in it for her. Add the fact the function was being hosted by the same woman her child has been going on and on about, she couldn't resist. I just hope Julian doesn't give up on friendship too easily."

"Julian Lowe is fiercely loyal to those people she cares about," Rudy defended just as fiercely. "But to get that from her, you first have to treat her with the same respect."

"Understood, and I'll try my best to get Kiki to talk to her."

Behind them, two four-year-olds enjoyed their morning snack with their heads together. "My mama was so sad at home," started Tiger.

"Bernie was sad too."

The little boy leaned further in and cupped his hands around Summer's ear. "I told her that she wouldn't be sad if you and Bernie were there."

"I know." Summer whispered back and then a plan came to her. When Chris stepped back in all she noticed was how fast Tiger's head was nodding.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Any luck on finding our quarry?"

"I've tried all the different hotels in the towns around there but still no luck, but don't worry, I'm fanning out in ten mile increments," answered Darlene. With no clues as to where Deanne was heading it was like trying to find a dry shirt outside in a hurricane.

"Find her." Darlene just looked at the intercom for a moment wondering what had brought on Julian's bad mood. "I'm sorry, Darlene, that was rude of me. Thank you for all the time you're putting in on this."

"We're all entitled to a bad morning, boss, so don't worry about it." The phone rang and she answered it before continuing on with Julian. "I'll see if she's in," Julian heard as Darlene put the person on hold. "That's Cassandra Jarvis on line one."

"Thanks, I'll take it," *it's the least I owe her after Friday*. "Cassandra, hi, how are you?"

"Confused."

"I'll bet, but I promise I'm not crazy, and it wasn't anything you did before you think that."

Cassandra ran her finger over the rim of her coffee mug as she listened to the half assed excuses coming out of Julian. "It had to be something to make you run out of my place like your ass was on fire, or in this case like it wasn't."

It took her a second to get Cassandra's meaning but Julian laughed long and hard when she did. "Trust me, honey, you have nothing to be ashamed of in that department. I'll be a bastard and admit I had something else on my mind, but if you give me the chance, I'll make it up to you."

"No running out this time?"

"You'll have my undivided attention for the whole evening I promise. If I don't, you don't have to give me a discount on my engines."

"I know how you love your discounts, Julian, so this must be serious. When can I see you again?"

"How about tomorrow night at seven? I'll come by and pick you up."

"It's a date, which I don't want to end until at least eleven so start working on your small talk," teased Cassandra.

"I'm looking forward to it."

\*\*\*\*\*

The month of May started with still no sign of Deanne and Julian wondered if the woman even remembered she had a child she'd left behind. It had been weeks with all of them getting more and more attached to Summer, and Julian getting more comfortable with the idea of seeing Cassandra whenever she had the opportunity. The sex was always good, but Julian didn't want to rock the boat by admitting to herself that there was something missing. Whenever it crossed her mind, she blamed it on her own inability to commit, so she just promised herself to try harder.

The one person who was never mentioned in her presence was Katherine. Even Summer tried to limit her conversation to Tiger and the other kids she spent her time with at the daycare. It escaped no one's notice that Summer also hardly mentioned her mother anymore, and Julian worried about what was going to happen when Deanne finally did decide to come back.

"Julian?" Darlene's voice filtered through the intercom causing the dark head to look up from the paperwork scattered in front of her.

"What can I do you for?"

"There's someone here to see you without an appointment, and she won't leave until you talk to her."

"Is it someone I want to see, or is it someone security will be happy to meet?"

"I don't know, why not give me a few minutes then we'll decide." The smart-ass comment was delivered from the door with a smirk. Over a month of moping was all Chris was willing to put up with from all parties involved. "Come on, you know you miss me, so talk to me a few

minutes."

"You have five. What can I do for you?"

"I come to ask favors of you, Miss all powerful Lowe," Chris put her arms out and bowed at the waist like a harem girl saluting her master.

"Get in here and sit down before Darlene beats me to the punch and calls security." Julian's voice was gruff but Chris accepted her good fortune and closed the door. "Is something wrong?"

"Lots of things," Chris started ticking off things on her fingers. "There's a war in Iraq, but no weapons of mass destruction, there's famine in Africa and global warming."

"And you want me to do what about all that exactly?"

"When you look at the big picture, there's nothing one person can do about all that, but there is something you can do to make life better right here in this building." Chris tapped the top of the desk, liking the solid feel of the piece of furniture.

Across from her Julian rested her chin on her fist and waited, looking a little wary of whatever would come out of the woman's mouth next. But nothing did. "Well?"

"Come down today and talk to her."

"Talk to who?" Julian knew the answer but wasn't going to give in so easily.

"You know damn well who, and you know why. Julian, you never gave her the chance to explain and now her life has changed so much I don't think Kiki recognizes herself anymore. She needs a friend right now and she needs to make peace with you, but like you, she's too stubborn to see it."

Julian twirled her letter opener in her fingers and stayed quiet until the pleading look on Chris' face got to be too much. "I didn't stop being Katherine's friend, so don't come up here and try to guilt me into fixing something I'm not responsible for."

"Then why haven't we seen you again? There's even more parents coming down now after they heard you liked it so much and then you just decide to never come back." She stood up and leaned over the desk as far as she could. "Tell me your absence has nothing to do with Kiki and I'll leave right now and never bother you again."

"My absence has nothing to do with Katherine."

Her small hands slammed down on Julian's desk. "You're lying, I know you are. No one looks at a woman like that without having some feelings for her. She poured milk on my head every time you did so don't tell me you don't think it wasn't mutual. All I'm asking is that you talk to her."

Feeling like she had to, Julian stood as well and leaned in until she was inches from Chris' face. "I'll think about it if you tell me one thing."

"Name it."

"Why do you care so much?"

"You promise not to tell our boss?" Chris laughed when Julian made an x over her heart with her index finger. "She's my sister, and I don't like seeing her so unhappy."

The cushion of Julian's chair let out a stream of air as if someone had stuck a needle in it and deflated it when she fell back. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" asked Chris offering her a smile.

"Your sister's married. I know she is since I met the woman at the museum opening. I stayed away from her because..." started Julian, not knowing how to finish.

"Because you didn't want to add to her burden. You're doing just that by staying away, so just think about it, but not too long. You don't want me to come back up here because then you really will have to call security." Chris waved over her shoulder and kept walking.

Her private line rang before Julian could think too hard on the bizarre meeting with the extremely outspoken woman. "Julian Lowe."

"Is an extremely sexy person," said Cassandra from her end. "I'm not bothering you am I?"

"What are you up to?"

"I have to go out of town this afternoon so I was wondering if we could put off our date until tomorrow night? I'll be back tomorrow afternoon around two so it shouldn't be a problem."

"How about you come over for dinner tomorrow? I'll have Rebecca make one of her world famous pot roasts."

She hadn't been invited over very often but Cassandra was already mentally picking out new wallpaper since things were going so well. "I'll have to think of something special to make it up to you."

"Sounds interesting. I'll see you tomorrow."

The next afternoon Julian had Rudy pick Summer up and bring them both home early. She wanted to spend time with the little girl, not wanting her to feel left out once Cassandra came over. They walked around the pool and through the garden that took up a good part of the backyard. The block the house was located on only had one other house to the left and none behind it so the yards were a good size for being in town. Enough room that the previous owner had built a pool/guest house that butted up against the back fence.

"You won't mind letting Miss Rebecca tuck you in tonight?"

"Why?"

Having a four-year-old in her life had taught Julian that the word why was in the top three of their favorites. "Because I have a friend coming over tonight and I wanted to spend time with her."

"Is it Miss Kiki?"

Julian stopped walking and looked down at the kid as if trying to figure out where that question had come from. "No, it's Miss Cassandra. Remember, she's the one who got you the Barbie corvette for your dolls."

"She sure likes to kiss ya a lot."

"Maybe she likes me."

Summer understood that since her mother had a lot of people who liked her, but she wanted Julian to like Miss Kiki. If that happened she'd get to see Tiger all the time. "Okay. Can we go inside?"

When Cassandra arrived, Summer just gave her a halfhearted wave and walked up the stairs, headed to her room like her best friend had moved to the moon. "Was it something I said?" she asked Julian after they kissed hello.

"Everyone in my life is acting a little weird today so don't worry about it. I haven't noticed, but maybe it's the moon."

They sat in the den having drinks until dinner was ready; telling each other what was going on in their perspective businesses when Rebecca called them to dinner. She had set up the table on the patio and had soft music playing through the outside speakers. Rebecca didn't think the romance would last but Julian looked like she was having a good enough time, so it was her way of helping out.

"Want to retire to that comfortable sofa and finish this?" asked Cassandra holding up the half full bottle of wine.

It was kind of strange to be making out on her couch, but Julian figured she had never done it in high school so she had some catching up to do. Cassandra was slowly turning up the heat with long kisses and a gentle massage of her shoulders. When the woman straddled her lap, Julian took the opportunity to wrap her hand around one of Cassandra's breasts. The squeeze earned her a moan that seemed to just pour into her mouth and down into her groin.

"What time does your grandmother get home?" teased Cassandra.



Julian was about to respond with something witty when Summer screamed her name from the bottom of the stairs. Both of Julian's hands shot out as if Cassandra was now radioactive and she stood so fast she dumped the smaller woman on the floor. The blood-curdling scream had scared the hell out of her.

