

Lydia's Daughters – Part II

By Patricia Crisafulli

Part I of Lydia's Daughters can be found under the Fiction link on the Home Page

Eileen Townsend sat at the kitchen table, nursing a cup of hot tea. Although she had a dozen things to do, including staking her claim to a shower, she could not break away from a rare moment alone on this second long day at her mother's house. So far it had been a pretty good visit, or at least not a bad one. Her only concern was that she and Jenny and their respective families would go home in two days without making any kind of decision about Mom, the worsening arthritis in her hip and the likelihood of replacement surgery, and what that would mean for recovery and the ability to live on her own.

Staring into the cup of black Lipton as if it magically contained the answers, Eileen heaved a deep sigh. All she wanted was peace of mind where her mother was concerned. Was that too much to ask? While she was at it, she'd add to her wish list her daughter, Dena, who despite an expensive education to get a master's degree in medieval literature appeared to be going nowhere fast. And she might as well include Zach, who now had his sights on medical school after graduation. Who was going to pay for that? Certainly not Rick who had to be hounded every few months for half the kids' tuition and pleaded poverty every time. She was leveraged up to her eyeballs after getting her own master's degree in counseling and now pursuing a doctorate.

All she wanted was for them to be okay—not rich or fabulously successful—just okay. Why was that too much to expect?

The back door opened, and her brother-in-law Bill came in with four bags of groceries; Jay followed behind with three more. Seeing him again after his unexpected arrival two hours before jarred her anew. Why on earth Jay had decided to surprise her by showing up unannounced, she'd never know.

Catching his eye, Eileen saw the apologetic look and gave him a strained smile. It was a sweet gesture, and she should be glad he cared enough about her to fly a third of the way across the country to spend New Year's Eve with her. It's just that... Eileen couldn't finish the thought. She wasn't sure what the problem was other than seeing Jay in her mother's house had thrown her for a loop. It was just too much to handle all at once.

“We got enough to feed an army.” Bill pulled off his hat, sending his gray hair into an array of angles.

Eileen opened the refrigerator door and began loading in packages of boneless skinless chicken breast and ground beef. “What are you guys making?”

“Fajitas and tacos. My specialty.” Jay's voice brightened with enthusiasm.

“Mom will never be able to eat that. It's too spicy. She'll be up all night with indigestion.”

An arm wrapped around her and a hand gripped her opposite shoulder. “Why don't you let us take care of dinner tonight?”

Looking up at her brother-in-law, Eileen pushed aside the feeling that Bill was being incredibly patronizing. “Okay, I'll leave it to you two chefs. Just remember Mom

doesn't have a cast-iron stomach. As for me, I'm going to see if I can finally get a shower."

Eileen hadn't crossed the dining room before Jay caught up to her. "Are you still mad that I'm here? I couldn't stand the thought of not being with you at New Year's. If that's a really bad idea, I'll leave. But please don't give me the silent treatment."

Stepping forward, Eileen allowed herself to be enveloped in an embrace. "I'm sorry. It's just this is harder than I thought. Mom won't listen to reason. This morning she got up at the crack of dawn and decided to make breakfast for everybody. She shouldn't be doing that. And Jenny! Well, she acts as if everything is the way it was ten years ago when Mom was in good health and Dad was still alive."

"Maybe this visit isn't about making a definitive decision. Maybe it's about being together—all of you. Later on, you and Jenny can discuss what needs to be done for your mother. You're only going to be here for two more days. Why not enjoy it?"

Eileen tried to be annoyed, but his smile and his logic were disarming. Rising up on her tiptoes, she kissed him quickly. "Thank you. I'm glad you're here."

Jay chuckled. "I'm awfully glad to hear you say that."

Eileen looked toward the living room where her son and nephew camped out at night and thought of the bedrooms upstairs that were already full. "This house is already so crowded with eight people here and..."

"No need to say another word! I have already checked into a motel not far from the airport."

"You're too good, you know that, right?"

Jay shook his head. "No, you deserve it."

Eileen looked up toward the ceiling at the sound of water running. “I better get upstairs before Dena decides to wash her hair. Otherwise, I’ll be melting snow on the stove for a sponge bath.”

