

Lydia's Daughters – Part III

By Patricia Crisafulli

Parts I and II of Lydia's Daughters can be found in the Fiction section.

The key slid in the lock and turned with such ease Eileen thought the door would swing open by itself. The motion felt strangely foreign until she realized that for the past four days she had been dealing with the old wooden back door at her mother's house, which had warped over the years and required a nudge or a tug every time.

Over her shoulder, she watched her daughter, Dena, and her son, Zach, trailing up the sidewalk behind her, locked in conversation. Jay stood at the driver's door of the taxi, paying for their fare from the airport and giving directions on how to get back on the highway. Her mind returned briefly to the moment Jay had showed up at her mother's house unannounced because he had wanted to spend New Year's with her, and along with it the memory of her annoyance. But that was three days and a lifetime ago. Between worries over her mother's health, Dena's mystery story that she had yet to hear, and her own insights into missing her father, quite a bit had changed.

Inside her townhouse, Eileen snapped on lights and turned up the thermostat; wondered what was in the refrigerator and whether she should cook or get take-out for dinner that night. After the New Year's Eve feast they had shared the night before, she

couldn't imagine any of them wanting food. Standing in the brightly lit kitchen with its dark marble countertop and chrome appliances, Eileen remembered the party: each of them contributing a favorite dish, and in the center of all that commotion her mother, Lydia, more animated than she had seen her in years. Not since Dad died, Eileen admitted, wondering now if perhaps her mother was a little depressed, or maybe just lonely. Without all of them with her, the house would seem empty. Was that letdown worth the price of having everyone around her for four days? Eileen certainly hoped so.

When everyone finally came in the door, Eileen got busy unpacking: sorting dirty laundry and putting away the toiletries. She could hear Zach and Jay in the other room, discussing whether or not to order a pizza for dinner. They could count her out on that one; first thing tomorrow morning, she was going to the gym.

“Mom...?”

At the sound of her daughter's voice, Eileen took a breath and made sure she was smiling when she turned around. “Just putting some stuff away. What's up?”

Dena stood in the doorway. Without makeup and her auburn hair held back in a Scrunchie, she suddenly looked about 16-years-old, not a 23-year-old about to complete her master's.

“I think you know I talked with Aunt Jenny while we were at Grandma's,” Dena began.

Eileen made non-committal noises.

“Mom, I know because Aunt Jenny told you me. She said she didn't say anything to you other than that we needed to talk. She didn't want to break any confidences.”

“Don’t worry,” Eileen said, sitting down on the edge of the bed, “she didn’t. All I know is something was troubling you and your aunt was there to listen.”

Eileen’s eyes followed Dena as she paced across the room, pausing for a moment in front of the beveled mirror over her dresser. She wondered if her daughter could see the beautiful young woman she really was.

“So I had been seeing this guy,” Dena began.

Eileen felt her training as a counselor kick in as she became an attentive, active listener, but silent.

“We saw each other pretty steadily for four months.” Dena turned to face her; Eileen smiled slightly. “He was one of my professors.”

Oh, no! Eileen screamed silently, trying to keep her emotions from registering on her face.

“He was my advisor, too,” Dena added.

“What was he like?” Eileen rubbed her sweaty palms discreetly over the bedspread.

“Twelve years older than I am, brilliant, funny, handsome.” Dena met her gaze. “Two kids, separated from his wife who obviously had the good sense to kick him out. And I loved him, Mom. I really, really loved him.”

This was no time to be a counselor; she was a mother. Opening her arms, Eileen waited for Dena to sit down next to her, and then held her close. Through sobs, Dena told her the rest: plans for the future, dreams of travel through Europe, teaching together some day... Then one day she came across him in a quiet corner of the reference section of the university library, down an aisle of obscure stacks that no one would go—no one except a

student like her who was researching commentaries on medieval literature. “He was standing right in front of the books I needed. He knew that, Mom—on some level he did. He wanted me to find him.”

“Did he see you?”

“They both did. The girl looked embarrassed. As for him, he just shrugged and shook his head as if to say, ‘Oh, sorry, I can’t help myself.’”