"What?"

"I miss Binky, Bernie."

*God, say that five times real fast.* "You're holding Binky, sweetheart," Julian pointed to the rabbit thinking Summer was having a nightmare or something.

"That's Izzy, not Binky. I want my Binky. I can't sleep without Binky, Bernie." With every silly sounding sentence, Summer was getting more hysterical until by the time she was done, she was inconsolable.

Julian helped Cassandra back on the sofa and pointed her index finger in the air. "Give me just one minute. Keep my place until I figure this out." She moved to the foyer and picked Summer up to comfort her. "Calm down, pumpkin, or you're going to get sick." Summer took deep breaths, but her crying continued and now she had the hiccups. "Where's Binky?"

"Ti...Ti...Tiger's got him."

"Ok, what's Tiger doing with Binky?"

"He said he wanted to take him home and I said ok." It wasn't your usual date night conversation, but they were making headway so Julian could get back to the sofa.

"Then you'll see Binky tomorrow. I'm sure Tiger's taking real good care of him."

"No!" The pitch of the word screamed right into her ear left Julian light headed. "I have ta have him right now." Summer was getting hot she was crying so much. "Please, Bernie, I have ta have him right now."

"Let's call Rudy and he can drive you over there to get him, how's that?"

"No!" the pitch got louder and higher. "I want you to come."

There was nothing she could think of to calm the little girl down, so Julian walked back into the den with her remora and talked to Cassandra. "I have to run out for a few minutes to retrieve an errant rabbit, so do you mind waiting?"

"Now?"

"Well I could go get the rabbit so Summer can go to sleep or you can sit here and listen to her

cry all night that Binky's missing, your choice."

"Hurry back."

The car keys were on the kitchen counter where Rudy always left them, so Julian just grabbed them and headed out to the garage. "I'm sorry, Bernie."

"It's ok, but why did you let Tiger take Binky if you can't sleep without him?" Julian belted her into the backseat trying to sound understanding.

"He was sad like you and I wanted him to be happy."

It had been awhile, but Julian still remembered where the house was. When they stopped there was only one light on in the front of the house, and like before, there were a slew of toys in the front yard. Julian's palms started to get damp at the anticipation of seeing Katherine again. She hadn't lied to Chris, she'd stayed away not because of what Kiki had done or failed to do, but because Julian didn't want to pressure her. She stayed away for Kiki's peace of mind, but it hadn't been easy. More than once the petite blonde with her dancing green eyes had crossed her mind, and it made her heart clench.

"Let's go get Binky so we can go home." Julian picked Summer out of the car and carried her to the front door, hesitating before knocking. She looked at her watch and it was already after ten. Was it rude to knock on someone's door this late and demand a stuffed animal back? "Summer, if I have to get into a fist fight tonight, you're going to be in big trouble, young lady," Julian mumbled so the kid wouldn't understand her. If it had been her though and someone came with this lame excuse to see her girlfriend, a black eye was the least she would do for them.

"Who is it?" asked what sounded like Kiki's voice.

"It's Julian and Summer." The sound of a latch, lock and chain were heard being undone before the door swung open revealing Kiki in a robe and pajamas. "I know it's late and I apologize for coming, but we're having a Binky crisis."

"Come in," Kiki said trying to get over her shock.

"No really, all we need is the rabbit and we'll leave you alone. We don't want to intrude."

"You're not intruding. Please, Julian, it's been weeks since I've seen you." The green eyes crumbled her resolve and Julian found her feet moving without her permission into the house.

When she ran out of floor, Julian stopped and put Summer down not really knowing what to do next. "Miss Kiki, can I see Tiger?" asked Summer saving her caretaker from making conversation.

"He's sleeping, but there's room in there if you want to join him while Bernie and I talk." She took her by the hand and tucked the little girl in next to her son, Binky the rabbit between them.

"Can I get you anything?" Kiki asked Julian when she walked back in.

"Listen, Katherine, I really didn't mean to bother you and if you want just hand over the rabbit and we'll get out of here and leave you all in peace."

"It's just me and Tiger, and since he's sleeping and you're not bothering me, there's no harm done. Please sit, I really do want to talk to you."

"Where's Rhonda?" the question sounded bitter even to Julian.

"We're on what she's defining as a cooling off period, so she's not here. Is that why you've stayed away?"

Julian sat on the very edge of the sofa as if not committing fully to sitting down. "Will you answer something for me before I answer that?" Kiki nodded. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was afraid you'd stop coming around if you thought I was taken."

The taller woman laughed but it had nothing to do with humor. "Excuse me if that sounds a little, uhm, I'm not really sure what word to use to make you sound good."

"It makes me sound slutty I guess, but you shouldn't judge me until you have the whole story, Bernie." Kiki moved to the front window and looked out, thinking she couldn't tell Julian the story if she had to look at her.

"It's none of my business, so don't feel like you owe me anything."

"I met Rhonda right when I got to college. She was like no one I'd ever met before. Sounds cliché, but she was a little edgy and a lot romantic so I never stood a chance."

"You don't owe me this," Julian tried again.

Kiki went on as if she was in a trance. "We graduated and I started teaching and she went into sales. A couple of years later we were comfortable, we bought this place and decided to start a family. Tiger was born a year later and that's when it started to change. The romantic died and was replaced by someone who didn't believe in anything we'd built together. Turns out I was just an idiot and didn't see that's how Rhonda was all the time, and the women had begun long before Tiger was even an idea."

*Shit! I can take anything but the tears.* Julian watched as the shoulders started to shake as the story got worse and she was stuck. If there was something she had never been able to resist, it was a crying woman. "If that's how it was maybe you're better off with just you and Tiger. No kid deserves to be raised in a home where his parents are going at it constantly."

"When I saw you, on the first day you came in, you made me forget my life for just a little while. When you kept on coming and talking to me and making me feel like you wanted to see me, I

couldn't help but want more. I'm so sorry, Bernie, if I led you on, but I was raised to honor my commitments and I made one to Rhonda. I just didn't factor you in."

"I'm sorry too, Kiki. You're a beautiful woman who deserves to have someone who sees that every minute of the day. Is there anything I can do to make it better?"

Katherine turned and buried her face in Julian's chest. "Please don't stay away from me anymore. I'm sorry for not telling you but I need our friendship."

Julian silently pondered the situation and then sighed. "What's on the menu for tomorrow?"

"You're favorite, peanut butter and jelly." Kiki tamely followed as Julian pulled her toward the kitchen and grabbed a paper towel and wet it. With a gentle hand, Julian washed her face of her tears and hugged her one more time.

"I missed you."

"Oh, Bernie, not as much as I missed you. Do you want something to drink while we're in here?"

"No, I really have to get going, so let me grab my kid and rabbit."

For Kiki it was like living out a fantasy she'd spun more than once. She stood in front of Julian as they looked in on two sleeping children, neither of them saying anything so as not to wake them.

"You could just leave her," Kiki whispered.

"I couldn't do that to you. I'll just wait a little while and I'm sure she'll wake up." Julian sat on the sofa again, this time getting comfortable and accepting the remote from Kiki. "Any requests before I start surfing?"

"You're only allowed to go around once before I take it away from you," warned Kiki. After two go-rounds they settled for an old movie neither of them had seen.

Julian took her boots off and propped her socked feet on the coffee table after asking if it was all right. As the movie spun a story of intrigue, with lots of build up music in the background, she forgot about everything except the smell of Kiki's coconut shampoo.

It was the persistent tapping on her shoulder and the pain in her back from sleeping on the lumpy surface that woke Julian up. The tapping was coming from Summer and the lumpiness was Kiki's foot that she was lying on. Her head felt surprisingly great where it was resting on the blonde's stomach.

"Bernie, we're hungry."

The door swung open before the children could put in their breakfast orders, and woke Kiki up. "Well isn't this cozy. You accuse me of cheating and you're in here with the big payday acting

like a bitch in heat." Rhonda looked unkempt and tired as she stood in the doorway.

"Hey if you want we can take this outside, but don't curse like that in front of the children."

"If I want to fucking curse in front of my kid I will, and since you and your kid are in my house you got nothing fucking to say about it."

"Rhonda, don't please," said Kiki. She hung on to the back of Julian's shirt trying to keep her on the sofa.

Rhonda swayed on her feet as she stuck her finger out and pointed it at Kiki. "Don't give me that shit. I make a couple of little mistakes and all of a sudden I've got to go, but you get to sleep with her and I'm supposed to just take it?"

"It was more like dozens of mistakes and what Julian's doing here is just being my friend."

"Wake up, idiot, your friend has the hots for you and you're too stupid to figure it out," added Rhonda as she moved to close the door. It hadn't swung half way when she found herself being carried to the front lawn but a tall angry woman.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep on your sofa, but it doesn't give you the right to come in there and talk to Katherine that way. Get out of here and get cleaned up and then she'll maybe want to talk to you," said Julian.

Julian never saw it coming so she didn't have the foresight to do anything about it. *And that's why they call it a sucker punch.* For a slightly bigger shrimp than Kiki, the woman packed a hell of a wallop. When Julian recovered she grabbed Rhonda by the collar and cocked her fist back to retaliate, only to be stopped by Kiki's voice.

