

# ~ ...and A Canopy For Happy Endings ~

by A. Valdivia

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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, please find more appropriate reading material.

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"How far out are they?"

"The on board GPS has them close to the mouth of the river, ma'am. They'll be free to crank up the engines as soon as they're in the Gulf. Once that happens their intent is to see how fast this run can be made with the new designs we incorporated into the Sea Dragon. It's the only way to know if building her twin will be worthwhile." The man watched the blip on the screen and predicted the ship would be out in clear water in a couple of hours. "There's no turning it around now I'm afraid."

"Thank you, Mr. Zeringue. I appreciate the information, but never say never. You don't know when that'll come back to bite you in the ass. The way I'm feeling at the moment, I could give a damn if we made another run anywhere with the ships we have now much less future twins to the ones we have currently." The phone was placed very carefully back in its cradle and the caller felt a wave of anguish wash over her. "What brought this on?"

The couple standing across the desk from her had no ready explanations, and the clues left behind failed to enlighten them any further. "She left us a note too, but you read it, it doesn't say much more than yours. Just that she needed some time away from here to clear her head."

Eugenia Lowe looked at the envelope with her name across the front lying on the desk as she tapped her fingers around the sides. It contained a note, barely a page long, in her granddaughter Julian's beautiful handwriting.

"Where's Summer?" she asked sounding tired. The call from Rudy had come as she was getting ready for bed. As much as she tried to deny the years their due, days like this only made Eugenia feel old.

"She's gone. Her mother came for her earlier, ma'am. She didn't want to go, but Julian had no choice but to comply. Julian had no legal standing to keep her, but Rudy and I were surprised she gave up so easily. After the car drove away Julian just went up stairs and sent us into the kitchen to take care of Tiger," explained Rebecca. "He's still upstairs asleep. Poor heart, I don't think he

knows what's going on."

The old woman leaned forward in her chair and exhaled heavily as one piece of the puzzle fell into place. Losing the little girl who'd been with them for nearly a year was like a physical blow to all of them, and Eugenia heart ached for the pain Julian must be feeling. As hard as her granddaughter had fought her feelings, Summer had become important to her and Julian had come to love her. "Is she at least staying close? I'd feel better if Summer was close by so we could keep an eye on her in case her idiot mother decides to take another year's vacation."

"We wish we knew. She just appeared and took Summer and whatever she could fit in the car of the creep she showed up with." Rudy tried not to sound bitter, but the house was so quiet without the little girl's laughter. "Julian didn't take it very well. I don't mean to frighten you, but I don't understand why she left instead of going to Kiki."

"Why indeed?" asked Eugenia standing up with some difficulty. She didn't need her cane often, but the cold weather had forced her to use it today. "Stay here in case Tiger wakes up, I'll be right back."

"You want me to go? That path is tricky during the day, I don't want you falling and breaking your hip now that the sun's gone down," offered Rudy.

Just as she had taught her granddaughter, Eugenia spiked her brow over her right eye and pinned the man with a no nonsense look. "How long have we known each other, Rudy?"

"Long enough for me to know better obviously."

"I'm old granted, but that's not going to stop me from finding out what happened to Julian. As much as she loved that little girl, I don't think losing Summer sent her running out to sea. So if you don't mind, I'm going to find out what did."

The walkway was lit by path lights and the tap of her cane could be distinguished every so often when it hit the flagstones. She thought of the numerous walks she and Julian had taken in the yard, to see something or other in bloom, ever since Julian had moved in. Winter came for such a short stay in the South that it made it easier for the gardeners to keep some color no matter the month. But now the larger shade trees were without foliage making the wind howling through the branches sound louder than usual.

Eugenia stopped on the other side of the pool and looked at the cute little house where Kiki and Tiger had taken up residence. The lights were on in the front and the blonde's car was parked in its usual spot. The overall picture looked normal, but Julian had run from something, and that wasn't in her nature. Those who thought they knew Julian well were under the impression she was emotionally fragile, but Eugenia knew better. Julian's state of mind when it came to emotions was to shut down and ignore things for a couple of days until she was able to rationalize them. That had been Julian's style of coping from the time she was old enough to rationalize anything. Remembering their last conversation and how Julian had spoken of making a life with this girl made Eugenia wonder why Kiki wasn't up at the house raising hell because

she'd left.

"Only one way to find out," Eugenia said gritting her teeth against the pain from so much walking in the biting cold. When Kiki answered the door, it suddenly became crystal clear why Julian was gone. The blonde hair, that reminded Eugenia so much of her own before the white had overwhelmed the honey tones she possessed, was mussed. Added to that was an open bottle of wine on the coffee table and a relaxed looking woman she didn't know. The tableau added up to one big bad impression.

"Eugenia, what a surprise, I wasn't expecting you. Is something wrong with Julian or the kids?" Kiki ran her hand through her hair and tried not to sound nervous. She sent up a silent prayer that Rhonda would keep her mouth shut and not make matters worse.

"There's nothing wrong, I was just out for a walk. I'm sorry to disturb you, I'll let you get back to your company." The woman's identity hit Eugenia the precise moment she caught sight of her lips curling up in a smirk. Eugenia remembered her from the museum's opening night.

"Would you like to come in?" offered Kiki.

"It's late, *Katherine*, and I have a lot to attend to, so no, I don't care to join you and your guest." Despite the anger she felt on Julian's behalf, Eugenia kept her cool. She could feel the green eyes on her back as she started back toward the house.

"Eugenia, are you sure everything's all right? Is Julian okay?" Kiki stepped away from the door a ways as she spoke. Remembering what had happened the last time Rhonda and Julian were together, Kiki wanted to keep them apart if it was at all possible.

"Julian is fine, don't worry."

Kiki was now at the pool's edge trying to get a closer view of Eugenia's face since she could hear the edgy tone in her voice. "And there's nothing I can do for you?" she paused. "It's awfully late to be out for a walk, especially in this weather." The blonde pulled the sweater she had on tighter around her frame.

"I thought you could help me with something, but I just realized you can't assist me with what I need." With that Eugenia started her trek back not caring to extend their talk any longer. As she approached the main house, she looked up into the two faces plastered to the kitchen window keeping an eye on her progress. Rudy came out and helped her the rest of the way.

"Julian didn't say anything else before she left?" Eugenia asked the couple. "Nothing about Kiki?"

"All she said was 'take care of Tiger since Kiki had company.'" Rudy wanted to ask her if she knew what was going on, but felt it wasn't his place. If Eugenia wanted to share what she'd discovered at the guesthouse, she would do so in her own good time.

The white head nodded and Eugenia started walking toward the front of the house intent on leaving. It wasn't her place to make things right for Julian, but she was having a hard time not going back to the guesthouse and telling Kiki what she thought of her. To repay Julian's love like this tainted Eugenia's opinion of the young woman she had believed to be a Godsend just the day before. She was fighting the urge to toss Kiki and the bitch she was spending her evening with off the property, but there was Tiger to consider.

"Come by in the morning and pick me up, Rudy. It might be fun going into the office for a couple of weeks until Julian gets back."

"She's on the longest run, ma'am. She won't be back for three months at the earliest," said Rudy gently.

Even with the feel of the paper from Julian's note in her pocket, Eugenia's face fell with the realization of not seeing her granddaughter for so long. As she grew older, time had become a precious commodity to the old woman. Three months without Julian was like fate stealing from her. "Life has a funny way of taking left turns when you least expect it, don't you find?"

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"It's killing you isn't it?"

"What, that you think you've found this perfect life?" Rhonda laughed and waved her hands around to make her point. "Your white knight ran at the first sign of trouble, Kiki, so don't fool yourself. She put you up here like a common slut. The big house will always be just out of reach for you." Rhonda poured more wine into her glass on the table noticing the one she'd prepared for Kiki was still untouched.

"What are you talking about?" Kiki turned from watching Eugenia walk away and faced the woman she'd once lived with.