Both bathrooms upstairs were occupied. As Eileen suspected, her daughter, Dena, was in one and her niece, Paige, was in the other. She needed to talk to those girls about the reality of a crowded household and two bathrooms. Yelling through the door, she urged them to hurry up, but no one could hear her.

Jenny stretched out across the bed reading a professional journal on nursing. She folded down the corner of the page and closed the magazine. “Welcome to the waiting room,” she called out to Eileen.

Her sister’s face appeared in the doorway. “How long have they been in there?”

“Twenty minutes, give or take. That’s why I’m up here. I wanted to be first in line.”

“My thought exactly.” Eileen crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Where are Zach and Henry? I haven’t seen them since we came back from ice skating.”

“Last I heard they were going to the video store. I told them to get something we all could watch, but I have no idea what that will be.” Jenny curled her legs inward and rose up higher against the pillows. In the suspended silence, she gathered her nerve to ask the question that had been on her mind, even though it meant trespassing on her sister’s private life. “So, are you happy Jay is here?”

“Sure. I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

Jenny studied her sister for the deeper message behind those few words. “I’ve only met him once before, of course, but he seems like a nice guy. Bill likes him, too...”

Eileen’s gaze cut her off. “Jay is very nice. We have a good relationship. But...” Her voice trailed off.

“But what?” Jenny prompted. “Maybe you think I’m prying. Okay, I am. But I’m your sister, and I care about you. I just want to know what’s going on with you.”

Eileen shook her head slowly. “I don’t know what’s going on with me. Imagine that. All that counseling education and undergoing the requisite therapy myself, and I don’t know why I’m in knots because my 50-year-old boyfriend of two years has showed up so he wouldn’t have to spend New Year’s Eve without me.”

Jenny leaned forward and touched Eileen on the shoulder, her fingertips conveying what she didn’t dare say in words: That it was okay to be vulnerable in a relationship, to trust her heart and allow herself to be happy.

“Maybe I’m not sure what Mom thinks. You know, she’s pretty old-fashioned. I don’t think she approved when Rick and I got divorced. She always wanted us to have safe, predictable lives.”

Jenny cocked her head. “For the record, Mom never said any of those things to me. Oh, she was upset when you got divorced, but mostly out of worry for you, Zach, and Dena. I’m sure she just wants you to be happy.”

“I am happy,” Eileen pressed on. “When I’m home, Jay and I have such a good time. We bike together, go to outdoor concerts in the summer. We took a road trip through Napa Valley with friends; that was so much fun... But as soon as I get here, I can’t bridge the gap with him. This is not where he belongs.”

“This is where you met Rick,” Jenny replied without thinking. “Every significant place—this house, the church, the diner in town, the high school are probably filled with memories of Rick.”

Eileen widened her eyes. “That’s it, isn’t it? I feel myself sucked back into a time warp when I’m here.”

“You’re not the only one that happens to, you know.” Jenny traced the pattern of the bedspread with her finger. “I have advanced degrees in nursing and provide care for patients with complex cases, and yet I can’t get my own mother to wear a hat when it’s cold outside. Whenever I’m around her, I feel like I’m twelve-years-old again.”

Jenny saw the slight nod and the smirk, knowing her words resonated with Eileen. “So I suppose the issue is really whether *you* are happy that Jay is here—never mind Mom, me, or anyone,” Jenny continued.

Eileen pursed her lips. “I think I am, which is so stupid since we’ve been talking about him moving in. He’d rather get married, but I don’t know if I want to do that a second time. Then I see him here and it feels like he’s intruding on my life.”

Jenny reined herself in to keep from spewing unwanted advice. “So why don’t you just see how it plays out?”

Eileen nodded and turned her head toward the doorway. The showers had stopped running. “So all this wisdom comes from being the older sister?”

“Wisdom I like, but watch that ‘older’ business.” They both laughed and headed toward the door to hustle their daughters out of the bathrooms.

Lydia sat at the kitchen table, watching Bill and Jay preparing dinner. She thought of asking if she could help, but decided to keep them company instead. “So what is it you are making?”

“Fajitas and tacos.” Jay turned from the cutting board on the counter and gave her a smile over his shoulder.