"Bernie, she's not worth it." The fist didn't come down so instead Kiki did; down the stairs until she was standing next to Julian. "Let her go and come inside." To her partner she said, "Rhonda, I don't want to see you, so leave."

"This house is half mine, Kiki, so you have no right to keep me out of it."

"Just go."

"Does this happen often?" asked Julian as they watched the aggressive woman go.

"A couple of times. She comes and screams at me and it somehow makes her feel better. I don't like it but she's right, the house is half hers and I don't have the cash to buy her out." Kiki put her hand up to stop whatever was going to come out of Julian's mouth. "I want you to be my friend, Bernie, not my banker so don't even try it."

"I could have wanted to say I wanted pancakes for breakfast."

"I thought you didn't like sugar?"

Julian laughed trying to forget the pain in her eye. "It's starting to grow on me."

They stayed for breakfast and coffee, Summer and Tiger carrying the brunt of the conversation since Kiki was too busy watching Julian's right eye turn black. On the drive home to get ready for work was when Julian remembered Cassandra, but she waited until she was in the office to call. She was already contending with a rapidly growing shiner, so the thought of some other woman being upset with her wasn't on her agenda first thing that morning.

"I can explain," was how she started when Cassandra answered her phone. Julian wondered how long she'd stayed before she figured out that Julian and Summer weren't coming home.

"You invited me for dinner, then left to pick up a stuffed animal in Tibet?"

"Close, so close. I'm really sorry but time got away from me. I want to make it up to you."

Cassandra tapped her nail on her front teeth in an effort to calm her anger. "I'm free for lunch at Armand's."

Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and promises popped into her head and Julian had no choice but to say no. "I can't, I'm sorry. How about dinner at Armand's tonight instead?"

"I'm leaving for Houston for the rest of the week, remember?"

The large leather portfolio Julian kept her calendar in opened, and she had penciled in the trip Cassandra was talking about. "I have it right here. You get back Sunday night right?"

"You planning to surprise me?" It sounded like more of a statement of what Julian should do than a question.

"If I tell you now it wouldn't be too much fun, so I'll keep you guessing. Have a good flight and I'll see you when you get back."

"I'll miss you," Cassandra tried something in an attempt to get something out of Julian's mouth aside from business and the weather. They had been seeing each other for weeks, and in all that time she noticed Julian didn't use pet names or expound anything remotely touchy feely sounding.

"Uh huh, have a good trip."

"Bernie," yelled Summer and Tiger from the door, surprising her as she put down the phone.

"Hey, guys, what are you doing roaming around up here?" There was no answer to Julian's question as the two took turns playing with the ship's wheel in the corner.

"They wanted to come and get you so you didn't have to go to lunch by yourself," said Kiki as she strolled in. She kept walking until she was on the other side of the desk where Julian was still sitting. "How do you feel?" A delicate finger traced the outer part of the bruise.

"Like you should've let me hit back."

"Aside from the blood lust, does it hurt much?" Kiki's finger never fell away from her face and Julian had to smile.

"I'm actually more... I don't know... astonished that I've lived this long and never had a black eye. Stop beating yourself up over this, Kiki, it wasn't your fault. I think you're in more pain than I am."

She had never felt someone's hands so warm as when Julian reached up and took hold of her fingers. "I just didn't think she'd get violent."

"No one ever sees it coming, but it still isn't your fault. Why not just move until you get things settled and know where and what you want to do?"

Kiki squeezed Julian's hand and laughed. "What *I* want to do? Why are you planning on getting rid of me?"

"And miss out on your sterling personality so close by? Never, I just meant in your immediate personal life and future."

"Even with your great raise, I can't afford to buy her out and finding a new place just seems like a pain in the ass, so we'll just tough it out."

Tiger turned from touching all Julian's things within reach and put his fist on his hips. "Mama, you said ass. That's a bad word."

"What's ass, Bernie?" added Summer.

"A donkey, buttercup. Who wants peanut butter?"

Kiki laughed and pulled Julian out of her seat. "You're learning, Bernie. Make a mistake and the old change of attention is a great way to get out of it."

They spent such a relaxed afternoon that Kiki felt comfortable enough to bring Summer up to Julian at the end of the day. She noticed a change in her friend in that Julian wasn't as flirty as she was before, but Julian still exuded a sense of caring. In the state her life was in at the moment, Kiki appreciated the port in the storm.

"Are you two busy tonight?" asked Julian.

"We're going out to see the new Disney movie, but I'm sure they'll sell you and Summer a ticket

if you want to come with us. It'll be my treat to pay you back for the pizza you sprung for."

"How about if you get the movie tickets and I get dinner?" Julian started toward the bathroom to change, leaving a humming Kiki behind.

The movie turned out to be good, since there were enough adult lines in it to keep Julian interested, and action filled enough to keep the kids riveted. But the most interesting part of the evening was dinner. Two adults and two four-year-olds in Armand's was not something seen every night.

"Are you sure?" asked Kiki, looking down at the way she was dressed. Julian was in jeans as well, but she looked more put together.

"Kiki, the reason kids misbehave in restaurants is they're never taught any better."

"And you know this from your years of experience in the child rearing field?"

"I know this because Nanna took me to every restaurant in this city worth dining in by the time I was five. If I got out of hand she smacked me with a piece of bread."

Kiki stopped walking forcing Julian to take her hand and drag her the last couple of feet. "Please tell me your grandmother didn't beat you with bread?"

"My grandmother didn't beat me with bread," said Julian causing Kiki to relax again, "She smacked me with it, is what I said."

"Stop it," Kiki slapped her arm. "You're making this all up."

"See you're doing it right now, so why was it wrong when Nanna did it?"

Considering the way people were dressed and the look of the place, Kiki was surprised when the waiter brought out two entrees with two hamburgers with fries. In the end Julian had been right. Tiger and Summer and taken their cues from them and the people around them, earning them a few compliments on their behavior on the way out from the other patrons.

"I might have the solution to your problem if you're interested," said Julian from Kiki's sofa. It was early enough to let the kids play a while longer before she had to take Summer home for bed.

"I have a problem?"

"Your living arrangement problem."

Kiki folded her legs under her and sat facing Julian. "We'll be fine."

"Kiki, don't lie because you think there isn't anything you can do but grin and bear it. Why don't



you hear me out before you turn me down?"

Her hands went up as if to accentuate something she was going to say and then just as quickly they dropped. "A couple of weeks ago you didn't want to know me, so why do you care what happens to me now?"

"Because a couple of weeks ago I was a donkey, but I've come to my senses and figured out I like having you as a friend. I care about what happens to you, Kiki, but I also care about what happens to your son. Tiger doesn't deserve to live in a war zone until you and Rhonda work things out."

The blonde head dropped until Kiki's chin hit her chest. She was tired of crying but the tears were about to spill again. "Thank you, that's nice to hear."

"Ah, don't worry about it, besides your sister promised to blacken my other eye if I wasn't nice to you."

"She told you."

"Looking at this blonde hair," Julian reached over and pulled a bit of Kiki's hair, "And her brown hair, I'd have said one of you is adopted."

"And now?" Kiki's eyes were still watery but she was laughing.

"I got a taste of the attitude and my conclusion is you're related." Without thought Kiki fell forward and hugged Julian, happy beyond belief when it was returned.

"Bernie," yelled Summer from the hallway. This time it didn't make her drop the girl in her arms on the floor.

"That pitch is going to drive me to an early grave," she told Kiki. "Summer, if you need something could you come in here and not scream please." Her summons got two kids looking like there would be some negotiating going on before the night was over.

"I want to stay here with Tiger."

"No, and before you think about starting all that crying, forget it. We have to go home and get ready for when Tiger and Miss Kiki come over tomorrow."

"Really, mama?" asked Tiger. "But tomorrow's a school day."

"We're taking the day off tomorrow to do some important stuff, buddy," said Julian.

"You heard the boss, we're going to Summer's house tomorrow."

They both laughed at the squealing that caused and Julian wasn't able to get Summer to leave

until she fell asleep. "Just come by whenever," said Julian with the little girl slumped against her shoulder. She had written down the address and number for Kiki after the kids had settled down a little. "There's something I want to show you."

"I'll just bet," said Kiki before she could sensor it.

A dark brow went up but Julian resisted the urge to tease her. "Good night, and call me if you need anything."

Kiki locked the door and watched from the window as the two walked to the car. "Even if it's you I need?"

\*\*\*\*\*

"You have a pool?" asked Tiger so that the whole neighborhood could hear him.

"We have a pool," said Julian as they all looked at it. A couple of more weeks and the water would be warm enough to swim. "And more importantly we have a pool house."

Julian led them the long way around so the kids wouldn't get too close to the water, opening the door to the cottage looking structure. "It's got two bedrooms, a full sized kitchen and it's got a gate to the street so you don't have to come through the front if you don't want to. But most importantly, it's empty and not used.

The kids ran through the place like a fast moving wind while Kiki took her time. She looked at the furniture and the fixtures as if adding the rent in her mind. "It's beautiful, but we can't."

"Why not?"

"Bernie, you pay me a great wage but I can't afford this place and I'm sure you don't want Tiger and me underfoot all the time."

Julian held her hand out and waited to see if Kiki would take it. When she did, she led her outside. "Tell me if you can see the house from here. I'm not doing this to brag, but there's a reason the pool's way back here."