Her laugh was one of the things she hated most about Rhonda. It dripped of her condescending attitude and it had driven Kiki insane for years. "She was standing in the garden for our touching reunion. It was good for her to see that you belong to someone else and that she should go back and wrap herself in her money. We belong together, baby, and from the way she turned and didn't look back, Julian saw it too."

Kiki's jaw opened and closed a few times, and the color drained from her face as she caught on to Rhonda's sick game. "Get out!" she rasped, once she had been able to take a breath and form words. "I thought I owed you an explanation or a proper goodbye, but now I see that I don't owe you a damn thing outside of my disgust. Jesus Christ! What did I ever see in you?" With that, Kiki opened the door and stormed out, not bothering to see if Rhonda followed her directions.

She could hear someone yelling at her to "stop ringing the bell," but Kiki's finger never let up on the buzzer outside the kitchen entrance. "Where is she, Rudy?" she asked, breathless from her run though the garden.

"Julian's gone, Miss Katherine, and we can't say when she'll be back. I think it's perhaps better if you go back home. I'll bring Tiger by as soon as he's had breakfast. He's sleeping and I don't think it's a good idea to disturb him. Deanne came back today for Summer and he was pretty torn up about it."

"Summer's gone? Just like that?" Kiki leaned against the counter feeling like she was about to fall down or throw up. "Is that why Bernie left?" Eugenia's visit and Rhonda's comment made sense now. She knew why Julian had left, there was no reason for her question, but Kiki wanted the answer anyway.

Rudy though, wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. "You tell me, Miss Katherine, what's going on down there?" He pointed toward the guesthouse. "After Eugenia spoke with you tonight she looked even more distressed than she did to begin with."

"Rhonda came by to see me." Her voice sounded as flat as she felt.

The door opened wider and Rudy waved her inside. Even with as much time as they'd spent in Kiki's company, her past was something that just never came up enough for he and Rebecca to learn all the details. All they had cared about was the smile the young blonde was able to put on Julian's face whenever she walked into a room.

"You want some coffee?" asked Rudy. Kiki nodded her head, but just barely. "Is Rhonda the woman you attended the opening with?"

"She's my ex, Rudy, there's no reason for you to beat around the bush. She's my ex and I'm guessing after Julian saw her little display earlier, she's under the impression she's my not so ex."

The coffee grounds smelled wonderful when Rudy opened the container and slowly poured some into the filter. "What exactly did Julian see?"

"An idiot kissing me and offering a ring, that I might add is about six years too late. She took me by surprise and I didn't see Julian standing there."

"Is that really an excuse?"

Kiki looked up from the oak tabletop and crinkled her brows together. "What do you mean?"

"If you'd seen Julian standing there would you still have been shocked enough to let some other woman kiss you?" He put his hand up before she said anything, stopping the pointless conversation before it got out of hand. "There's no real good answer to that question so forget it."

He flipped the switch on the coffeepot and went to take a seat across from her. "How do you feel now that you know why Julian left?"

"And you think that question has a good answer?" Kiki let out a humorless laugh and looked like

she wanted to find something heavy to heave at Rudy's head. "I didn't ask Rhonda to come here, Rudy. Weren't you paying attention all these months? Julian and how I feel about her isn't a game to me."

"What I think is, I've known Julian a lot longer than you have and I know why she left. You're telling me what happened confirms that. What I don't know is how you feel about the situation."

With her hands flat on the table, Kiki leaned forward and spit out an honest answer. "If you want the no bullshit bottom line, I'm pissed. Pissed that she didn't believe enough in me to stick around and find out how I feel about her. Pissed that she could just walk away without an explanation or a word to let me know where she was going. Pissed that she didn't think we were worth fighting for." The green eyes closed trying to hold in the tears that were threatening. "Where'd she go anyway?"

"She's on a tanker in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico headed to the Middle East." Rudy got up and poured two cups of coffee. "Can I tell you a story, Kiki?"

"If it's about how I screwed up my life and Julian's, I don't really want to hear it."

"Once upon a time, my wife and I met a pugnacious little baby who even then kept the world at an arms length." He slid one of the mugs toward her; his words making her look up at him. "Eugenia was the only one who may have understood what made her tick and she was the only one the kid let inside the prefabricated walls her heart came with. Julian is smart, always has been, and she has a spirited sense of humor but I always saw it as a way to hide the fear she lives with everyday."

"What's she got to be afraid of?" asked Kiki.

"Her father died about an hour before she was born and her mother left this world just as Julian took her first breath. Living with that burden has made her afraid of losing the people she loves through no fault of her own. I don't know from personal experience, but I'd have to guess it's like always waiting for the other shoe to drop when things look too good. You know what I mean? She insulates herself as much as she can from the things that can hurt her, especially the people she loves."

Kiki tapped a nail on the ceramic cup and waited a few minutes before she answered, pondering all that Rudy had said. "Doesn't that also insulate you from living? To love is to take chances."

"I agree with you. 'To live for today and to love for tomorrow is the wisdom of a fool,' " said Rudy.

"What a great quote. Who said that, Shakespeare?"

Rudy laughed and shook his head, "Actually it was Tom Jones, but it doesn't make it any less true. I thought when she met you and your son, Julian would learn to see that not everything is a gamble, or at least that some gambles are worth the risk. Rebecca and I love her like the child we

never had, and it made us happy to watch her around you two." He took a sip of his coffee and looked Kiki in the eye. "You don't still have feelings for Rhonda, do you?"

"I threw her out, Rudy, don't worry. My mistake was trying to be a decent person first and explain why it was best if we never saw each other again. Inviting her in was a mistake. Before I had time to think, she popped open some wine and made herself comfortable," she paused. "God, that sounds horrible even to me and I was there. If Julian had taken that kind of time with someone from her past I would have had a major fit. I had a hard enough time watching her leave with that woman she brought to the opening, and that was months ago."

"Well at least we know why she's on a ship in the middle of the Gulf. Julian doesn't have major fits as you so poetically put it, she returns to the things she knows and can control. She's a lot like her father that way."

"How long?"

"Will she be gone?" he asked, getting a nod from Kiki. "A little under three months. Do you think you can wait that long?"

"I'll be waiting, Rudy. I can't promise I won't have bought a bat by then to whack her with when she does get back, but I'll be waiting."

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The ceiling in the room was painted a shade of pale blue that Julian was finding relaxing to look at as she laid sprawled across her bunk. She was trying hard to control her breathing to keep the anger that was lingering around the edges of her heart from taking hold. There was something else niggling away at her thoughts but had yet to announce itself in the form of clear idea. Then it hit her, causing her long body to come to attention and sit up.

Her briefcase was leaning up against the chair and in the front flap pocket was the key to making her feel better. When she'd packed in a hurry to get to the dock on time, Julian had stopped to open the safe in her study. After a year of anticipation, the time had come to read her father's letter.

The sound of the letter opener cutting through the top of the envelope was almost deafening, and Julian could feel her heartbeat pick up speed. Black, slightly faded ink filled the page, most probably from the very pen she loved so much. Her eyes scanned over the page just looking at the shape and slant of the words, studying the penmanship that showed her something else she and Sebastian had in common. At the top of the page were the names of both her parents embossed in raised ink and before she started reading, Julian took the time to run her finger over the letters.