Probably he couldn’t, Eileen thought, but kept it to herself. “I’m so sorry you were hurt by him.”

“I trusted him, Mom. That’s what makes it worse. He knew all my hopes and dreams and plans, and he didn’t care. He was probably laughing at me the whole time.” Dena sat up straight and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

Eileen handed her a box of tissues from the nightstand. “You don’t know that, Dena. And even if he did, that doesn’t make your dreams and plans less worthy.”

“Don’t defend him, Mom!” Dena snapped.

“Honey, believe me, I’m not defending him. As your mother I would like to strangle this guy for hurting you. What he did was wrong on so many levels. You opened your heart and he wasn’t worthy of such a gift.” Eileen leaned forward an inch. “*He* wasn’t worthy—not you.”

“Maybe I got caught up with all those tales I’ve been studying—*Tristan and Isolde*.” Dena tried to laugh.

Eileen thought Dena was on to something with that theory: maybe she was looking for a hero and had idealized this guy.

“So I’m not going back. I’m going to take a leave of absence,” Dena said. “I know you’re not going to like it, but my mind is made up.”

Eileen wet her lips, gathering up the right words to say. “Are you sure that’s what is best for you? You’re so close to finishing, Dena. Is he worth throwing away your plans and dreams?”

Dena shook her head. “I can’t even think of my master’s thesis without immediately connecting it with him.”

“First of all, you’re getting a new advisor,” Eileen interjected. “I don’t care what you have to tell the university.”

“I just don’t think I can’t do it right now.”

Eileen reached over and put her arms around her daughter. “I’m so glad you told me. We can figure this out together.”

“I’m not going back, Mom,” Dena said.

Eileen tightened her hug.

* * *

Jenny was on the phone with her mother as soon as she walked in the door. “We’re home, safe and sound,” she said, her voice assuring although her real concern was for her mother in a house that was probably too quiet after they all left.

“Have you heard from Eileen?” Lydia asked.

“Not yet, but you will—or I will. I’m not sure what time their plane got in. So are you doing okay?”

“Just fine. A little tired with all that activity. I can’t believe all the things we did! And that party was really something. I have so many leftovers.”

Jenny made a mental note to make sure that her mother didn’t keep anything too long.

“I just wish you all weren’t so far away. It would be fun to do that again soon.”

“Maybe this summer,” Jenny suggested. “I know Bill and I will be there for sure, and maybe Eileen and the kids can come too.”

“And Jay,” her mother added. “I really like him. Do you think they’ll get married?”

Jenny hesitated; Eileen hadn’t sounded like it. “I don’t know, Mom. But he is awfully nice.”

Their conversation went in different directions from there, but kept circling back to how much fun her mother had with all of them. Jenny promised three times that they’d be back soon. When she hung up, there were tears in her eyes.

Bill carried two suitcases past her. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“Oh, I just talked to Mom. She had such a good time, but I know she’s going to be lonely now that we’re gone.”

Bill set the valises down and put his arm around her. “That’s the risk isn’t it? You have a wonderful time for a while, and then it’s over.”

“You make it sound like a whirlwind romance,” Jenny laughed.

“Same thing, in a way. We had a marvelous time, but now life goes on. If your mother would sell the house and move closer to us, I’d be thrilled.”

“But she won’t. There is too much of her life in that old colonial.”

Bill patted her hand. "It will be okay. In a day or so, your mother will be back to her routine of her church group and going to the senior center. She does pretty well for herself."

Jenny leaned into him. "I suppose you're right."

"Speaking of going back to their routines, when are Paige and Henry leaving?"

Jenny couldn't believe it! She'd give anything if Paige and Henry had more time with them before going back to their respective colleges. "You trying to get rid of them?"

Bill laughed. "Not exactly, but I wouldn't mind having my own car back and a few more leftovers in the refrigerator."

"Oh, please!" Jenny patted him on the stomach. "You're well fed."

Following Bill upstairs, Jenny helped him unpack. When Henry passed by the open door to the master bedroom, she called out a reminder to him to deposit his dirty clothes in the laundry room. A few minutes later, she said the same thing to Paige.

"Gotta let go, mother hen," Bill chuckled.