The trees and garden made it impossible to make out the large structure except for the roofline. "I can't really."

"That means you and Tiger won't be underfoot. I think about this place every so often but I hardly ever come out here, so you'll have privacy. It also has been empty since we moved in so why not put it to good use for a friend who needs a place to plan her next step?"

Kiki leaned against her as if thinking about what she was going to do. "What do I do with all my stuff?"

"If you want I'll have the things in there put in storage, and have your stuff brought in, or you can leave them at your place until you decide where you go from here."

Julian felt the head nodding against her shoulder. "How much a month?" asked Kiki.

"You let Tiger come up to the house every so often to play and we'll call it even."

"No way, you have to let me pay something."

"I'll have Rudy draw you up a lease if it makes you feel better." They turned when two sets of running feet could be heard headed in their direction.

"Mama, come see this," said Tiger waving his arms toward the back of the house.

One of the bedrooms had been done in a nautical theme, perfect for a little boy. Throughout the bookshelves in the room and on the desk against one corner were boats, ships and navigational tools Julian had collected through the years. It wasn't for Tiger's benefit, but Julian wasn't about to tell him that now.

"Isn't this the best?" he asked the two adults.

"How would you like to come here and live for awhile, buddy?" asked Julian.

"Really?" He turned to his mother and pressed his hands together ready to drop to his knees if that's what it took. "Please, mama, can we?"

"You play dirty, Lowe," said Kiki out of the side of her mouth.

"You forgot low."

"I was getting to that." She laughed and threw her hands up. "Sure we can if you want to," she told her son.

By late that afternoon Rudy and Rebecca along with some of the household staff had taken care of moving all of Kiki and Tiger's personal items from their home. When they handed her a set of keys, the blonde felt almost liberated. She laughed when Rudy made her sign a lease agreement that stated she had to pay five dollars a month or five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, which ever came first.

"Enjoy," said Julian as she headed to the front door of Kiki's new place.

"I don't know how to thank you for all this."

"Five bucks will do it," teased Julian. "Can I ask you something that's been running around in my head?"

"After all you've done for us, you can ask me anything."

The tall brunette closed the door and leaned against it, Summer was already in bed up at the house and she had just wanted to come by and see if Kiki and the boy were settled in. "Won't Tiger miss Rhonda?"

"You can't miss something or someone who wasn't around much, Bernie. To tell you the truth, if I told him we couldn't see you and Summer anymore, that would upset him more."

"But you planned a family together."

Kiki patted the sofa cushion next to her, thinking her answer would take more than a minute of Julian's time. "We did, but a family to some people is what you do as a progression of things to be done in your life. But just because you do that, doesn't mean you're going to be any good at it. Tiger isn't a work project or something you tinker with on the weekends and she could never understand that."

"Wow that's got to be tough on him."

"I think it was at first, but because he's so young, he didn't understand so he just learned to depend on me. I carried him for nine months and he's my son, but I didn't want to raise him alone. Maybe it's the teacher in me, but I feel for a child to be well rounded they need two people bringing different things to the table. In the classroom I saw what a boost it was for children who had that."

Julian reached over and rubbed Kiki's knee in sympathy. "Don't knock the job you've done, sweetheart. When I was growing up all I had was Nanna. You remind me a lot of her when I see you with Tiger, and my opinion is that extraordinary women raise extraordinary children."

"You think you're extraordinary?" asked Kiki in a joking way.

"Tell me you don't think so." Julian laughed and stood up ready to go. If she stayed any longer she felt as if leaving wasn't going to be an option her heart would comply with. "You know where to find me if something goes wrong," she pointed in the direction of the house.

"Good night, Bernie, and thank you again."

Kiki watched until Julian stood at the edge of the garden. Before the foliage swallowed her up, she turned and waved making the blonde blush. They both laid down about three hundred feet apart and stayed awake for a long time. For Kiki it was from excitement, what seemed like a bleak immediate future had changed because of Julian. And for Julian, her future seemed splintered in so many different directions that it was hard to tell which way to head.

It was the first time she felt like opening the safe and pulling out her father's letter. After receiving it and waiting to open it, she had come to the conclusion he would let her know when the right time was as she considered it, she realized that the time still wasn't right.

"Good night, Kiki. I hope you find what you're looking for," whispered Julian looking toward her window.

\*\*\*\*\*

By Sunday night they had gone to the zoo, City Park to ride the train, the aquarium and to another movie to round out their weekend. Summer was having so much fun it was getting harder to get her to go to bed. After all the whining she fell asleep instantly when Julian got her to lie down.

"I love you, Bernie."

"Thanks, princess, I love you too, but you have to go to sleep so you won't be tired at school tomorrow."

A big yawn stopped Summer from saying she wasn't tired, but she wanted to talk to Julian about something important now that Tiger and Miss Kiki were so close by. "Bernie, I gotta tell you something."

"Is it something important?" Julian leaned over and turned her new Barbie lamp back on. It had been a gift from Nanna, along with the new bedspread, sheets, towels, bike and battery operated car.

"I don't ever want to leave here."

Julian sat frozen not knowing how to respond to that. Darlene was still looking for Deanne but it was as if the European countryside had opened up and swallowed her whole. "Don't you think your mom would be lonely if you stayed here with me." As much as she loved having Summer around, Julian had to keep reminding herself the little girl didn't belong to her.

"She went away and I'm glad. I love you, Bernie."

The choked up adult pulled the blankets back and pulled Summer into her arms to make her stop crying. She had made her admission with such conviction that Summer came close to yelling it. "It's ok, Summer. Remember what I promised you when you got here?"

"You said I don't have ta leave."

"That's right, and even if your mother comes home, I'll talk to her and see if she'll let you come visit us."

Summer clung tightly to her like something had frightened her. "Can you ask if I can stay here with you?"

"If that's what you want sure, but we don't have to worry about that right this minute." Julian laid

her back down and pulled the covers back over the girl and Binky. "Right now I want you to have sweet dreams and get some rest."

The window in the study upstairs faced the street and Julian sat with the chair cocked back a little looking at the full moon. Her journal lay unopened on the desk and her pen was in her hand uncapped. Summer's worries were starting to concern Julian and she didn't know how to put the child at ease.

"Maybe Kiki will know what to do," she said to no one but the walls.

"I thought I'd surprise you even though you don't exactly deserve it after standing me up yet again." Cassandra's voice cut through her daydreams, and Julian's feet dropped to the floor.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Lover, for once maybe your response should be, 'Hey it's great to see you, I missed you so much.'" When Julian's mouth opened, Cassandra put her hand up to stop her. "Is it too much to ask for?"

"Sorry I'm such a disappointment in the correct response category, but I have a lot on my mind tonight. How was your trip?"

"Great, we picked up a new client who's close to being in your league but not quite. Are you going to invite me in?"

"I'm sorry," Julian stood up and waved to one of the chairs across from the desk, "Have a seat."

Cassandra didn't take her up on her offer and instead walked around and pushed Julian back into her seat so she could sit on her lap. "I can't do this from way over there." Soft lips moved up Julian's neck until she got to her lips. "Want to move this somewhere more private?" asked Cassandra when they parted.

"Tempting offer, but not tonight."

"It's been days, you don't know what you're missing." Cassandra moved her mouth back to Julian's neck trying to change her mind.

Before things got out of hand, Julian pulled her away and moved to get them both on their feet. "Let's head downstairs and have a drink."

"Is something wrong?"

"Summer just had a rough time of it before she fell asleep and I want to be there for her if she wakes up is all." Julian waved her hand toward the door and waited for Cassandra to move.

"Could I use your restroom first?"

"There's one through there," Julian pointed to the door that connected to her bedroom. "I'll meet you in the den."

Twenty minutes later Julian was sitting in a reading chair with an empty glass in her hand, and still Cassandra hadn't come down. The only thing she could think of was the woman was waiting for her on the bed. Not that she was in the habit of dragging beautiful naked women out of her bedroom, but it didn't feel right to sleep with Cassandra with Kiki and the kids so close by.

Julian moved quietly down the hall in bare feet surprising the woman sitting at her desk reading her journal. Unaware, Cassandra turned the page and continued reading as if it were a good book she couldn't put down. She wanted to know more about the woman now living so close that Julian had written so eloquently about.

"Close it and get out."

The dark head whipped up at the menace in Julian's tone. "I didn't mean to," started Cassandra.

"Those are my thoughts and not meant for you or anyone to read." Julian's hands clenched to fists. "Now close the book and get out of here."

"Let's talk about this, Julian."

"Get out!" Julian screamed loud enough to wake Summer and bring Rudy and Rebecca out of their rooms.

Cassandra dropped the leather bound diary and moved to touch Julian. "Please, Julian, it's not worth throwing away what we have over something so trivial."

"Rudy, show Ms. Jarvis to the door, I have to go see about Summer."

It took her another hour to get the little girl back to sleep and in the morning everyone was cranky from the bad night. The only thing that cheered Summer up was seeing Tiger when they arrived at the daycare center.

"Bad night, Bernie?" asked Kiki noticing they were running late.

"Bad night, bad morning - let's just hope the trend doesn't continue," grumbled Julian, smiling when Summer hugged her goodbye.

Before she could straighten up fully, Kiki moved closer and kissed Julian on the cheek. "Something to cheer you up."

Like a schoolgirl with her first crush, Julian put her fingers over the spot and smiled like an idiot. "Thanks."