“Charles never cooked, except for eggs occasionally and of course a sandwich, but that’s hardly cooking.” Lydia recalled him sitting at the table just as she was, reading the paper or listening to the news on the radio while she was busy at the stove. If she had known how much she would miss those small things when he was gone, she would have appreciated them more. But that is how life goes, she told herself; there’s so much you don’t know until it’s too late.

“We ate a big dinner every Sunday, usually around one o’clock. We’d come home from church around eleven or so and I would start right in. Sometimes we’d eat a little later, depending upon what I made,” Lydia went on. “Charles liked roast pork, and I tried to make that a couple of times a month.”

Jay gave a generous shake of reddish spice to the meat in a dish. Lydia wondered what the seasoning was; paprika, she supposed.

“My mother did the same thing,” he told her. “Sunday dinner was always in the mid-afternoon. My grandmother and my Uncle James—he was my father’s brother who never married—would come over a lot, too. Then we’d go in the living room and watch the Sunday afternoon movie.”

“Oh, remember those?” Bill interjected. “The big epics like *The Guns of Navaronne* and *Battle of the Bulge*.”

“Where did you grow up, Jay?” Lydia asked.

“California,” he said. “Right around San Jose.”

Lydia nodded, but didn’t know that place. She visited Eileen in New Jersey and Bill and Jenny in Minnesota, and she and Charles used to go to Florida. Once they went to Charleston, which had also been very nice. “I’ve never been to California. I would have liked to have seen the Pacific Ocean.”

Jay smiled. “I miss it, to tell you the truth. The East Coast is nice, and Eileen and I get to the Jersey Shore every summer, but the Pacific is different than the Atlantic.”

“Really? I would think an ocean is an ocean.” Lydia shifted in her chair to ease the pressure on her sore hip.

“The Pacific is bluer, to me anyway. And the waves roll in from farther out, which is why the surfers like them so much.”

Bill washed his hands in the sink and dried them on a paper towel. “I remember going to San Francisco on business and taking Jenny and the kids along Route 1 to Big Sur. That was just fantastic.”

“That does sound very nice,” Lydia murmured. Suddenly her life seemed terribly small and pitted with dozens of tiny disappointments. What a silly old woman she was! She had a lovely family and a good home, and she’d spent a long time with a husband who had loved her. She’d best shake herself out of it. “I don’t suppose you want some help making a salad or something.”

Lydia rose to her feet and pretended not to notice the look that Bill and Jay exchanged—the one that questioned whether or not she could stand at the sink and tear lettuce leaves. She wasn’t sure she could do it either but was willing to try.

“Salad would be great,” Bill said. “Why don’t we bring the stuff to you at the table?”

Lydia shook her head. “I better stand. I can only sit so long with this hip.” After a tentative step she reached for her walker and propelled herself across the floor. “It hurts to stand and it hurts to sit and at night it hurts to lie down.” Lydia sighed and forced a laugh. “Don’t get old, gentlemen. I don’t recommend it.”

Jenny ran a towel over her wet hair and then finger-combed it in place. She was never in the shower more than six minutes, including shampooing and conditioning. It was a hold over from nursing school with too many young women in dormitories with too few bathrooms. Wiping away the steam with her towel, Jenny looked at her reddened face in the mirror. The secret was running the shower as hot as possible, maximum heat in the minimum time, or so she had decided back then. Suddenly the reflection in the mirror wasn’t a 50-something with hair that had gone totally gray nearly a decade before, but a young woman with blond-brown hair to her shoulders. She had wanted to be a nurse since she played with dolls and put Band-Aids on their plastic arms, and once taped up her teddy bear with an entire roll of adhesive tape because, as she had explained solemnly, he had been caught “in a anvil-lanche.”

Nursing to her had meant service to others, probably in a hospital, which of course was where she ended up, but she nearly changed everything her senior year. Jenny stepped into her jeans and zipped them up. *Benito*. She never thought of him any more and probably hadn’t said his name in twenty-five years. Yet even now, thinking of the

young med school student she had met and with whom she had fallen swiftly and deeply in love, Jenny felt a melancholy tug inside.