Jenny's loud sigh was nearly a hiss. "They have dirty clothes. I am doing laundry tonight. Makes sense for it all to be done together."

"Whatever you say, dear." Bill winked at her as he carried the first empty suitcase toward the crawlspace.

She missed them at the start of every semester and at the end of every holiday and long weekend. Not that she wanted them to stay. It was wonderful that they had been accepted at good colleges, even though both were out-of-state. But no matter how cheerfully she waved good-bye, with happy hugs and warm send-offs, the ache inside never got any better. Each time part of her body was ripped away. By the time they came

back for a visit, the wound had healed just enough to start bleeding all over again when it was time to say good-bye.

Gathering up the dirty clothes she and Bill had removed from the suitcases, Jenny headed downstairs to the laundry room. With luck, she'd get most of it done before bedtime.

Paige appeared as the washer filled for the first load. "Hey, Mom, I was thinking of going to the video store and getting something that we would like to watch." Paige tossed her head backwards. "You know those two are going to watch football."

"That would be lovely, unless you were planning to see your friends tonight." Jenny closed the washer lid.

"No, I thought I'd hang with you and watch movie."

A smile spread slowly across Jenny's face. "Enchanted April, Room with a View."

"Mona Lisa Smile... The English Patient."

"Doctor Zhivago!"

Paige nodded and jiggled the car keys in her hand. "We're on the same wavelength."

Jenny sorted the remaining clothes into three piles: dark colors, light colors, and delicates.

"Everything under control here?" Bill ducked his head in the doorway.

Jenny listened to the thump-a-hum sound the washer made. "A-okay. Paige went to give a movie for the two of us since you and Henry will be in football-land tonight."

"Did she now?" Bill's eyes twinkled.

“You sent her, right?” Jenny didn’t know whether to be grateful or disappointed.

“Merely a suggestion, my dear. Our darling daughter eagerly grabbed hold of the idea and ran with it, all the way to Blockbuster.”

Jenny laughed and shook her head. Who cared who thought of it; she had an evening with her daughter. In a few days, she’d miss Paige like crazy, but for now, she didn’t have to think about that.

* * *

Lydia pushed the walker through the kitchen, into the dining room with the big table that just the other night had been set for nine, and into the living room where her grandsons had camped out in sleeping bags. She remembered the word they used: crashed. *It’s okay, Grandma. We can crash here...* What a funny thing to say! In her day, when someone crashed they ran a car into a tree.

Straightening the throw on the back of the sofa, Lydia fingered the fringe. All that noise and confusion for four days: up and down the stairs, all the bathrooms occupied, dishes forever in the sink. And the cooking! She hadn’t seen that much food prepared and consumed for years.

And she had loved it, Lydia admitted. This home was meant for a family. She told herself again the story of the first time Charles had showed her this house where he had lived with this first wife before she had died. It had scared her a little to think of some other woman in this house, but over time the curve of the banister, the creak of the floors,

the molding around the doorways—all of it had become hers and as familiar as the back of her hands.

Lydia raised her hand, palm downward, toward her. Instead of the creamy smooth flesh of her youth, her skin was mottled with brown age spots and lined with veins. She was an old woman living alone. Her thin shoulders sagged and a funny pain shot through her, an ache that was different from the burn and throb of her hip that sometimes radiated into her back. Lowering herself into the nearest chair, Lydia rested her arm on her walker and counted slowly to ten, a little relaxation technique that seemed to help. The discomfort passed as it usually did, but not before Lydia recognized it for what it was: sadness. For a few short days, her life had been so full with Jenny and Bill, Eileen and Jay, and her four grandchildren in the house. But that was a visit, not real life. She couldn't pretend any longer that her life hadn't changed any more than she could convince herself that she was still a young woman of thirty or forty.

It was time, Lydia knew, and wondered which daughter she should call first. She supposed that depended on which one she was going to live near: Eileen in New Jersey or Jenny in Minneapolis. She didn't know. Well, maybe she should let them decide. Surely there were senior apartments in both of those places. Lydia hauled herself to her feet and headed toward the kitchen, deciding on the way that she would call Jenny. After all, she was the oldest and had the more settled life of her two daughters.