After lunch Julian took a walk down to J.J.'s place and ordered a beer. "Hey there, I was beginning to think you were avoiding me, buddy," her old friend told her.

"My life is complicated with children lately and you won't let them in here to drink, so we all suffer."

J.J. stopped cleaning glasses long enough to take a swig of her bottle. She rarely drank at work, but found it strange to talk to Julian without joining her. "Don't tell me more trashy women have left children on your doorstep to take care of," teased J.J. "Seriously, how's life treating you?"

"Like a bad rash. Another one bit the dust last night."

The bartender let out a long whistle. "She lasted longer than Nanna and I thought she would, so that means something, right? What happened, you get bored?"

"She was reading my journal," Julian started her story.

"Man, you won't even let me read that thing," whined J.J.

"If you'd learn to let me finish, rock head," joked Julian with more enthusiasm than she felt. "I didn't say I gave her permission to read the damned thing."

"Ooh that sucks," J.J. reached over and patted Julian on the shoulder. "Now that I have you alone, what's the story with the cute blonde at the opening?"

Julian explained the situation ending with the reason she had a black eye and Kiki was living in her guesthouse. The one thing she loved most about J.J. was no matter what the subject was, or what you did, she never judged. She just warned a little.

"Is this asshole Rhonda out of the picture?"

"I'm not in the picture so what's it matter?"

With her elbows on the bar, J.J. looked at her for a long time before answering. "We've known each other forever right?" Julian nodded. "In all those years I've never once seen you look at a woman like you did that night. I thought my wish had been granted when I saw her looking at you. What I'm trying to say is, I don't want you to get hurt."

Julian nodded and finished her beer. "Thanks, buddy. It's good to have someone looking out for me."

As Julian's hand closed around the knob on the way out, J.J. yelled one more thing. "Don't be afraid to at least try."

\*\*\*\*\*



The summer came and went, as did the fall with the four of them getting closer. Julian used the pool for the first time at the kids' instance and Kiki took care of feeding them all. For a week, Julian took them all to Disney World so the children had something good to tell their friends at school when asked what they did on their summer vacation.

More than one night in all those months found Julian falling asleep with Kiki on the sofa in the guesthouse. It would be the giggles of two small children that would get them to stop snoring. And it was the same tykes who encouraged them to get closer. With Kiki and Julian getting more comfortable around each other, it gave Summer and Tiger something they'd craved in their short lives - a happy family.

From the beginning they included Nanna in most of their outings and once she got over the disappointment of Kiki not being Jewish, she befriended the young woman who made Julian smile so much.

In the fall they celebrated both Summer and Tiger's fifth birthdays, which turned out to be a couple of days apart. Not finding Deanne sent Darlene in search of information about the little girl who was now a fixture in their offices.

"Did you finish your Christmas shopping?" asked Kiki as she dropped next to Julian. She'd left the kids playing a video game Summer had gotten for Hanukah in the little girl's bedroom, and was anxious to get back to Julian and the fire she'd built.

"I've never been Christmas shopping in my life, so, no."

Kiki tried to hide the smile on her face as she looked at the decorated tree in the corner. They had argued over the size all afternoon the day they'd gone shopping for it, finally deciding on a medium sized one. The blonde had almost busted a gut laughing after she figured out why. After spotting Eugenia's car in the drive, Julian grabbed the whole thing and shoved it in a closet.

"It's not hard, honey, and I offered to help you with the wrapping. Though, I think the kids are enjoying the many nights of Hanukah and all the gifts and candle lighting it involves." Kiki lifted Julian's arm and put it around her shoulders.

"Be honest with me, if you found a big fat guy dressed in red velvet in your house with a big bag - wouldn't you call the police?"

"Tsk, you're so bad, and don't ask the kids that question. I have a hard enough time getting them not to play poker with the go fish cards during the day after you taught them to gamble with Lego pieces." Kiki turned so she was almost lying across Julian's lap. "I bet I can introduce you to a holiday tradition you'll like."

"Heavily spiked eggnog?"

From her pocket Kiki pulled a fresh sprig of mistletoe. "Whenever you find yourself standing under this, whoever's standing with you has to kiss you."

"Whenever that happens, huh?" Kiki nodded and started to lift her arm only to have Julian stop her. She thought she'd screwed up her chance to get closer to Julian, when a long arm reached behind them. "Rebecca told me about that particular tradition so I had her make me something."

Kiki laughed and held on to Julian as the object of her affection put on a wire halo with another wire going up so the mistletoe attached to the end would hang over Julian's head. "Oh, Bernie, I didn't think you had it in you."

"So?" Julian pointed up. Kiki pulled the dark head down by two fists full of hair.

The kiss was gentle at first, with two sets of lips just pressed together to get acquainted. Julian held Kiki close and opened her mouth when the blonde's tongue ran across her lips. She felt her hair being pulled tighter as the intensity grew, but it only served to turn Julian on.

"Merry Christmas, Bernie," said Kiki when they pulled apart from lack of air.

"Happy Hanukah." Kiki laughed and took the funny contraption Rebecca had made off of Julian's head. "I was that bad?"

Kiki pulled her closer again. "You were that good, I just don't want anything in my way." Their second kiss was a little more intense, that was until the door opened.

"Julian Bernstein Lowe, what in the world is that?" asked Eugenia pointing at the tree with white twinkling lights.

Their lips almost made a popping noise when they came apart. "I've never seen it before, Nanna," responded Julian with a straight face. She looked down at a smiling Kiki and asked, "You?"

"Elves brought it in while we weren't looking, Eugenia."

"Elves my ass," teased Eugenia. She moved closer to the Christmas tree as if she'd never seen one before.

"Nanna, please, we have young impressionable children in the house."

"I'm sure coming down here and finding the two of you groping each other won't make an impression."

Kiki laughed at both Eugenia's bluntness and the blush now running up Julian's neck. "It wasn't groping, it was kissing and you have really bad timing," said Kiki, moving to straighten up.

"I have perfect timing, dear, you still have all your clothes on." Julian laughed at her grandmother's teasing as Kiki's neck started to show a creeping red blush of its own. "Now don't stop on my account, I came to see the kids." The verbal menace took her bag full of goodies and

started up the stairs. A few minutes later Julian and Kiki heard the screaming from whatever treat Nanna had brought with her this time.

"Are you ok?" asked Julian. She was used to Nanna's weird sense of humor but newbies sometimes didn't know how to respond.

Kiki moved back to her prior position and cupped Julian's face with her hands. "I was about to ask you the same thing before we got interrupted. Are you ok with this?" She indicated the position they were in and kissed Julian again.

"I just have one question."

"Let's just hope it's something we can fix because I don't want to give this up if I don't have to."

"You'll still kiss me without this plant on my head, right?"

"Your lips have been claimed, Ms. Lowe. Even Nanna walking in on us won't stop me from enjoying as many of these as you're willing to give me."

There was no reason for heavy talks about their futures and commitment since both of them knew they wanted the same things, and had built their relationship slowly and solidly for weeks. Kiki and Tiger spent the night on Christmas Eve and Julian got a crash course in putting together dozens of toys for the morning's excitement. For a second, on the morning of the twenty-fifth, she thought the house alarm was going off when Summer and Tiger reacted simultaneously to their pile of gifts from the bottom of the stairs.

"Thanks, Bernie," Summer told her later after they'd had their Christmas lunch. Rebecca had spent quite a while explaining to Kiki why ham wasn't going to be on her menu that year so get used to having turkey.

"Did you like all your stuff?"

"I never had a Christmas like this, and I loved all my stuff. Look at my Barbie watch Nanna got me." She put her wrist about a half an inch from Julian's face and let her watch the crown on the second hand reach Barbie's head. "What'd you get?"

"I got to watch you and Tiger open all that stuff, and that's the best present I got this year. The other thing is I got to celebrate my first Christmas with you."

"You never had Christmas?"

"I had Hanukah, remember I told you about that?" When Kiki made it back from the kitchen with dessert, she leaned against the wall and watched Julian with both kids now in her lap. She was telling them a story and both little faces were looking up at her like Julian was telling them the secrets of the universe.

When Kiki had dreamed of having a family this was the type of person she dreamed of having one with. Over the summer she had sat in awe as Tiger took the field in little league with Julian hanging on the fence at every game giving him advice. She was sure he'd had more than one accident in the pool from over excitement when his tall playmate held him tight and taught him to swim. Julian had managed to do with Tiger what Rhonda never could in all the years she'd been with him. She had managed to plant in his mind what another loving parent could be, and he idolized her for it.

"Will you help me with my track later, Bernie?" asked Tiger. He had whispered to Julian on one of their trips to the mall how he wanted Santa to bring it to him, and had been thrilled he hadn't forgotten to add it to his sleigh.

"We'll carry it to your room as soon as your mama gets in here with that pie and stops staring at us," teased Julian, tickling the two blondes. "Go get her, guys."

"Bernie, don't you dare," warned Kiki. She was holding a coconut cream pie she'd made after Julian had said it was her favorite. Kiki put it down in time to take off from the three troublemakers chasing her. It was the way they spent the afternoon and evening, and when it was time for bed neither of the children complained after Julian had run them ragged.