*My dear greatest gift,*

*This may seem silly years from now when I sit with you as you receive your inheritance. I find*

*though, that as your birth date gets closer sleep eludes me with the excitement of it all. The promise of parenthood is overwhelming but at the same time thrilling. I call you a gift because in my heart that is exactly what you are to me. You are a precious blessing your mother and I hope to one day share with the world.*

*There are so many things I'm looking forward to sharing with you. Your first time behind the wheel of a boat, your first steps - in that order, just as in from my own upbringing. Mama said your grandfather brought me aboard the Eugenia when I was only four-weeks-old, and I did a great job of steering on my first cruise. Will you love the water as much as I do? If I'm granted one wish it will be that you do, and that you find it a great enough love to pass along to your own children.*

*The other love I hope you find, my child, is the love of the person meant only for you. Even if my life is cut short, I will have lived well because I won your mother's heart. She's sleeping next to me as I write this and it amazes me still just how beautiful she is, and the fact she loves me. There is no greater urging I can bestow on you than to love and be loved in return. No job, no amount of money or any other material thing in life can compare to the feeling it will give you.*

*I see you kicking away in there, even as Birdie sleeps. She laughs at me when I tell her it just means you're happy. That is my other hope for you, Baby Lowe, that you're happy with whatever your life's choices are. Know that I'll always support you in whatever you do, and try to be nonjudgmental when you take a path different than that which I think is right. Your grandmother keeps telling me the secret to being a good parent is walking the fine line between being too overbearing or too lenient. I hope that when you reach this point in your life you will be able to say that I am both your father and your friend.*

*I shall end this, before you grow too bored with me and roll your eyes at your sentimental father, with just a few more thoughts. Find your passions, child of mine, and exhaust your quest to enjoy every bit of them while you can. And I mean this in all things. For me I can honestly say I've had three great passions in my life. First is my love for my family, with them I learned there wasn't anything beyond my grasp if only I dared to try. Then there is my love for the sea. At the wheel of a boat I have always felt the most humbled, but yet the most free. You will understand this some day when you feel the wind in your hair and find the horizon in your sights. The single most important though, has been my love for your mother.*

*Birdie has given me everything vital to my happiness. She is my friend, confidant, wife and the keeper of my heart. If I should die tomorrow the title I place the most value on is that of husband.*

*In a few weeks I shall no doubt add one more passion and one more important title. You will take your place at your mother's side as the center of my world and I will try my utmost best to earn the title of father.*

*May you grow strong, have health, strive for wisdom but above all else achieve happiness. Your mother and I will give you life, but you alone are charged with making something of it.*

*Remember, find your passions, then let no man or woman keep you from them. You are my child*



*and I want you to stand up and fight for the people and things you believe in, always. If you're afraid, look in your heart and find your mother and myself. We'll always be there when you need strength.*

*Happy Birthday, my child, I Love You.*

*Always,*

*Papa*

It was four pages all told and Julian read them six times as if trying to memorize his words. The tears in her eyes had made it difficult at first, but the joy her father's words brought far exceeded her well worn grief. She was happy she had waited to read the letter, since his words were more poignant at this point in her life than ever.

Folding the letter carefully and placing it back in the envelope, Julian fell back on the bed and considered her next course of action. There were people to stand up and loves to fight for, but doing so meant getting off the Sea Dragon. She was tired of feeling afraid of what could go wrong and was ready to concentrate on getting what she wanted.

"Julian," the voice called over the intercom.

"Yes?" Her voice sounded rough from her ragged emotions.

"We're coming to the mouth and I thought you'd want to come up and see how she does once we crank the engines up a bit." The man at the wheel had worked for the Lowe family as a captain for years and was always as glad to have Julian on a run, much as he had welcomed her father. With the large buoy that marked the very mouth of the Mississippi, and all the extended delta in sight, he rechecked their coordinates as they prepared to make their turn to the east and the Gulf of Mexico. As anxious as he was to boost the throttles and test the engines, Ford waited for his boss. He didn't mind sharing the captain's duties with someone who knew as much about ships as he did.

"I'll be up in a minute, Ford. Let me splash some water on my face. Don't do anything until I get there." When she opened the door to the wheelhouse, Julian saw the anticipation on the men's faces as they prepared to take the Sea Dragon on her maiden voyage.

The ship was the largest in their fleet and Julian had taken a major role in her design. Lighter metals had been riveted into her hull, once they were sure safety wouldn't be compromised, and her engines were a seaman's dream. If everything went according to plan the trip would be about three weeks shorter than usual.

"There she is, captain," Ford pointed to the buoy. "It's time to say goodbye to New Orleans for a while." He put his hand on the controls and prepared to bring the throttle up at Julian's command.

"Wait."

He turned as if he didn't understand her. "What?"

"I said wait." She walked closer and put her hand over his. "Keep your current speed, but go ahead and make the turn."

"If we don't follow the set plan, we won't know if it'll be worthwhile to build her twin. I thought you were going to use this run as the deciding factor?"

"I was, and we can still all get what we want, but if I leave the city now I'll have more to worry about than this ship's twin, so keep your speed!" barked Julian as she reached for the radio. She took a deep breath and expelled it in a long sigh. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap. This is important, and I promise to spot you a few hours for the lost time."

They all listened as Julian ordered a helicopter from Venice to intercept them. The southern most city in Louisiana was about an hour by boat from their current position so it would only take the bird about fifteen minutes to reach them.

"Are you sick?" asked Ford.

"No, my friend, I'm just tired of living with regrets for things not tried. I found something I think is worth fighting for, but I can't do it from here."

He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed with a laugh. "It's a good thing you own the company then, isn't it? I'm thinking if any of us would have tried this you'd hire someone to skin us once we stepped off."

Julian laughed for the first time that day, and slapped Ford on the back. "I'll tell you what, old man, you fall madly in love and I'll buy you a chopper ride to wherever she is, for now though, just keep your speed."

"Aye aye, captain."

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"I don't want to go to school, mama." Tiger had dragged his feet all the way back to the guesthouse as he followed Kiki. He had run into Summer's room that morning thinking she'd come back, only to be disappointed. Not even Rebecca's special waffles had made him smile. "Summer won't be there and it won't be the same."

"I know, buddy, but if you have faith, maybe Summer will come back." Kiki tried to sound cheerful, but she'd woken up so depressed that it felt like her body weighed four hundred pounds. Looking across an empty bed had almost made her cry when she'd opened her eyes that morning.

"What's that mean, mama?"

"It means if you believe in something enough, then it'll come true. Until it does, you have to go to school with me and wait. Fair enough?" she asked when she turned around and looked at him.

"Okay." Tiger seemed appeased and he ran ahead of her through the garden to beat her back to their house. At the end of the trail he saw something lying just under one of the bushes that hadn't been there the last time he'd been out exploring. He put it in his school bag thinking it was too pretty not to belong to someone.

They were the first ones to arrive at the daycare. This was the only time the place was quiet and Kiki wanted to take advantage of the peace. It was Friday, so the payroll paperwork was due and Kiki wanted to get it done before the other kids got there. Now that Julian was gone, she needed the time after work to think about where she and Tiger were going to live since she was unsure if they'd still be welcomed on the grounds of Julian's home.

The Valentine's decorations they'd hung a couple of days before were making her mood worse when she looked at them, but the kids loved exchanging cards and celebrating so much that Kiki worked on improving her attitude before they arrived. She just hoped there would be an opportunity to give Julian the gift she'd bought to celebrate the day.

"Happy birthday, Bernie," she whispered to the picture on her desk. A smiling Julian with a small blonde child pressed up against each cheek grinned at her from the wooden frame. "You may not be thinking about me, but I'm thinking about you, and I'll wait for you as long as it takes."

With Tiger content in front of an Elmo video, Kiki sat in her office and pulled up the week's records. She looked at her watch a few minutes later when she heard the elevator door open, wondering who had arrived so early. *So much for doing paperwork*, thought Kiki as she plastered a smile on her face and got up to greet the intruder on her quiet time.

Her expression went from pleasant to stunned when she saw the woman standing in the entrance. Kiki's eyes filled with tears and her hands came up to cover her mouth and hold in the sob that wanted to escape.

"Did you know there's a big buoy at the mouth of the river that marks the shipping lanes?" asked Julian.

"No," squeaked Kiki. Any anger at Julian's abrupt departure disappeared from Kiki's mind. All she wanted to do was run up and hug her for coming back.

"Well there is. It just kind of sways out there like it's waving goodbye as you head to ports far away. I saw it just a few hours ago, and then it hit me, I didn't want to say goodbye. There was something else I'd rather do back here instead," explained Julian. She waved the flowers in her hand to help make her point.

"What?"

"I wanted to ask for a happily ever after instead of saying goodbye. It's so cliché to ask today, it being Valentine's day and all, but since I blew my chance to ask yesterday, I thought I'd come back and try my luck today. That is unless you want me to take a long walk off a short pier?"