“Hello?”

“Eileen?” Lydia couldn't imagine what Eileen was doing at Jenny's house.

“Mom? Is everything okay?”

“Did I dial your number?” Lydia sputtered.

“Yes, you did. Is something wrong? Are you ill?”

Lydia fumbled to cover up her mistake. “Oh, I was hoping to reach you. I have an idea to suggest. I have been thinking about this for quite a while now, and I have decided.” Lydia swallowed hard to make the words come out. “I am going to sell the house and move. I suppose I could get one of those senior apartments here, but I would prefer to live closer to you or Jenny.”

“Have you talked to Jenny about this?”

“No, I dialed your number first,” Lydia replied.

“Mom, I would love it if you would come out here. I can think of three or four really nice adult residential communities here, and each of them is about 20 minutes away from me. I’m sure Jenny would love to have you, too, but the weather usually is better here—not as cold as Minnesota. But you could go up there to spend part of the summers. I would fly with you... or even drive.”

Lydia smiled. So this was where she was going to live, even though it hadn’t been her first thought, not that she’d ever tell anyone. “I was thinking the same thing,” she added.

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The next morning, Jenny got up a few minutes before six and ran to the grocery store, filling up on the staples, along with bacon for a last big family breakfast and organic eggs that, if she were only buying for Bill and herself, would have been replaced by cholesterol-free egg substitutes. Putting two kinds of orange juice in her cart, one with

pulp and one without, Jenny told herself she was going overboard, but ignored the self-criticism. She needed to celebrate her family being together one more time before they all scattered again. Then the house would go back to being too big and too quiet, until finally she and Bill found a way to fill it up with the hum of their own lives.

By seven she was back home and unloading the groceries when her cell phone rang. Hearing the jangle from her purse she raced over to get it, wondering if they needed her at work. Glancing at the caller ID that announced Eileen's number, Jenny wondered why she was calling her cell and not the house as she usually did.

"I figured you were up, but not sure about everyone else," Eileen explained without being asked. "Did Mom call you last night?"

Jenny sank in the chair, waiting to hear the worst: that their mother had fallen, that she was crying out of loneliness, that they needed to go back right away. "No," she said, and held her breath.

"Mom called me last night—took me completely by surprise. She said she is ready to sell the house and wants to move into a senior assisted-living complex."

Jenny put her hand on her heart. "Oh, that's great. You have no idea what was going through my mind when you said she had called."

"Wait. There's more." Jenny heard the hesitation in her sister's voice. "She wants to move...here."

Jenny couldn't speak for a few seconds. If Mother moved anywhere, it would be with her. She was a nurse and, quite frankly, she got along better—or at least more smoothly—with their mother. It didn't make any sense. "Are you sure?"

Eileen laughed a little. “I know what you’re thinking. You always thought that of the two of us, she’d pick you, right?”

“No, not at all!” Jenny protested.

“Jenny, face it. We both had expected this to turn out differently. But she said it was the weather; New Jersey is milder than Minnesota, but she wants to spend summers with you. Actually, from a completely clinical standpoint, I think this is a good choice because there are several sites to choose from here, all within a few miles of my house. And if she could visit you in the summer, she’d have the best of both worlds.”

But Eileen would be the one to take her shopping, the one to pop over and visit. What would she have? Jenny told herself to stop; this wasn’t about her. “This is good news. Did she have any idea of when she’d like to move?”

“Right away, or so she said. Of course the way the housing market is it could take a while.”

“Mother can’t wait for the house to sell. She can move before that.” Jenny’s mind locked into gear: cleaning out the house, big yard sale out front, putting a minimum into a U-haul for the long drive to New Jersey.

“We’ll get a plan together,” Eileen said.

“Everyone will help,” Jenny echoed. “I’ll call Mom this morning.”

“Oh, and one more thing,” Eileen added.

Jenny couldn’t imagine what surprise could top this one.

“I had a talk with Dena last night. Actually we talked twice, which is why I didn’t call you until this morning. She told me everything. She says she’s not going back to finish her master’s—at least not right away. I keep hoping she’ll change her mind.”