"Thanks for today and all the stuff you got Tiger," said Kiki as they put away the rest of the dishes giving Rebecca and the rest of the staff the day off. "Promise me you won't let him go near the water by himself with that remote control boat you got him."

"I'll take care of him don't worry."

"And what about his mom?"

Julian turned Kiki and pressed her up against the counter, dipping her head to initiate a slow kiss. "His mom's in good hands too, don't worry about that one."

The festive mood continued as New Year's rolled around, only this time, the kids were glad to stay home with Rudy, Rebecca and Nanna while Julian escorted Kiki out to dinner. For the occasion Julian chose Galatoire's. It was one of the older establishments in New Orleans but it was a nice way to spend a night wrapped in old traditions, as you were set out to make some new ones of your own.

"Happy New Year," Julian said as she held up her glass.

"It's certainly starting out that way," Kiki returned the toast. "Can you do something for me?"

"Name it."

"That's what I love about being with you, Bernie, I actually believe you when you say that to me."

Julian reached across the small table and took her hand. "If it's within my power to give you whatever you desire, then I'll do it. If it's something I have to work for, then I'll spend a lifetime getting it done."

"God, I could melt when you talk to me like that." Kiki tangled their fingers together wanting not to lose contact with Julian and wanting to memorize everything about the night. "Will you take me back to the museum?"

"That's an easy enough request, but can I ask why?"

"Because it's important to you and you're important to me. I think of everything we've been through since we met, it's the one thing that's a not so pleasant memory and I want to change that."

"Good thing for you that you know the owner."

They finished dinner and decided to walk to the museum. They held hands the whole way, sharing more than one kiss as they waited for traffic to pass at the intersections. Julian waved to the few guards posted for the nightshift before disengaging the alarm system.

"Will you tell me about them?" asked Kiki.

"Who?"

"Your parents, I want to know why all this came to be," Kiki held her hand up to indicate the museum.

They were on the first floor and it was so different empty and deathly quiet. It was as if the canvases were screaming at you to look. "The way Nanna tells it, they were two very different people who were fated to collide and fuse together like metal."

"She's a pain in the ass, but Nanna has a wonderful way with words when she applies herself."

Julian laughed at the description since it was so apt. "My father, Sebastian, was the thinker, the planner and the pragmatist of the two. Nanna said he didn't have an artistic bone in his body, but he could park the QE II on a dime given the opportunity. There wasn't a vessel in our fleet at the time that he didn't have a license for."

"Sounds like a ship enthusiast I know," teased Kiki as she looked at the Jackson Pollock in front of them.

"My mother, Birdie, was the artist, the dreamer and the teacher. I've heard people tell me all my life that my dad would love saying that she was his creative side. She never drove anything in her life, or sailed anything either, but I have some of her sketches at home and it's a good thing she never wasted time learning the more mechanical things in life. There is a depth to her stuff that would have surpassed some of these with time."

Kiki looked up at her with tears in her eyes at the words Julian had used. "I'll be blessed if Tiger speaks so highly of me one day."

"I'm lucky that way, I never knew them so to me, they'll always be perfect. For Tiger though, he'll be the blessed one because he'll speak from experience."

Their conversation continued as they made their way to the third floor and the Monets. "What happened to them?" Kiki sat next to Julian hanging on to her arm as tightly as to her words. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"When my mom was eight months pregnant, they went to a friend's wedding. On the way there a drunk driver crossed the centerline and hit them head on. My father died instantly but my mother hung on just long enough to give birth. She died at five after midnight on February 14th without ever hearing my first cry."

"That's such a sad story, but for Eugenia you were like a gift of love. How appropriate that you were born on the day of the year that honors it most." Julian pulled her arm up and looked at her watch. "Am I boring you?"

"I just wanted to kiss you at midnight and I didn't want to miss the opportunity." She put the timepiece where Kiki could see it. "See less than a minute left to go." When it came time they both counted down from ten, missing the one when their lips found each other.

"Can I ask you for one more thing?" asked Kiki.

"You can ask for anything."

"Take me home, Bernie."

With the kids asleep in the main house, Julian parked the car and walked Kiki to the guesthouse. She was hoping the reason Kiki wanted to come home was so they could start the year off right and in each other's arms. When the door opened, the petite blonde took her by the hand and walked Julian to the bedroom.

"I want to be with you more than anything," Kiki confessed putting her hands under Julian's coat, on her chest.

Before they went any further, Julian kissed her then started taking Kiki's clothes off. She threw Kiki's coat across the chair by the window, followed by her own. A laugh escaped her chest when Kiki slipped out of her heels and shrunk a few inches. "One short joke and you ain't getting any," she warned, jabbing a finger in Julian's chest.

"The more I look at you, touch you and feel you pressed against me, the more I think you're just perfect. So I promise, no short jokes."

Julian held Kiki close as she worked on the row of small buttons on the back of her dress. The fingers that brushed her skin every time Julian moved to the next button were hot, but the tall woman was so gentle they felt like butterfly wings. As Julian busied herself with that, Kiki returned the favor and popped the pearl flat buttons on the heavy cotton shirt Julian was wearing.

The dress fell to the floor and Kiki was left standing in nothing but a smile. "My, Katherine, I don't think my heart would've held out through dinner if I'd known there was so little between me and all this skin." Julian stood back long enough for one good look before scooping Kiki off her feet.

"Bernie, have I told you how much I love this bed?" Julian shook her head and finished with her clothes with an attentive audience watching. Blue eyes followed the red finger nails as they scraped over the sheets. "The first time I got in this thing I just wanted to take my clothes off and roll around in here, this bedding feels so good. There was only one thing that I could think of that would feel better than this."

"What's that?" Julian's pants went flying over her shoulder along with her underwear.

"Being naked with these sheets under me and a naked Bernie on top."

Julian finished by stripping off her socks and crawled over Kiki until she was in the position the blonde wanted her in. The smaller woman felt so good under her that Julian came close to just collapsing all her weight on top of her. She felt Kiki flattened her hands then slide them down to the small of her back.

"Baby, I've waited long enough," said Kiki reaching up and sucking on Julian's neck. "I've wanted you from the first day you walked into my life and now I want more than anything for you to touch me."

The mattress dipped a little when Julian rolled half off Kiki so she could run her hands down her body but still keep as much of their skin touching as possible. Kiki was one of the most feminine looking women she'd ever seen. The body lying bare before her was compact but the breasts were full with dark pink nipples that hardened just from Julian's staring at them. Her stomach wasn't completely flat but the little bit of a flair was incredibly sexy to Julian as was the roundness of her butt. More than once she'd had to remind her eyes to stay above Kiki's waist as she watched her walk away. There was a roll to her hips when she walked that made Kiki look like she had all the time in the world to get to where she was going. To Julian, it was the definition of womanly swagger and it was mesmerizing to watch.

Julian ran just her fingertips along Kiki's collarbone, and up her neck; fascinated by the trail of goose bumps she left in her wake. The pink lips parted slightly when Julian's index finger ran a circuit around them. A small plea from Kiki got her to move down again bypassing the nipples in want of attention.

"You're so beautiful," whispered Julian as she moved back to cover more of Kiki's body with her own. Wanting a small taste, she dipped her head and sucked one of the rosy buds into her mouth

getting Kiki to plaster her hand to the back of Julian's head. Without letting go of the nipple, Julian's hips came up a little so she could squeeze her hand between them.

Without looking, she ran her fingers on the outer part of Kiki's sex feeling the moan it caused through the young woman's chest. "Touch me, honey," Kiki's sounded almost desperate.

The soft blonde hair felt slicker as Julian made the return trip up to the top of Kiki's mound. Slowly she dipped her index and middle finger into the copious amounts of natural lubricant and fanned them out. Julian could feel Kiki's hips starting to move and her hands tightening on the back of her hair to encourage Julian to suck harder. Her fingers were coated with Kiki's excitement when Julian stopped her stroking and squeezed the hard bundle in need of attention.

Their hips slapped together when Kiki's shot off the bed trying to chase the fingers that were trying to let up on the delicious pressure. "No, don't stop."

"Just a taste, then I promise to take care of you." Kiki took Julian's statement to mean she was going to lick her own fingers to appease her curiosity. The blonde almost came when it was her lips Julian painted with her wetness then moved to kiss them clean. True to her word, as Julian's lips covered her own in a kiss of possession, two fingers slid in slowly and her thumb concentrated on the point of her pleasure.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," chanted Kiki as Julian drove her higher. She felt like the brunette had stripped her of all her inhibitions and gave her the freedom to claim her pleasure. As she began to feel the edges of the orgasm starting, Kiki clawed Julian's back and felt her emotions build with the fabulous feeling. When she reached the peak, Kiki didn't know why, but she was crying and couldn't stop. Instead of asking questions, Julian just rolled to her back and wrapped Kiki in her arms and held her.

Kiki didn't try to hold any weight up on her own and just slumped against Julian's chest enjoying the hand running from her shoulder blade to her butt with a steady stroke. "I'm not sure what you did, but I've never felt like that before." Her head finally felt strong enough to pick up and Kiki pulled her shoulder length hair back so she could look into Julian's eyes. "There's only one way to thank you for that."

Instinct told her Julian was the type of person who enjoyed sex, the way she'd touched her clued Kiki into that fact, but what she couldn't figure out, considering Julian's normal demeanor, was how she expressed that enjoyment. *Are you a screamer, my love, or does that strong silent type spill over into all aspects of your life?* She moved her legs up so she could straddle Julian's waist. Kiki pulled herself up into a sitting position and looked down as if trying to decide on where to start.