Drawing in a deep breath, she tried to remember what twenty-one felt like when everything seemed possible; when she and Benito would make their plans for a future that had seemed designed especially for them. His family was Brazilian and had come to the States when Benito was sixteen. When they met he was twenty-three and studying to be a doctor like his father. Benito's dream was to move back to Brazil to open medical clinics for the poor and undertake research in infectious diseases. Her vision had changed then, from being a hospital nurse in a starched white uniform to picturing herself in a loose cotton dress, giving inoculations, dressing wounds, checking for signs of fever and infection. It had all seemed so idealistic and possible back then, and no one could have convinced them otherwise. Except Benito's father had other ideas for his son.

When Benito's family came to visit, she waited all weekend for a call to join them for dinner. When she finally reached him on the second day and asked in a quivering voice how he was, she had heard a new tone. She never saw Benito's parents that weekend and rarely saw him after that. Whatever had been said to Benito had changed him. The Benito she had known and loved had simply ceased to exist.

Tears splashed her hand. Jenny looked up at the mirror and saw her own lined face staring back at her. A knock sounded. "Aunt Jenny? Are you in there?"

"Just a second."

Jenny ran cold water and dabbed her eyes. *After all these years!* She scolded herself.

Yanking open the bathroom door, Jenny laughed lightly. “Sorry, Dena. The instant beauty routine takes a lot longer at my age.”

Dena’s smile was brittle at the edges.

“I think I left my earrings near the soap dish.” Dena pointed toward the vanity.

Jenny spotted a glint of gold on top of the paper cup dispenser and scooped them into one hand. “Here you go.” She watched Dena fasten the hoops in her lower lobe.

“They’re very pretty.” Jenny pretended to look more closely at the earrings as she scanned Dena’s face in profile.

“I’ve had them for a while.” Dena flipped her hair behind each ear.

“Gift from someone?” Jenny asked lightly.

Dena pressed her lips together, shut her eyes, and bowed her head. Her hair fell across her cheekbones.

Jenny clicked the bathroom door behind her. “So, do you want to tell me?”

There was quite a crowd in the kitchen by the time Eileen went downstairs. Bill and Jay had opened the wine, and even Lydia had a small glass. “Aunt Eileen, we’re having a party!” Paige laughed.

“That’s what it looks like.” Eileen stared at the back of Jay’s dark blue sweater as he worked in the kitchen. No matter how much he seemed at home, it still struck her like one of those children’s games of what doesn’t belong in this picture—the igloo at the beach, Christmas tree with a seashell on top, the bicycle with one square tire...

“No, this is just the warm-up. Tomorrow night is the party,” Paige explained. “We’re all making our favorite dish for New Year’s Eve—all based on the luck of the draw—except Dad who says he’s doing ribs so we have to stay out of his way all day.”

“Oh, I used to make a lovely cranberry mold,” Lydia piped up.

Her mother’s cheeks were bright pink and her eyes sparkled. “I remember that dish, Mom,” Eileen replied, trying to think of something that Jenny would say, instead of her own usual reply which would be along the lines of how insane this was. She looked around, wondering where Jenny was.

“Here!” Paige produced an upside down hat which sprouted slips of paper.

Eileen’s eyes blurred as she took one and read aloud one word, “Beverage.”

“That’s your contribution to the feast,” Paige explained.

Eileen nodded, her eyes never leaving the hat.

“Where’s Mom, anyway? And Dena?” Paige put the hat on the table.

Gray tweed with a black fleck, a couple of shades darker than the white-gray hair beneath it. A neck scarf above the collar, usually navy but occasionally cherry red, and a spicy smell of aftershave and the special soap he used. When she looked up, Jay gazed back at her with soft eyes. He knew, of course, that it was her father’s hat, which she had given to him two Christmases before he died.

“So what beverage shall I make?” Eileen heard herself asking.

“Champagne for starter,” her nephew Henry piped up.

“Some people are not 21,” Bill intoned.

Jay broke his gaze and laughed with the rest of them. “Oh, I think we can come up with an unspiked punch that you’ll like—that is, if Eileen will accept my help.”

“But you’re the dessert guy,” Paige laughed. “And we want something big, rich, and at least four layers.”

“I’m thinking ice cream and little scoops at that.”

That was what didn’t fit, Eileen suddenly knew. The problem was not Jay being in places she associated with Rick; he was in her father’s house. On some level she was concerned about what Dad would have thought of Jay; it had always been his opinion that mattered most.