“Dena’s a smart young woman. She won’t throw away her future.” Jenny thought back to their conversation over New Year’s, the tears that had streaked her niece’s face as she talked about heartbreak and betrayal. “But she’s hurting.”

“I just wanted to let you know—and to thank you, for everything.”

“No need,” Jenny replied, “we’re family. You would have done the same for Paige.”

The silence kept them both on the phone longer.

“Jenny, are you upset, you know, by what Mom decided?”

In a muddle of feelings at the moment, Jenny couldn’t identify just one clearly enough to call it upset. “Just surprised, I think. Plus I’m feeling a little blue over the kids going back to school. Bill tells me I should be used to it by now, but it never gets easier for me.”

“I think if you talked to Mom you could probably convinced her to move closer to you.”

Eileen’s suggestion hit her like a douse of cold water in the face. “Oh, no. I’d never do that. She’s decided to live near you, and it sounds like you like that plan. As you said, she can be here during the summer. The kids will be home from college and I have lots of vacation; she won’t be without company or a driver if she wants to go somewhere.”

When they hung up at last, Jenny told herself she was going to embrace this decision as the best possible solution. Life was full of surprises, but somehow it all worked out.

* * *

Eileen sat at her kitchen table, contemplating her silent phone and thinking about Jenny, their mother, Dena, herself... In the swirl of thoughts, she didn't hear Dena until she appeared at the coffee pot, pouring herself a cup. Her wet hair hung long and straight, but she wore a touch of makeup. "Going somewhere?" she asked.

"Out to breakfast," Dena replied. "With Jay."

"Really?" Eileen wondered when that plan had hatched. She was glad Jay liked her daughter and son, and was pleased to note that the warm feelings were mutual, but it wasn't like him to do something like this.

"Before he left last night we had a talk about my plans. Then he asked me to go out to breakfast with him this morning." Dena took a sip of her coffee, winced, and blew across the top of the cup.

Eileen pushed a million questions out of her mind. "So what time is he picking you up?"

Footsteps sounded up the back steps. "Right about now." Dena went the cup on the counter and went to the coat closet for her jacket.

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Lydia sat in her chair in the kitchen, grateful that the night had finally passed. In the morning everything always did look better. Despite the fatigue she felt, Lydia got herself to her feet and pushed the walker through the dining room and into the living room. What would they do with all this stuff? Maybe Jenny and Eileen would take some

of it, but most would probably have to be donated or given away. People who had no idea what these things meant would pick them over like scavengers. Why had she told Eileen that she was moving! She was just tired and feeling a little lonely after everyone left. She was going to call Eileen and tell her she changed her mind. She had been in this house for over fifty years and wasn't about to uproot herself now.

When she reached the living room, Lydia lowered herself into the brown easy chair with the padded arms, the one Charles always favored. If she had the strength, she would kick back and make the footrest pop up on it, but didn't dare get herself off balance. The chair was not as pretty as the sofa with its floral pattern in gold and red, but it certainly was comfortable. Lydia closed her eyes just for a moment.

The house looked different, bigger than she remembered, with a second staircase that appeared out of nowhere and ran all the way to a third story she hadn't known existed before. Wandering from room to room as spry as a teenager, Lydia could hear voices: Eileen, Jenny, Bill, and her grandchildren. There were other voices, too, as if there was a party going on. She opened doors into rooms and looked inside: an entire bedroom suite furnished in delicate white furniture with lavender curtains at the window. Who had put those up, she wondered. Lydia called out several times, but no one seemed to hear her above their laughter and conversation. There was a party going on somewhere, but she couldn't get to it.

In the next room, was the brown easy chair, all by itself. When she looked again, Charles was sitting in it, the way he looked twenty years ago. "It's about time you got here," he chuckled.

“I tried to find everyone, but I got lost,” Lydia complained.

“I know,” Charles said, getting up from the chair and taking her by the hand. “The house is just too big.”

Lydia eyes snapped open. Confused for a moment, she looked around. Tears dampened her cheeks. She brushed them away with a shaky hand.