"And here I thought you looked good in your clothes." Kiki laughed at the smile the compliment got her.

Julian was the tallest person she'd ever seen naked, but tall in Julian's case didn't mean bulky. Over the weeks she'd seen the CEO coming back from her morning runs and three times a week



she hit the gym at the office. The result was a body that was fit without being overly muscular, except for her arms and shoulders. Julian worked harder on her upper body so she would feel comfortable with the controls of any ship they owned.

Lowering her head, Kiki kissed her, long and softly. "Let me love you," she said as she rose up on her knees so she was inches above Julian's body. Going down slowly, Kiki moved so that just her nipples dragged along Julian's body. She smiled when the blue eyes never left her chest and Julian's nose flared.

*We can do better than that*, thought Kiki as she ran out of real estate. Kneeling between Julian's legs she ran her hands up her own body until she reached the undersides of her breasts. Cupping them, Kiki leaned down and ran first one nipple then the other through Julian's sex, then just as slowly moved back to the head of the bed.

"Like you said, just a taste," whispered Kiki as she offered the glistening part of her body. When Julian had sucked Kiki's nipples of her own excitement, the blonde moved back down. The loud moan she was waiting for came when she clamped down and sucked in Julian's clitoris without warning. Kiki almost came again when Julian grabbed the top of her head and ground her center into Kiki's face. The long body tensed then slumped back to the damp sheets with a long exhale.

Kiki stretched out on top of Julian again and kissed her before resting her head on a broad shoulder. "Happy New Year, Bernie."

"It certainly is," said Julian, causing her bedmate to laugh.

\*\*\*\*\*

A few weeks later, Julian sat in her study at home and looked out the window at the violet night sky letting her mind wander from subject to subject at random. Fear had kept her from analyzing her good fortune of late when it came to her personal life, not wanting to jinx any part of it. The wonder she had found with Kiki was something Julian hadn't planned on, but Nanna had always told her love was something no one ever planned for. Love just happened to you when the person who completes you falls into your life. Now she felt like she had to make some decisions or watch as the things she wanted slipped through her fingers like sand.

*January 30, 2003*

*A year has almost passed since I first saw her, and I find myself thinking of a time when I felt like I didn't love her. When I make love to her I see her heart in those green eyes and it makes me want to be a poet so I can adequately express what's in my own. Months ago I complained about the sentimental asshole I'd become and now I've found someone who wouldn't want me any other way.*

*The dilemma I find myself with tonight, and from the first night I felt her touch, is making a leap of faith. Up to this point in my life I've planned every step and agonized over the major decisions because the lives of so many people who depend on what I do hung in the balance. Delivering*

*jobs and paying good wages is easy compared to giving someone your heart.*

*Love. It's a small word that doesn't begin to cover how it makes you feel. I look at Kiki and I see myself fifty years down the line. If I'm lucky to be gifted such a long life, the one thing I'm sure of is that I'll love her even more than I do now. All that's left is to give voice to what's in my heart and tell her how I feel. Maybe by taking the first step, it will give her the courage to do the same. If I'm wrong, then I'll at least feel better having tried.*

*For once I don't look toward another birthday as a time to remember loss, but as a time to celebrate new beginnings. My father once had the courage to fly across the world to get the woman he loved to marry him. How lucky am I that all I have to do is walk across a lawn?*

*What do you know, the sentimental asshole fell in love and found that it's worth more than the sum of all the great days I've had so far.*

"What cha doing, Bernie?"

"Writing some stuff down. I thought you were asleep." Julian looked at the rumpled looking child standing in the doorway and held her hand out. The invitation was always accepted in a hurry and Summer found herself in her favorite spot in Julian's lap.

"I wanted to talk to you some more."

"What's the matter, sweet girl?" The blonde hair was mussed so Julian started to put some order to it with her fingers. The repetitive motion usually put the little girl to sleep.

"I miss Tiger and Miss Kiki."

"I miss them too but they promised to be back soon. Miss Kiki's sister is sick and she's almost well enough so they can come home and play with you."

As was her habit, Summer snuggled closer to Julian's body and played with her stuffed rabbit's ears. She loved listening to the tall woman's voice because it rumbled in her chest so you could feel it too. "Can we go to the zoo tomorrow?"

"Don't you want to go to school?"

Julian felt the blonde head shake against her neck. "It's not the same without them there."

"I guess we can go to the zoo after I go to someplace I was planning on in the morning."

"Can I come with you?"

Julian didn't really know if she wanted to explain the cemetery to the child, but she wanted to go and sit someplace quiet and finalize the plans that would completely change her life. There she felt like there was someone looking over her and guiding her in the right direction.

"I was going to see my mom and dad, but they aren't alive anymore." It wasn't great but it was the best she could do without her child expert Kiki around.

"My grandma's not alive either."

"Did you love her?"

"She used to take care of me when my mom went away but then she got sick and went away too. She used to make me noodles and cheese."

"Sounds like she love you a lot, sweetheart."

"Can I go with you and see your mom and dad?"

"If you want, sure."

The next morning Rudy waited by the car as Julian took Summer's hand and walked to the Lowe family graves. A year older still left Summer at five, but even at such a young age she still managed to floor Julian with questions beyond her years. "Didn't you bring a flower, Bernie?"

They stopped at a bench close to where they were headed and Julian pulled Summer into her lap. "The way I was raised we don't bring flowers to people who have died."

"Why, didn't you like them?"

"I loved them very much."

"So you don't bring nothing?"

"Flowers are for the living, Summer, but for people who have come into our lives and are now gone it's best to bring a stone and leave that as a remembrance."

"Stone?" The word sounded like something she should know, but Summer's brow scrunched up.

"A rock."

"A rock is silly, Bernie."

"Think of it this way, if you left a flower how long do you think it would last?" Summer's shoulders shrugged not knowing the answer. "Not very long before it got all wilted, and in my family buying flowers for someone who cannot enjoy them is seen as wasteful. What did your grandmother like doing?"

"She liked going to this place with other really old people and playing games."

"Don't you think she'd like for someone to buy her friends a new game instead of spending the money on flowers?"

"I don't have money."

"Not now, but when you get older you will. My mom and dad liked different things too, and that's what I give my money to so they'll be happy."

"In heaven?"

Little white lies never hurt anyone especially when it saved you from a circular conversation with a five-year-old that was guaranteed to end in a headache. "Yes, in heaven."

"But why do we leave a rock?"

"The stone is our calling card that we were here. When we come back we'll see it and know that we took the time to come for a visit and remember how special the person is to us."

"So a flower is for a little while and a rock is for a really long time."

"For eternity if we're lucky." Julian pulled two smooth small stones out of her pocket and handed them to Summer. "You want to leave some so you can remember that you were here?"

Julian watched as Summer stood on her toes to reach the top of the marble markers. If she needed a sign that her life would be all right, it came in the form of a small child who only wanted to be loved and love her in return. Summer didn't care about her money, she cared about Julian reading her stories and holding her hand after a bad dream. It was the same with Tiger and Kiki, and it cemented Julian's resolve.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Welcome back, guys. How's the patient?" asked Julian as she headed for the trunk of Kiki's car to get their bags. Chris had gotten a flu that had almost landed her in the hospital after she couldn't keep anything down for a few days.

"She started bitching about everything a couple of days ago. That's when I was sure she was on her way to a speedy recovery. Did you miss me?" Kiki whispered as she leaned into the trunk with Julian.

Julian kissed the cute nose and couldn't wait for some privacy. "I must've not done a good job in all those phone calls if you don't know if I missed you or not."

"The ones that left me quivering and wanting to go put a pillow over Chris' head to put her out of her misery so I could come home calls?" The teasing blonde pushed Julian to sit on the bumper so she could stand between her legs. "You did a great job, Bernie, but they were equally cruel as well. Think you can talk dirty to me tonight while we're in the same room?"

"I'm counting on it."

A trip to the kids' favorite pizza place and a couple of hours of play later they were ready for bed. "Thanks for letting me stay with Tiger, Miss Kiki," said Summer from the twin bed next to the little boy's.

"He missed you so much that I didn't think it was fair to make you spend the night apart. You have to promise to get some sleep though." Kiki kissed Summer's forehead like she had Tiger's and left only a small nightlight on in the room.

"It's just you and me now, Bernie," whispered Kiki to the woman standing in the hall looking in at the two kids. "Got any ideas?"

Julian picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. "I'm sure I'll think of something."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Thank you for joining me for lunch," Julian stood and held out her hand to the shorter man with wisps of white coloring the temples of his blonde head. "I'm Julian Lowe."

"It's nice to put a face to the name my kid's talked about incessantly for months now." The man took her hand in a strong grip then pointed for her to take a seat. "I'm Arthur Breaux."

"Can I get you something to drink?" asked the waiter.

"Scotch neat," answered Arthur.

"Make that two, thanks." Julian smiled up at the young man before turning her attention back to the retired cop who looked like he'd rip her arm off and beat her with it if she said one wrong thing. "I wanted to talk to you before I talked to Kiki about something important."

"Did you know Rhonda?"

"Yes, sir, we met a couple of times."