Footsteps down the stairs caught Eileen’s attention and she turned her away from the kitchen toward the archway into the dining room where Jenny walked beside Dena. “What’s up?” Eileen asked, her tone penetrating, which she tried to deflect with a smile. “You’re missing the party plans. You’ve got to get your assignment. I’m beverage.”

Jenny’s eyes fixed on hers, telegraphing something that Eileen couldn’t read, other than the obvious that she and Dena had a conversation of some significance.

Eileen held the hat by the visor toward them. Dena didn’t make a move, so Jenny did, plucking a paper that read “hors d’oeuvres.”

The last one, side dish, fell to Dena, who made a face as she listened to Paige’s explanation of the potluck surprise feast. “You could do the green bean thing with the onions on top.”

“That’s gross,” Henry moaned. “It looks like cafeteria food.”

“If it was cafeteria food, it would have a layer of mashed potatoes in it.” Zach added.

“Do you want to switch?” Jenny held out her hors d’oeuvre slip.

Dena nodded, taking the paper. “This I can do.”

“I’ll need to go to the store early,” Jenny said. “Anybody who needs ingredients better come with me early. The stores are going to be crowded.”

Eileen caught her sister’s eye and knew that they’d be in the car together before the rest of the household even got up.

“Time to eat,” Jay announced, setting the group in motion with plates and silverware toward the dining room.

“You’re coming with me tomorrow, right?” Jenny whispered.

“Got it,” Eileen replied, and wondered how she was ever going to sleep now that she had the mystery conversation to worry about all night.

At seven forty-five the next morning, Jenny waited downstairs, keys to her rental car in hand, watching the first flakes of what was expected to be a three- to four-inch accumulation. She’d tapped on the door to Eileen’s room about a half-hour before and received a whispered, “I’m up” in reply.

A moment later, Eileen appeared in the kitchen. As she put on her coat, Jenny motioned that she was going outside to start the car.

The Ford Taurus engine revved a little fast, or so it seemed to Jenny, but rental cars always drove differently than her Camry at home. Glancing in the rearview mirror, she noticed the billow of exhaust from the cold car, and the frost of her breath inside it.

“What is it, ten degrees?” Eileen huddled deeper in her coat and pulled the collar up around her ears.

“Actually, twelve.” Jenny glanced at the temperature read-out on the dashboard before she started to back out of the driveway. “No, just dropped a degree to eleven. So do you know what you need at the store?”

“Jenny, I’m getting juice and sparkling water and soda, and Jay can go out later for more wine. Right now I don’t care what we put in the cart; I want to hear about your conversation with Dena.”

Of course she did, Jenny empathized, but Dena had told her everything in confidence. If she broke that trust, Dena would feel betrayed. But Eileen deserved to know a few details so that she could prepare for what was to come.

“First of all, Dena is fine,” Jenny began. “She has a good head on her shoulders. You should be proud of her.”

“So she’s not in any trouble—nothing physical, mental…”

“Perfectly fine that way,” Jenny replied. “But she’s sad, Eileen. Something has happened to her that broke her heart.”

“I knew it!” Eileen threw her hands up in the air. “When Rick and I split up five years ago, Dena seemed so well adjusted. Zach had a few issues, but he was only fourteen then. Dena was supportive; she talked about her friends whose parents had divorced. Now she’s having some sort of delayed reaction.”

Jenny waited until Eileen’s torrent of words stopped. “No, that’s not it at all. In fact, she never mentioned you or Rick.” She glanced in the rearview mirror at a car behind them; watched it slow down and signal for a left turn. “I don’t want to say too much because Dena confided in me. I’m sure you respect that. She recently broke up with someone. It was pretty serious, apparently, at least for Dena, although for him I think it

was far less so, although she's not ready to see that. It's gotten her a bit mixed up, and she's thinking about leaving school at the end of this semester—taking a break is the way she put it.”

“What? She's dropping out of grad school?” Eileen turned toward her as far as her seatbelt would allow.

“No, not exactly. She said she wanted to take a break—clear her head a bit. That's all I'm going to say. I just thought you should be aware of what she's thinking.”

“Who is this guy? She never mentioned anyone in particular.”

“I imagine not,” Jenny said.