Kiki shook her head and hid her smile behind her hands as Julian gamely plowed ahead with her speech.

"First off, I'm a putz."

"I'll concur," said Kiki in a serious voice. "You had to know she didn't mean anything to me anymore. No one will ever mean what you do to me."

"That hit me after I'd been cruising down the river for awhile, but that's not what's important now," Julian said, taking a step forward.

"What is?"

"What's important is what snuck up on me a few months ago without me even realizing it. I love you, Kiki. I love everything about you, and I don't want to live another day without you knowing that. If you give me a chance, I'll never run from you again."

"You promise?"

"On a stack of Bibles."

Kiki laughed but didn't pull away as Julian laid the flowers down and wrapped her arms around her. "Should I point out now that you're Jewish."

"It just seemed like the thing to say," Julian teased back as she dipped her head for a kiss.

When they pulled apart, Kiki held onto her and started crying. "Don't ever do that to me again."

"I promise, love. I had something to show you what kind of commitment I'm looking for here, but I dropped it, and even though I looked this morning, I couldn't find it, so you'll have to take a rain check until this afternoon."

"I don't need anything but you, Bernie," said Kiki, pulling the dark head down for another kiss.

A persistent tugging on Julian's pant leg interrupted them. When she looked down, Tiger was standing there with a small black jewelry box in his hand. "I found this in the yard, Bernie. Is it yours?"

"Actually, I hope in just a minute it will belong to someone else, but thank you for finding it for me. Because you did, it means I get to do this right," said Julian dropping to one knee.

"Katherine, will you consider spending the rest of your life at my side, letting me love you and take care of you? If you say yes, there'll never be another day in your life that you'll feel alone."

The creak of the box in Julian's hand made the moment real for Kiki. While she was generally happy with her life and her choices, and as much as she tried to convince her parents of that, Kiki still longed for the traditions and moments her friends had been given over the years. Someone to drop to one knee and ask for her hand, and someone who pledged just not in deeds but in words their love and heart to her. She looked at the diamond sparkling up at her and her throat closed from emotion, so she just nodded and held out her hand.

"Once you let me put it on, I'm not ever letting you take it off," said Julian with a smile. The joke earned her a kiss that almost knocked her off her knees.

"It also means you don't have to be alone either, you idiot," said Kiki before she pressed her lips to Julian's again.

Still kneeling before Kiki, Julian turned to address Tiger. "Buddy, I don't have a ring for you, but I did want to ask you a question."

Tiger looked at the two of them and stayed quiet as if knowing this was important and would change his life. "What?"

"Do you think you'll be okay with your mom and I being together and us being a family?"

"We get to live with you?" he asked. Julian nodded her head. "Do I get a room like Summer's?"

"Only if you like Barbie, pal," she joked. "You get a room with whatever you want, and it comes with a storyteller every night before you go to sleep," Julian promised.

The little boy joined his mother and stepped into Julian's embrace. If only Summer where there everything would be perfect. But remembering his mother's words, he focused on memorizing every detail so he could tell her when they saw each other again. No matter what, he knew he and Kiki would be happy with Julian looking out for them.

"We love you, Bernie, and we have for so long now," whispered Kiki into her ear as she sat on Julian's upturned knee. "There's just one thing."

"You want to take the rest of the day off?"

"Only if you join me, but that's not it. Do you think you could talk to Nanna? I'm going out on a limb here, but I'm guessing she thinks I'm a slut right about now," whispered Kiki so only Julian would hear her. "I know how important she is to you and I don't want her thinking poorly of me."

"Only if you promise to act a little slutty for me when we get home," said Julian with a straight face. The push from Kiki sent all three of them sprawling to the ground, and that's how Chris found them when she walked in.

"You getting rough with the staff, Lowe?"

"I'd watch it, hot stuff, or the future Mrs. Lowe might have you escorted out of the building," said the tall woman at the bottom of the pile.

Kiki held up her hand to flash the ring and the two sisters started screaming. Shaking her head and smiling, Julian escaped to Kiki's office to make a short phone call. Having fixed the most important aspect of her life she left the happy trio behind so she could start making amends to the other people she'd run out on.

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Eugenia leaned on Julian's shoulder as Rudy drove them past the oaks of St. Charles Avenue. The smile on her granddaughter's face was enough to appease her, and she had decided to let Kiki back into her good graces.

"I'm proud of you, darling."

"Thank you, Nanna. I love her, but this happiness I'm feeling wouldn't be complete if you didn't share it with me. I'm just glad I took the chance."

"So am I. Your grandfather was someone who spent most of his life aggravating the patience right out of me, but he was also the love of my life and I miss him dearly. One of the happiest days of my life was when our son found your mother and lost his heart. Your mother made Sebastian smile and that's all a mother can hope for. And now I know that kind of happiness again," she said as she patted Julian's leg.

"Are you disappointed I didn't follow a more traditional role, Nanna?"

"I would have been disappointed if you'd chosen a life that wasn't right for you. Kiki completes the person that you are, and you have found a better way to remember this day and feel happy. For that I owe God and Kiki a debt."

"I read the letter papa left me."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes I did. He sounded just like the man in all your stories, and he had lots to say. Later I want you to read it as well."

Eugenia patted Julian's knee and shook her head. "He meant those words for you, sweetheart, so you don't have to share them with anyone, not even me."

"He thought so highly of you and what a wonderful job you did as a parent, I don't think he'd mind your reading what he wrote. He was right you know. You raised me as well and I thank you for the great job you did the second time around."

They walked together and visited the gravesites of all the Lowes who had passed on. Julian pulled the stone Summer had given her from her pocket and looked at it, but put others on the headstones of her parents. The little girl was a story not yet complete in her opinion, and until the future brought about the next chapter, Julian was going to hold on to the one material piece of her she had left.

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Their evening had started off with a strained atmosphere during dinner with Eugenia, relaxing only after Kiki asked Julian to take Tiger to the bathroom so she could clear the air. Her heartfelt declaration of love and devotion erased Nanna's concerns and they shared dessert with coffee and laughs. Now they were driving home with Tiger asleep in the back seat and the blonde felt suddenly unsure of her place.

"Will you spend the night with me?" Kiki's asked tentatively.

Julian took one hand off the wheel and rubbed Kiki's thigh. "When I asked for your hand this morning I was kind of hoping your saying yes meant the rest of you came as a package deal."

"You know it did, but that doesn't answer my question."

"You don't have to ask where I'll be spending my nights, you just have to decide the location." Julian stopped in front of the main house and left the engine running. "Where do you want us to sleep?"

"I guess we have lots to still talk about, huh?" Kiki moved to open the door then stopped remembering how much Julian liked doing it for her. "We're here now, so this will do fine."

They worked as a team to undress Tiger and get his pajamas on and settle him in the room he'd slept in the night before.

"Bernie?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"What, buddy?" She pulled the blanket up as she asked, feeling Kiki lean into her back.

"Can we do my boat tomorrow?" The small remote controlled toy Julian had gotten him for Christmas had sat in his closet for days since he wasn't allowed by the pool alone.

"We sure can," her father's letter and his love of the water popped into her head. "We'll do the little one in the pool tomorrow then soon I'll introduce you to a Lowe family tradition."

"What?" asked Tiger sounding a bit perkier.

"We'll take out one of our really big boats called ships, and you'll get to drive."

"Just me and you?"

"It'll take a few more people than that, but it'll be just the two of us at the wheel. I love you and your mom so we'll start doing lots of things together, just you and me."

His fingers appeared at the edges of the blanket and he pushed it down a little. Julian studied his face and found so much of Kiki in his features. "Will you come down and eat with me like you did with Summer?"

"You bet, but I'll tell you a secret. When I came before it was to see you and Summer. Close your eyes for me, buddy, and go to sleep."

"I love you, Bernie," his eyes popped open again and he smiled up at his mother, "You too, mama."

After they both kissed him goodnight, Julian and Kiki walked down and sat in the den. It was still early and Julian wanted to finish their talk.

"Can I ask you something?" started Kiki.