"That girl never wanted to talk to me about anything. Let me tell you something, I don't know how it happened that I ended up with a son who's married and has some kids, and two daughters who chased more skirts than that boy ever thought about. Happened and there's no sense talking it to death why, but what I do know is that it don't matter if they're gay or not, I don't like people treating them like dirt." He finished his drink in one gulp and pointed to the glass. "So what's it you want to talk to me about?"

"I wanted to ask you for Katherine's hand, sir."

"You serious?"

"Dead."

He cocked his head to the side and studied the whole picture Julian painted. "You know you got to take the kid too right?"

"Yes, sir, I assumed they came as a package deal. I love your daughter, Mr. Breaux, and I know you don't know me but I want your blessing before I ask her to share her life with me."

Arthur let out a laugh as he tore off a piece of bread the busboy had dropped off. "Hell, girl, now you sound like a fancy card. Can you take care of them?"

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"You got a job? Kiki deserves a partner not some do nothing she's got to drag along."

Julian pointed to her own glass and sent up a prayer Kiki didn't turn into her father with the passage of time. "What exactly did Kiki tell you about me?"

"She said you were tall, good looking, had blue eyes and liked boats. She also said you liked to play golf and would take me whenever I wanted." He took a bite of bread and almost choked from the expression on Julian's face. "I'm sorry I just couldn't help messing with you. I thought it would loosen you up a little." The pat on her shoulder was as surprising as the change in his face.

"I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"From what my little girl tells me, no you don't, you're more of a leader. You know what I see when I look at you?"

"A thoroughly confused person?"

"I see someone who makes my daughter happy, and someone who makes my grandson smile and that's good enough for me. Now let's eat and make plans for you to come over for dinner. Kiki's mom would kill me if I didn't offer, and since they took my gun when I retired I take her threats more seriously than ever."

The rest of their talk went pretty much like the one she'd had with Nanna. Not that she needed her grandmother's permission, but Julian wanted to share her good news with her so Eugenia could start planning the ceremony she'd imagined for years. Julian was sure she probably had Alice ironing the canopy already.

"So, Julian, when are you going to pop the question?"

"Everyone expects things like that on Valentine's Day, but since that's also the anniversary of a lot of other things in my life, I thought I ask a day early and really surprise her. I'm thinking after the sun goes down tonight I'll take her out in the garden and see if she's willing to spend a

lifetime putting up with me."

"Good luck, and thanks for asking me. I know it's old fashioned but a father likes to be involved in his little girl's future. It's nice to know she has such a good one to look forward to."

"Thank you, sir, that means a lot to me."

"She was serious about the golf though, right?"

"Any Saturday morning you want."

Julian left lunch and went to the jewelers to pick up the purchase she'd made a couple of days before. When she'd told Eugenia of her plan, she'd offered Birdie's ring that she'd kept for safekeeping, but Julian had turned her down. It was a nice gesture, but Julian wanted something Kiki could call her own and not have to share a past with.

"Now all I need is for the girl to say yes," Julian said as she snapped the black velvet box closed.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Kiki? Can I talk to you?"

The blonde just looked at her like she couldn't believe she was standing there holding flowers. "What are those for?"

"They're for you, just because. I wanted to come by and tell you something. What we have is something special, something I can't live without. I'm sorry if this isn't coming out right," the speech continued when Kiki didn't say anything. "I love you so much, and I have for so long. I know I made mistakes, but if we have love we can get past those."

"What does that mean?" asked Kiki.

"It means you deserve all those things you never had before," the box came out and snapped open with nervous hands. "It means I can't live another day without you. Please say yes?" When there was still no answer she took the ring out and slipped it on Kiki's limp finger and moved to kiss her.

Julian stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Kiki's in Rhonda's embrace. It wasn't like the kisses they had shared over the month they'd been together, and Julian couldn't believe she was standing there comparing their experiences as she watched Rhonda deepen the kiss as Kiki's hand came up and flattened against the other woman's chest. She had sent the kids to the movie with Rudy and Rebecca wanting to the time to propose.

All afternoon, Julian had practiced what she was going to say and had finally given up, hoping the words would just come when she needed them. The walk to the guesthouse had been short since she'd almost run from the anticipation, stopping at the edge of some evergreen bushes

when she heard voices.

Not wanting to listen and making yourself move were two different things and Julian felt like her feet had rooted in the grass. She waited for Kiki to tell her ex-lover to leave and for her to push her away when Rhonda kissed her but it didn't happen. What did happen was Kiki led her into the house and closed the door shattering Julian's heart with the click of the latch.

The ring she'd spent hours picking out fell from her hand and Julian just left it as she turned for the main house. She was looking for a place to go and hide from the pain, but all she found at the end of the drive was Deanne, Summer's mother.

"Not tonight, God, please!" she whispered. After all the time Summer had been with her, Julian had hoped Deanne had forgotten about her.

"Are you all right?"

"Why are you here?" asked Julian, pulling herself together as much as possible.

The off the wall blonde came and hugged her like she was there to borrow a cup of sugar. "You know why I'm here, goof ball. Where is she?" Deanne looked around her like she expected Summer to pop out of Julian's pocket.

"She's at a movie."

"Well I have a car waiting, so can you call and have her brought back? I got a good lead on some stuff in Florida in a couple of months so we'll be crashing in the city until then with my friend." Deanne pointed to the guy behind the wheel of an old Chevy.

It seemed surreal to her as Julian dialed the phone. One night was all it took to lose all that you care about. Summer and Julian shared tears as they helped Rebecca pack the little girl's things. There was so much Julian wanted to say but no words would squeeze past the lump in her throat.

Summer turned at the last minute and ran back into Julian's arms. "I wanted to give you something." She reached into the Barbie backpack Nanna had given her and pulled out a small stone. "I found it in the park and I thought it was pretty." Summer pressed it into Julian's hand. "I want you to have it so you won't forget me. Promise you'll remember?"

"Forever, sweetheart."

"Can I come back to see you, Bernie?"

"Whenever you want," Julian pulled out a card from her wallet and put it in Summer's pack. "If you need me, you call me ok? I'll come get you any time you need me."

"I love you, Bernie."



"I love you too," was all Julian was able to get out.

"Where's she going, Bernie?" asked Tiger, confused as to what was happening.

Rudy picked the boy up and started toward the garden intent on taking him to Kiki. "Don't," Julian's voice stopped him. "She has company and I doubt they want to be disturbed. Just get the boy something to eat and put him to bed."

There was something else wrong but Rudy and Rebecca didn't want to add to the moment with questions. They did as they were asked and took Tiger into the kitchen and fixed him dinner. When they walked back toward the den and sat the boy in front of the television, Rudy went in search of Julian. On the desk in her study there were two letters. One addressed to them and the other for Eugenia.

With his heart pounding with fear, Rudy used the heavy letter opener and sliced open the envelope for he and his wife, terrified Julian was planning something crazy. When he finished he ran toward the bedroom finding her bag missing along with some of her gear.

Julian was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

*February 13, 2003*

*Despite the cruelties of life, the coming of another day proves that time marches on whether you are ready for it or not. Out here the only worry is the wind and the water, but I can't help but dwell on the things lost.*

*I wish I was one of those people who could say, I wish them well if they belong together, but I've learned something new about myself - I'm selfish. Is it wrong to want someone to love me and share their true self with me? I guess there's no real answer to that and if there is it's hidden so well I'll never find it.*

*Another year and I have survived another birthday. That's all there is to say except what I had I lost and all I have to remember it by is a stone given to me by a child. I won't forget her no matter how many of these days I celebrate, but from now on that's all I want to do, just remember. I shall leave love to others who are better suited for it.*

*Kiki, I wish you well. Take care and may you find happiness. I love you. I have no stone from you so I'll carry you in my heart. There is no other choice since I can't bear the thought of letting you go completely, but keeping you so close means I will never have room for another in my life.*

*Well it seems I can be selfless if I really try. With months ahead of me I think I'll do something out of character. I'm going to re-read these volumes I've packed and hopefully I'll find the person I wrote about. I'll find myself.*

The pen went into the top of the desk in the captain's cabin and Julian left the journal open so the ink would dry. By the window she had set up her *Yartzeit* candles. The match sounded loud as she struck it, but the rather strange surroundings didn't dim the importance of the moment. Below her the new engines of the Sea Dragon were set to quarter speed, and the crew was taking the first watch as they slowly cruised down the Mississippi, but Julian felt better having gone through the yearly ritual.

With a cup of coffee, Julian stepped onto the deck and looked up at the night sky before concentrating on the passing shoreline. They were on their way to the Middle East for a pickup of crude for some of the islands in the Caribbean, then on to South America to make another pickup. The trip there would make them good time since the holds of the ship were empty. With every mile they traveled further from New Orleans, the more she tried to put the events of the past year out of her mind. It didn't work when she felt the weight in her pocket.

The small stone with red specks made tears run down her face. "*Promise you'll remember,*" Summer had said before Deanne took her away. Even without the physical reminder Julian would never forget.

When she returned to her cabin Julian added one last thing to the opened journal.

*Love, even if for a day in the span of a lifetime, is worth the effort.*

She closed the journal and placed Summer's rock on the top. Even if she never found the same kind of love with anyone else, the memory of what she'd shared for a very short time would live in those pages and it would have to be enough.

**The End**

Comments to: [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com)

---