“Don't tell me he was married.” Eileen shook her head slowly.

“I don't think so. I have a feeling that she's going to talk to you about it soon. That's what she said, anyway.”

“So it's okay for her to confide in you, but she can't tell me anything. That's how it works?”

Jenny took a deep breath and reached over, laying a gloved hand on her sister's arm. “If you had this conversation with Paige I'd feel the same way—left out and ticked off. But I would be grateful that she talked to someone I trusted. I hope you feel the same.”

“Of course.” Eileen turned toward the window.

“Trust me, she'll tell you. In the meantime, just give her some space.”

The car was silent except for the bumps in the road and a slight rattle coming from the glove compartment. “You're not worried about her.”

“No, I’m not, especially once she talks to you. If she doesn’t say anything in a week, call me and I’ll speak with her.”

“So how did this come up, anyway?”

Jenny signaled for the turn into the grocery store. “Believe it or not, I was crying in the bathroom over my college boyfriend, Benito, and Dena was looking for her earrings.”

“You were crying?”

“Yup. I’ll tell you about it as we shop.”

As they cruised the aisles of the store Jenny explained how she remembered being back in nursing school and her romance with Benito.

Eileen put two bottles of organic sparkling cranberry juice in the cart. “He was that serious for you? I thought that was just a little flirtation.”

“He was going back to Brazil to open a clinic to care for the poor and I was going with him as soon as I graduated,” Jenny replied. “But his parents put an end to that.”

“So you told this story to Dena and she shared something with you.”

“Something like that,” Jenny replied. “Just be patient.”

As they got in line, Eileen picked up a magazine and thumbed through the pages. Jenny observed her, knowing her actions were borne of distraction rather than any interest in the 25 best places to golf or whatever else was promised on the cover. She longed to tell Eileen everything: Dena’s romance with one of her professors, which had ended pretty badly after he started dating someone else without telling her—until she saw them together. It was such a jolt Dena was considering leaving school for a while. She had urged her niece to continue her education, telling her how hard it was to finish later

on, but the bigger issue was Dena's feeling of having been betrayed by someone she trusted and probably even loved.

"Do you want to have them ring this as two orders?" Eileen asked.

"No," Jenny replied. "What's yours is mine and mine is yours. We'll split it at the end." She gave her sister a nudge. "Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

It was quite the New Year's Eve feast, if they said so themselves: the ribs Bill had slow-cooked all day until the meat was falling off the bone; Jay's vegetarian paella (after he swapped with Henry, who was more than happy to take care of ice cream for dessert instead of dealing with a side dish); Lydia, with help from Paige, made a cranberry mold, and Paige provided a spicy avocado salsa, which she maintained amid some protest qualified as a salad. Jenny made candied yams because it was tradition and she liked them, while Eileen unveiled an impressive array of sparking juices, sodas in exotic flavors, and a few standbys like Pepsi and Sprite, along with some good wine for the over-21 crowd. When Dena brought out her baked crab dip she had made from scratch, she acknowledged the compliments with a rare, broad smile.

"Where did you learn how to make this?" Eileen asked, digging into it with a triangle of pita bread.

"Someone taught me," Dena replied.

"You learned well." Eileen took another bite.

"Yeah, I learned a lot in that relationship," Dena added.

"Wanna talk about it?" Eileen finished off the pita.

“Yes, but not now.” Dena put a spoonful of her grandmother’s cranberry mold onto her plate. “I’m sorry, Mom. I know I’ve been difficult. There’s a lot going on.”

Eileen dipped a chip into Paige’s salsa. “I’m here for you. You just ask.”

Eileen looked over at Jenny who was flanked by Paige and Henry, and the sisters’ eyes locked just for the briefest moment.

As Dena drifted away, Jay approached quietly. Eileen wasn’t even aware of him until his hand was on her left shoulder. “Thank you,” he said simply.

Eileen reached up and took his hand. “Thank you, Jay, for fitting in with this crowd and all our mini-drama triangles.”

Jay reached for a wedge of pita and spread it with crab dip. “I don’t see drama. I just see a wonderful feast made from the best that everyone has to offer. I’m an honored guest.”

“No,” Eileen said. “You’re not a guest. You’re family.”

Part III of Lydia’s Daughters will appear in the March issue.