"You have the right to ask me anything."

"What do you want...what will make you happy?"

Julian reached over and pulled Kiki toward her until her upper body was cradled in her arms. "You make me happy, sweetheart, so I'm all set. It doesn't matter where we live as long as you're happy, if that's what you're worried about. If you don't like this place we'll look for something else, so stop worrying. That is what you're worried about isn't it?"

"That's part of it, but there's more."

"You don't want to live with me? Do you need more time?"

Kiki reached up and pulled a bit of Julian's hair. "Don't get all crazy on me, honey, of course I want to live with you. I think we're to the point I'd have to leave my son if I decided against it. He loves me, but I have a feeling you're going to be the cool parent who comes with all the really neat toys."

The allure of Julian's lips got to be too much so Kiki moved closer and kissed her. She tried not to compare Julian to anyone else she'd been in this position with, but her brain just ran off on its own tangent. "I love the way you kiss me."

Just the tips of Julian's fingers ran along Kiki's forehead. "That's a good thing I'm guessing."

"It is, and I'm going to kick myself later for this, but I want to be honest with you." The arms holding Kiki tensed and she smiled in an effort to relax Julian. "Everyone I've been with has always been in a hurry to get to what they thought was the good part."



Confusion was really the only way to sum up where Kiki was trying to lead them. "I'm sorry, good part? Am I supposed to be familiar with what that means?"

"The sex, honey, they were all anxious to get to that. After awhile you start questioning what you've read in books and watched in movies. There really aren't people out there ready to romance you and kiss you just for the simple pleasure of doing so, and it kills the bit of little girl dreamer I've tried to keep alive." The top button of Julian's shirt took the brunt of Kiki's nervousness as she picked at it as she spoke.

"If this is too hard, we can..." started Julian, only to have two small fingers press against her lips.

"Please let me finish, I need to, okay?" Julian's lips pulled up under her fingers, bolstering her courage to continue. "Then I met someone who was in so many ways, just plain old fashioned, it almost scared me."

"Why?"

"Because she talked to me, read stories to my son, and held me and didn't make fun of me when I cried at old movies. She did spend time kissing and romancing for the simple pleasure of doing it, and because of how it would make me feel. I fell in love because my heart gave me no other choice."

The tears spilling from the green eyes didn't make sense to the story, and it was starting to concern Julian. "Did you want another choice?"

"There isn't a person or thing in this world that could make me wish for another choice, that isn't why I'm telling you this. If I was granted special powers to conjure up the perfect mate, you would've been my final product."

"But?"

"I'm afraid that I don't bring too much into this relationship. I work for you, and I live in your pool house. This isn't really a fair exchange for you is it?"

"My having money is the problem here?"

"I don't want you to give up your money," said Kiki before Julian could ask or say anything else.

"That's good, because I promised your father I'd take care of you and Tiger, and I'm also supposed to be taking him out to the golf course regularly. If I'm working all the time at some dead end job, I don't know how I'd fit that all in," joked Julian. Kiki's tears were still falling but for a different reason now. "Stop crying, love, and stop selling yourself short. The things I bring into this relationship can be measured in monetary value perhaps, but what you add to my life is beyond price. You love me despite my money and you're willing to share Tiger with me."

"You are so perfect for me," said Kiki softly, moving closer to kiss Julian again. "I can still keep my job, right?"

"I want you to marry me, Kiki, not sell yourself into white slavery. Of course you can keep your job, or you can quit and knit cozies all day if you'd rather. Listen to me, all right?" She cupped Kiki's cheek and looked into her eyes. "There isn't anything I'm not willing to share with you. Whatever I have you can consider it ours now."

"I just want you to love me."

"You have that, and one day soon we're going to erect a canopy under the stars and start our lives together. I want to stand before my family, your family, and our friends and pledge my life to yours. There is something.....I don't want, though."

"Name it," Kiki said quickly.

"I'd rather drag my tongue through broken glass than hear about anyone who wanted to get to the good parts. Don't get me wrong, I know they exist and I'm okay with that, I just don't want to hear about it."

Kiki laughed, dropping her head to Julian's chest. She made an x over her own heart. "I promise, no more trips down memory lane, unless it's our memories I'm revisiting."

"You got yourself a deal, Ms. Breaux."

"The soon to be Mrs. Lowe, would like one more thing," said Kiki, as she started to undo the buttons of her blouse. One of the biggest turn-ons about being with Julian was the way those blue eyes watched intently as every inch of skin was revealed. To be at the center of such focused attention made Kiki feel incredibly sexy. "Honey, I said I want one more thing."

Julian had to smack her lips together to get her mouth to work. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You want to move upstairs and get to the good parts?"

"My love, with you, from the second you look at me, it's the good part."

Kiki kept unbuttoning her shirt with one hand and with the other she pulled Julian in for kiss. "Suck up."

"Did it work?" asked the tall woman. The low laugh rumbling through Julian's chest made Kiki's nipples harden in response.

"You betcha." Running out of buttons on her own clothing, Kiki started on Julian's belt. "If I get into these pants you're going to be stuck here for awhile, lover."

"If that was supposed to be a threat, your menace needs a little work," teased Julian. With ease she slipped her arms into position and lifted Kiki off the couch. "Are you okay about everything?"

Or do you want to talk some more?"

"I love you for you, Julian Lowe. My mother though, will love you because she'll think I'm marrying well. So will a lot of other people we deal with. If you can live with that, then so can I." Kiki smiled as Julian started walking.

"You mean you don't think you're marrying well?" Julian tried her best to sound indignant.

"Do you love me?"

"A lot more than I love my money, woman."

Kiki laughed and once again gave thanks for being in Julian's company. It was great that the head of such a large company was also wonderful with children, but good relationships Kiki knew weren't built around children. Relationships had to be built around two people who loved and respected one another, and because they did, it became a wonderful environment for kids. Julian made life fun, and Kiki found that more attractive than the money and the trappings of the CEO's possessions.

Mentally going down the line, starting with her sister and ending with all her straight friends, there was no one with a more considerate partner that came to mind. All those months they had spent together before becoming intimate, Kiki always felt like Julian was there with her. She listened as well as made her feel like what she had to say mattered. For all the good times Kiki had shared with Rhonda, that was something she never felt like she had with her.

"Baby, you do realize how much I love you right?" asked Kiki. They had stopped at the base of the stairs and her declaration made Julian pull her closer and kiss her.

Julian started slow just pressing her lips against Kiki's then pulling back and gently taking the blonde's lower lip between her teeth. "I think that's why we'll survive just about anything, and no one will ever be able to come between us again. It'll be all right, honey. What matters to us is what we think about each other. That's all I can promise you and I'll keep promising until you believe it, or until about seventy years go by and you'll have no choice but to believe me. I love you."

"Take me upstairs."

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*February 12, 2004*

*Whoever said 'What a difference a day makes' had no idea what could happen when you string two years worth of them together. Day by day she has changed my life until I no longer know how my heart will beat without her. Two years ago, when I imagined my future, I felt only despair and now I feel only hope.*

*I just reread that, and as sappy as it sounds, I can't bring myself to change a word of it. It must be love, how else could I be talked into getting married on Valentine's Day. But that's what Kiki wanted so that's what will happen.*

*Ever hear the one about what happens when a progressive Rabbi and Priest meet under a canopy on the schmaltziest romantic day of the year? I haven't either, but I'll let you in on the punch line in a few days time. The hardest part of the whole thing is the traditional weeklong separation Nanna insisted on. I talk to Kiki and Tiger every day but it isn't the same, and the fear of Chris corrupting the two of them with her wily ways while they stay with her, is of great concern as well.*

A knock on the study door made Julian look up from her journal into Rudy's concerned face. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Julian, but there's a police officer at the door asking to speak to you."

Julian cinched her robe tighter and followed Rudy downstairs. She thought the "officer" might be a male stripper, or some such joke sent by the Breaux sisters, until she got a good look at the guy standing in the foyer. A wrinkled coat, soggy shoes and glasses held together with tape was no one she wanted disrobing in her home.

"Officer, I'm Julian Lowe." She walked up to him and shook his hand.

"Sorry to bother you, Ms. Lowe, I'm Detective Langdon. Could I speak to you privately for a moment please?"

"Would you care to step into the den?" Julian held her right hand out indicating the direction. "What can I do for you?" she asked as soon as he'd picked a spot to sit.

"I'm sorry about the late hour, Ms. Lowe, but I'm here on official business." He almost fell into one of the chairs in the room from exhaustion. He'd been on the case almost fifteen hours straight, and the detective was more than ready to head home.

"Would you like some coffee or something else before we get started?" Julian was trying to buy time to brace herself for what could be bad news. If something had happened to either Tiger or Kiki she didn't know how she'd live through it.

"Coffee would be great, the weather tonight makes me wish I'd called in sick."

"Rudy, could you start a fresh pot of coffee please?" she asked before closing the door. "Now tell me what couldn't wait until morning."

He pulled a small notepad out of the pocket of his coat and flipped through six or seven pages before he found the information he needed. "Do you know a Deanne Lightener?"

Julian felt her heart freeze over for a moment and she gripped the chair. Deanne had disappeared with Summer and none of her inquiries had brought her any closer to finding them. "Yes."

"Was she a friend of yours?" He looked up from his notes to gauge her facial expressions as she answered.

"She was someone I knew in college, detective. Her daughter also stayed with me for a time while Deanne was in Europe. Why do you ask?"

"Have you ever had any business dealings with Ms. Lightener?" A cheap pen was fished out of the breast pocket of his coat and Langdon waited to write down her response.

"I wasn't aware of Ms. Lightener having a business, but I can assure you if she did, it had nothing to do with the shipping industry. I'm sure you have a job to do, but what's this about?"

Langdon accepted a cup of coffee from Rudy before answering, swallowing some of the hot liquid before he continued. "Deanne did have a business, and it was in transporting. It just wasn't legal. Do you know what a mule is, Ms. Lowe?"

"Please, detective, call me Julian, and to answer your question, I assume it involves carrying things."

"You could say that. Deanne was swallowing condoms full of heroin in Denmark and bringing them into the country every couple of weeks. A young woman traveling with a kid doesn't raise too many red flags, especially if the kid belongs to her. It was a pretty sweet deal until things went way wrong."

The color drained from Julian's face causing her to put her cup down. "She was smuggling narcotics with Summer along for the ride?"

"Yeah, she won't be up for any mother of the year awards let me tell you."

"Is Summer all right?"

"That's why I'm here. Deanne ran into a bit of bad luck earlier today on a flight in from New York to New Orleans. One of the damn condoms broke and presto," he snapped his fingers. "Instant overdose."

"Deanne's dead?"

"I'm sorry if you two were close, but yeah, there was no way they could save her. That's not why I'm here though."

"Where's Summer?" Julian leaned forward as she asked, ready to pound on the man if he didn't answer the question.

"She's with child protective services, and she made me promise I'd find you. She gave me this card," Langdon handed over the business card Julian had given Summer the day she left, now tattered and dirty. "I thought she was kidding and had just found this somewhere, but she was so

persistent I decided to check it out. Seeing as you do know her, I'm glad I did."

"Where is she? Is she all right? Deanne didn't make her do anything did she? Who do I have to talk to so Summer can come to live with us permanently?" The questions just kept flowing until the detective put his hands up in a gesture to make her stop.

"Whoa there, Ms. Lowe. Summer's fine. She just looks a little rough around the edges, but it's just because she's tired. I assure you she's fine. We brought her to the hospital just in case, once we figured out what happened with her mother, and she checked out fine. Her luck's holding out too, now that I found you. Rosa down at CPS is going to love you. Not too many people are interested in adopting a kid that old."

"Now, Detective Langdon, I want to go now," said Julian leaping out of the chair and heading toward the door. "That poor kid's been through enough already and I'm not going to make her wait a moment longer than necessary to see a friendly face."

"I'm sure she won't mind you taking a few minutes to get dressed. Granted you look better than I do, but I'm sure this is going to take awhile and I think you'll be more comfortable in something other than your pajamas." His voice was slightly teasing and it relaxed Julian enough for her to break out in a huge smile. This was the best thing that could have happened at the end his miserable day.

"Thank you, Detective Langdon. When Summer stayed with us a year ago, she became part of our family and it was tough to watch that witch just take her away. Your timing couldn't be better as well. My partner is going to flip when she finds this out."

"Your partner?"

"My soon to be bride, I'm getting married in two days. That won't be a problem will it?"

"I'm many things, Ms. Lowe, but small minded isn't one of them. As long as Summer is in a good home, with people who love her, that's good enough for me and the system.

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The Child Protective Services offices were beige; it was the only apt way to describe it. The chairs, the walls, desks and uniforms the employees were wearing were all beige. Summer was sitting in one of the plastic molded chairs swinging her legs and holding a battered Binky tightly to her chest. Blue eyes took her in and smiled despite the dirty clothes and matted hair. It appeared that Deanne had been so busy with her own problems that she hadn't even bothered to bathe her child.

"Hey, baby girl, how are you?" The little blonde head whipped up when she heard Julian's voice, and the nearby workers stopped what they were doing to witness the touching reunion. Summer flew into Julian's arms and just sobbed. "It's okay, sweetheart, everything is going to be fine." Tears of happiness streaked Julian's face at finally getting Summer back.

"I want to come with you! Please, Bernie, don't leave me here!"

Julian stood up with Summer plastered around her neck and sat in one of the visitor chairs. From her pocket she pulled the stone Summer had given her months before. "See, sweetheart, I didn't forget you, and if you want, I'll never let you go again. I sure missed you, princess. Tiger and Kiki did too, and we have some big surprises for you as soon as you get home."

For an hour Julian filled out form after form until Rosa, Summer's caseworker, let her take the haggard child home. There were still some legalities involved, and her attorney would deal with them, but if she wished it, Summer was Julian's to keep.

"Welcome home, princess," said Julian as Rudy pulled into their drive.

"I don't want to go back, Bernie. Promise you won't make me. I didn't like living with my mom and her friends. I cried for you but she wouldn't let me come back."

The little girl's plea broke Julian's heart. "I promise, Summer, you won't ever have to leave if you don't want to."

That night, Julian put her to bed on the Barbie sheets Rebecca had lovingly put back on the bed while Julian and Rudy went to pick up Summer. Julian sat with her and told her about the upcoming commitment ceremony and how Kiki and Tiger were coming to live with them after it was done. As much as Summer fought it, her eyes finally closed and she drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face, content in the knowledge she was home.

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"You nervous, Bernie?"

"Nope, I'm feeling great. Why, you planning on running out on me?" asked Julian. It was six in the morning, but the ringing phone wasn't what had woken her up. She looked to the other side of the bed where the little blonde child was sprawled out with her favorite rabbit.

"In your dreams, honey. I got you now and after tonight there's no escaping my clutches. The thing is though, I miss you. Your grandmother's going to owe me big for this past week."

*"What do you mean I have to move out? I thought you were okay with all this?" Kiki directed her questions at Eugenia, after the woman asked where she was going to be staying.*

*"I'm fine with it, dear, but this isn't about me, it's about custom. One week apart is what's expected, and I'm counting on you and Julian honoring that. If you want I'll have her move in with me so you and Tiger won't be put out."*

*The luncheon date was to finalize plans for the ceremony and Chris looked at the two most important women in Julian's life and stepped in to avoid their first family squabble. "She's right,*

*Kiki. It's just a week and it'll give us one last chance at a long slumber party, only this time there'll be vodka. I'd love to have you and Tiger over." She gave her sister a look that said, just go along with it.*

*"You've talked to Bernie about this?" asked Kiki.*

*"That's your job, sweetie," said Eugenia as she patted her hand. "You're younger, cuter and have a better butt than I ever did, so it'll be best if you break the news to her."*

*"Nanna," Kiki dragged out the word in a whine.*

*"Please, she can barely string words together and walk when you're in the room."*

*Chris laughed so hard she snorted iced tea through her nose. She loved spending time with Eugenia, especially when she was in a playful mood, which seemed to be always. The old woman was the first person, aside from herself, that Chris had ever known able to cause Kiki to blush so much.*

*Looking up from her monitor, Darlene just nodded and smiled when Kiki asked her to hold all of Julian's calls and visitors. The cute wool suit the blonde had on wasn't her usual work attire, but with their big day so close, Kiki had taken a month off.*

*Julian was standing at the windows looking out across the city while talking on the phone headset to a supplier when Kiki closed and locked the door. As was Julian's habit, her jacket was thrown over a chair and she was standing with her hands on her hips. Kiki leaned up against the door and studied her lover's profile, hating the fact she wouldn't see it for seven days. With a sigh she shrugged off her coat and placed it over Julian's. When the blonde looked up again, Julian had turned around and was smiling at her as she rolled her eyes at the person on the other end of the line.*

*Slow moving hands smoothed down the wool shirt Kiki had on before she moved to the soft feeling fabric of the cashmere shell she was wearing. The result of her display caused Kiki to laugh.*

*"I told you, no later than Friday or..." Julian's voice just faded away as Kiki's hands stopped at her breasts. "Or else I'll have to..." she tried to recover only to have the sway of Kiki's hips make her groin spasm.*

*"Julian, are you all right?" asked the vendor.*

*"I'm fine," it came out as a squeak when Kiki's hands landed on her belt.*

*"Yes you are, and you're mine," whispered Kiki. She maneuvered Julian back into her office chair, making sure the pants and underwear were pooled at her ankles before her butt hit the seat. "You might want to wrap that up before we get started," ordered Kiki as she lowered herself to her knees.*



*"Whenever you can, Morgan, it's no big deal. Listen I have to go," Julian looked down into bright green eyes. "Something's come up."*

*Kiki spread her open and looked at the hard bundle of desire. "You ain't just whistlin' Dixie there, baby," she noted before lowering her head. From the first touch of her tongue, the only sound in the room was the leather of the chair creaking under Julian's fingers.*

*The tall brunette was about to rattle apart with the effort needed to stay quiet by the time they were done. She figured she'd never again sit in her chair without a big smile breaking out from the memory her partner's impromptu visit had provided. Kiki had strung her along as long as she could before bringing her over the edge, and now Julian was just a six-foot lump of manageable CEO. Blue eyes opened again when Kiki walked out of the bathroom with a freshly washed face.*

*"Wow," said Julian. She wanted to return the favor, but her legs weren't following any commands to get up and get moving just yet.*

*"Wow is right. I just wanted to come by and tell you that I love you," said Kiki leaning forward and kissing Julian's forehead before moving on to her lips.*

*"Feel free to do that whenever the mood strikes you, and I love you too."*

*"That makes me the luckiest woman in the world." Kiki pulled back out of Julian's embrace before those long fingers made her forget why she was there. "Got to run, honey. See you in a week, okay?" Grabbing her jacket and purse, Kiki blew her a kiss and headed to the door before Julian fully recovered.*

*"Okay." The words made their impact when the door closed quickly behind Kiki. "A week? Wait a minute," she stood up planning to catch Kiki and get an explanation, when her pants tripped her up at her first step.*

*"Yeah, well I wasn't too thrilled about it either. Though with your bad news giving techniques we could go belly up and I wouldn't mind as long as they sent you in to break the news. I miss you so much, baby." Julian took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "How's my little guy?"*

*"He misses you as much as his mom does. The only thing that cheered him up was your attorney coming over and telling him his new last name. Wait till you see him and he introduces himself. I promised I wouldn't say anything, but he has a surprise for you. Of course, if you happen to run into anyone who's crossed our path in the last week, the gig will be up, but he's so pumped up about it."*

*"He's terrific kid and a fine addition to the Lowe line," joked Julian.*

*"He's ours, so how could he be anything but wonderful?"*

*"Speaking of surprises, I have one for you as well."*

"I don't need anything else but you, love." Kiki looked at the picture sitting on the nightstand of the two of them at the beach that summer. It was the highlight of the vacation for Tiger when his first picture-taking job turned out so well.

"Just a few more hours, love, then you and I have a date with a canopy."

"You love me, Bernie?"

"Like midnight loves moonlight. How about you?"

"All I have is yours for the asking, honey. I can't believe you're marrying me."

Julian laughed as she looked out at the first sign of the sunrise. "Believe it, and after all is said and done, and said and done again, we'll never be lonely again. I love you, Kiki, and I'm going to spend a lifetime showing you just how much."

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The guests were starting to arrive at Eugenia's estate as Kiki finished getting ready inside. She had picked a white dress with simple lines but very formal, and as Chris worked on fastening the row of tiny buttons along the back she was glad Eugenia had put some heaters out in the yard. Tiger had left that morning to join Julian and J.J. in picking up their suits and she was glad to see how excited he was to go and spend the day with Julian again. Kiki thought the forced week's separation had been as hard on him as it had been on her.

An emotional part of her morning had been when Julian had called after Tiger was dropped off to her. The one thing they had both agreed to early on after Kiki moved in, was that Julian would legally adopt Tiger. That way he would become her heir, as well as share the same last name as both of his mothers.

To say he loved Julian was an understatement of vast proportions. She had taken him to ball games, cruising on their ships on numerous occasions, had lunch with him almost every day, and was there every night when he went to bed. He loved Kiki, but Julian gave his life balance and someone else to love. In honor of that, when they explained his name would change he asked Kiki for one thing. On the day of their commitment, Tiger hugged Julian and told her his surprise. With his hand held out he introduced himself as, "Tiger Sebastian Lowe."

"Kiki, can I come in?" asked Eugenia from the other side of the bedroom door.

Chris went and unlocked the door before getting back to her job. "Hey, Nanna, are you ready for the big day?" asked Kiki as she turned so Eugenia could see her dress.

"You are a vision, my dear. Julian may just pick you up and carry you away, the ceremony be damned."

"Oh no, ma'am, I've always dreamed of a fairytale wedding and that's what I'm going to get

before anyone carries me off anywhere," joked Kiki. "I've waited for her all my life."

"It's she that's waited for you, Kiki, and I'm so happy she found you. My granddaughter is a very lucky woman. This day will be special and very different from what everyone's used to I'm sure, but I think we have room for just one more wedding tradition. What do you say?"

"She has something blue," Chris stopped with the buttons and lifted Kiki's dress until the blue garter came into view. "Something old," she pointed to a necklace Kiki was wearing that had belonged to Birdie Lowe's great grandmother. The family heirloom had been one of Julian's wedding presents for her bride. "Mom said the flowers could count as something new."

"I have a better idea," suggested Eugenia.

"Whatever you want, Nanna," said Kiki with a smile.

"I was thinking of a flower girl."

"We have one already, Nanna," said Chris, as she finished with the dress. "Our little cousin, Libby is filling in."

"I spoke to Libby before coming up here and she and her mother understood why I'm asking someone else to do the job." Eugenia stepped aside so Kiki and Chris could see Summer in a beautiful white dress. "I'm not familiar with the tradition, but I think a new daughter counts as something new as well."

"Summer?" said Kiki in a weak voice. The little girl had changed in the year she'd been gone, but Kiki would recognize the green eyes anywhere. She dropped to her knees not caring about her dress and hugged Summer tight as if to verify she wasn't a dream. "I missed you so much, sweetheart."

"Bernie said we're going to be a family, and Tiger's going to be my brother. But only if you say it's all right." Summer's arms were clamped around Kiki's neck as she babbled. She had spent the morning having Tiger fill her in on all that she'd missed, and now she felt like she had to convince Kiki to let her stay.

"It's very all right, but I'm going to kill Bernie for messing up my makeup," teased Kiki as tears threatened to wash away all of Chris' hard work. "I love you so much."

"I gotta go with Nanna," said Summer giving Kiki one more squeeze. "I love you too."

The bride looked at her and she could see there was one more question or statement dying to come out of the little mouth the way Summer was acting. "Do you want to ask me something?"

"Can I...could..." started Summer twice not knowing how to ask.

"It's all right, you can just ask. No one's going to get mad and I'm sure Nanna will let you stay

here with us until it's time to go," Kiki looked up at Eugenia. "A little girl should remember the day her mom gets married, don't you think?"

"That's right, sweetie. I'll see you all at the end of the aisle." Eugenia waved and closed the door. For the first time in years she felt like dancing.

With just the three of them, Summer looked up at Kiki and opened her mouth only to close it and look down at her own dress. Chris went to say something when Kiki put her hand on her arm and shook her head. She wanted to give Summer the courage to ask for the things she wanted. That would go a long way in healing the ills that Deanne had inflicted.

"Can I call you mama like Tiger does?" The hesitant question made Chris pull out the makeup bag for both herself and Kiki.

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All of the guests turned when the music started so they could watch Eugenia walk Julian down the aisle to the canopy set up in a clearing in the backyard. There was a huge smile on Julian's face as she walked slowly to her destiny. On her arm Eugenia looked just as happy, and she received one long hug and a kiss on the cheek before her granddaughter helped her into her seat. Just outside the traditional covering stood J.J. in a suit very similar to Julian's. Next came Chris walking slowly until J.J. came down to meet her. The music changed slightly as Tiger came down carrying their rings on a pillow with Summer next to him dropping rose petals to the ground.

"Ready, baby?" asked Kiki's father as their turn came up.

"I was ready the day I met her, it just took me some time to convince her of that." Kiki took strength from having her father walking next to her and not losing sight of Julian's smile. She could see the way her lover was looking at her and she made a wish right then that sixty years from then, Julian would still have the same love and hunger in her eyes.

As part of the ceremony, Kiki's parents walked her around the canopy seven times before handing her over to Julian. Standing at the brunette's right side, Kiki took a deep breath and looked at the two holy men waiting to get started.

"Welcome, everyone, to this very special occasion. I am Rabbi Andrew," said the young man to their left.

"And I am Father Carl," said the young man on the right.

"We're going to do this a little differently tonight and if you'll indulge me, I'll explain some of what I'm sure some of you will see as strange traditions. But first and foremost, tonight is about Julian and Katherine. A blending of two lives and two faiths into one shining beacon that is a gift to God." Andrew reached out and touched the two joined hands. "In the Jewish faith we marry under a *chupah*, or canopy which symbolizes the home Julian and Katherine will build together.

When Katherine circled the canopy seven times it was as if she were building the walls of that home just as the world was created in seven days."

"Today, Katherine and Julian, you will declare your love before God, your family and friends, but marriage is something not to be entered into lightly," continued Father Carl. He went through some of the prayers voiced in a Catholic ceremony as Rabbi Andrew prayed over two cups of wine. Carl helped him by handing Julian her cup to drink from as Andrew handed the other to Kiki.

"Julian do you have a ring for your bride?" asked Andrew.

Everyone smiled as Tiger stepped forward and gave Julian the ring she needed, while pulling on his collar the whole time. Summer was right behind him and threw some flower petals on the pillow for good measure.

Andrew took the simple gold band meant for Katherine and handed it to Julian. "Julian, it is time to declare your intentions toward Katherine."

"Behold, you are betrothed unto me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel." Kiki's eyes watered as the band cleared her knuckle.

"Katherine, do you have a ring for Julian?" asked Carl. Kiki took the other band from their son.

"Julian, with this ring I thee wed. In sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better, or worse until death do us part, I vow myself and my love to you."

It was hard to tear their eyes away from each other but Kiki watched as Andrew put a glass wrapped in a napkin at Julian's feet. Before the end of the ceremony they drank from the cups again, and Julian fought the urge to tell the two ministers to hurry things along so she could kiss her bride.

Carl took hold of their joined hands and smiled at them. "Before I finish up my part in this joyous occasion, I think it is only fitting to finish with the oldest blessing in both the Bible and the Torah. Katherine and Julian, today you joined your lives together in front of God and your families. You pledged to bring up children and take care of each other through life's ups and downs, so may God bless you and keep you, and make his face to shine upon you, all the days of your lives." When he was done, the priest pressed his fingers to their foreheads and said another silent prayer before stepping back, and waving his hand toward Andrew.

"There are a number of reasons why this is done at the end of a ceremony," Andrew pointed to the glass at Julian's feet. "It is usually preformed by the groom to signal the end of the wedding ceremony and the beginning of the feast. I believe that love comes in all forms, but just because that is so, doesn't mean it's not as heartfelt and special if it occurs in a joining that's outside that of a man and a woman. Love is a gift from God that goes beyond the religions of man and must be treasured as such. When I look at Julian and Katherine I see they have found this gift and embraced it for the precious thing that it is." He then pointed to the ground and the glass. "It

doesn't matter though, Julian, that you are a woman. This is your last chance in this lifetime to put your foot down."

Julian laughed along with Kiki and all the other guests before stomping down on the glass enthusiastically now that she was one step closer to that kiss. "Mazel Tov," screamed the guests as Kiki welcomed Julian's lips.

They shared their first dance together on the dance floor Eugenia had the catering company put down, and Kiki loved being able to touch Julian again after a week of wanting to. "He's right you know."

"Who's that, baby?"

"Rabbi Andrew, he's right. You're a gift to me and it humbles me that you love me. Thank you, Bernie, for everything."

"There's nothing I won't give you, love, if it's within my power to do so."

"I have you, Summer, Tiger, and a place to call home. For the rest of my life I'll have the memories of this night when you stood under a canopy on a beautiful star filled night and declared your love for me in front of everyone we know, that's all I'll ever ask of you."

"I should be thanking you for giving me new memories to replace all the sad ones. Thank you for being my Valentine, Kiki, and forever changing my feelings about this day."

"Happy birthday, Bernie."

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Kiki took her time in the bathroom wanting to give Julian enough time to finish what she was doing. It was their wedding night but still there was room enough to share it with the two people responsible for giving Julian life.

*February 14, 2004*

*I kept a promise to myself and reread a lot of these passages, starting with the ones written on this day of the year. It was amazing to see how many times the words 'I lived through another year,' were in these texts. Mama and Papa I'm happy to say that from now on I'll write that I now truly live and love, and will live and love well for the rest of my days.*

*To find happiness is to find joy in every minute life gives you. I found her and with her came the true definition of love. If you hear me, know that the Lowe name will live on with our son Tiger and our daughter Summer. Along with Kiki, they will guarantee I will never again know despair.*

*As I lit the Yartzeit candles this year, they symbolized the light of you both still burning within me. This year I give thanks that you shared this overwhelming feeling I get whenever I look at*

*Kiki. It is like a surprise that never fails to take my breath away, I love her so much.*

*Today I remember, and I build on those memories to make a life you would have been proud of. In the end, know that I am happy.*

*Your daughter,*

*Julian*

"Are you ready, honey?" asked Kiki.

Julian looked up and took in the silk full-length negligee and smiled. It was the beginning of a great night. She stood and blew out the two candles burning in her study. "For anything and everything that comes next."

**The End**

#### **Author's Note**

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*Y'all didn't honestly think I'd leave you hanging with a sad ending on Valentine's Day, did you? Valentine's day is a special day to remember lovers of every age, so every story written to commemorate it should conclude with a happy ending. In my own experience, I found the woman who is the other half of my soul. Because I did, the rest of my days will be as joyous as the ones I've had so far.*

*To that end, I want to dedicate this story to my parents. They have been together for forty-eight years and I have found no one, aside from my partner, who has given me as much encouragement and strength to try than the two of them. What better teachers to learn to live and love from. Without them I would have never learned the true meaning of happy endings, and happily ever after. Forty-eight years is a long time, but they look forward to the next fifty as long as they have each other.*

*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.*

*To every reader, I wish your life is blessed with the same love my parents share. How lucky are we all to find the one person who will hold our hand and give us the strength to look forward to whatever comes next. I have, and she has made it Valentine's Day everyday.*

*Ali (Vali) Valdivia*

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