Getting up slowly, she made her way to the telephone stand and hunted for the church directory. There was a woman, she recalled, who worked for a real estate company. She only knew that because someone had told her; then she had seen the woman at the parish Christmas sing-along. Her name was forgotten, but she was sure she would remember her face. She had lovely blond hair and a nice smile. Lydia paged through the pictures in the directory until she came to the woman’s photo. Carefully dialing the number, Lydia waited until someone answered.

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It took until spring to get everything organized, but fairly quick for all that was involved. The realtor loved the house, and expected it to sell rather quickly at the right price. Although the buyers would probably redo the kitchen, freshening it up with a coat of paint would help get it ready for showing.

Over spring break, they all came back: to pack and pitch, as Jenny called it. They made piles: what Lydia would take with her to the senior apartment that Eileen and Jay had found for her; what Jenny and Eileen each wanted; and what could be sold in the

yard sale. The rest was put aside to be donated, or pitched into the dumpster that appeared in the driveway one day.

Lydia sat down in the brown easy chair which would be in her new apartment and watched the activity. Zach and Henry carried a dresser out of Eileen's old bedroom and down the stairs. Paige wrapped the good dishes and put them in a box.

Bill came in the door accompanied by a young man whom Lydia didn't recognize. "There are two bedroom sets upstairs. One goes with that dresser you just saw. And there is another just like it." He paused and introduced the man to Lydia. "This is Ted. He and his wife bought a place not far from here. They were wondering if we were selling any of the furniture."

Lydia accepted Bill's help getting up. "Take whatever you like, as long as someone else hasn't claimed it."

"No, ma'am, I would pay you for it." Ted yanked a baseball cap off his head and held it in his hands.

"Nonsense. It would make me happy to know it's being used by someone else." Lydia turned to her son-in-law. "Make sure he gets whatever he wants." Then she wagged a finger at Ted. "And don't be shy about it. You'll be doing us a favor."

Dena walked past carrying a garbage bag that rattled. Lydia wanted to peer inside to make sure nothing worth keeping was being thrown out, but resisted.

"Just some old junk, Grandma," Dena assured her.

Lydia smiled and patted Dena on the arm. There was something going on with her college, Lydia knew, but she wasn't sure. Eileen had mentioned that Dena had spent

some extra time at home, but she was back now at school now. By December she would have her master's degree.

Jay went by, carrying a screwdriver. Lydia wondered what on earth he was using that for.

"Bill wants to replace the bathroom cabinets," he explained.

"That's a good idea," Lydia agreed.

Jay came over to her. "So you'll be moved in just in time for the next big party."

Jay's eyes seemed to twinkle when he smiled, Lydia noticed. Charles used to look like that when he teased her with a secret. "Are you cooking up another feast?" Lydia remembered New Year's, and how much fun they'd had.

"No, this time I think we'll cater."

There went the twinkle again; another riddle from Jay.

"Eileen and I are getting married this fall," Jay told her. "She wanted to make a big announcement about it later, but I figured you'd like to know."

Lydia clapped her hands. "Oh, I'm so glad."

Jenny and Eileen appeared a moment later, carrying curtains and a faded bedspread.

"Eileen! Congratulations." She saw her daughter's look and then Jay's shrug. "You can't hide happy news like that."

Jay slipped his arm around Eileen. "I told Lydia there would be a big party to look forward to after she moved in."

"Small party," Eileen emphasized. "Very, very small. Immediate family only—just the people who can fit in my house."

Jay shook his head. “Big party. Lots of friends to celebrate. More than could ever fit in your house.”

Eileen sighed, and the curtains she carried sagged to the floor. “How can we get married if we can’t even agree on the wedding?”

“There are times, dear sister, when the decisions are made for you and you have to surrender gracefully,” Jenny said with a broad smile.

How wise they are, Lydia thought tenderly. They were good women. “You’re wonderful,” she announced, then realized she’d spoken words aloud that she assumed were only in her head.

Jenny’s eyebrows jumped up her forehead. Eileen’s lips parted as if she was going to say something.

Hiding her embarrassment, Lydia fidgeted with a button on her sweater. “What I want to say is we have a wonderful family.” Lydia spoke slowly, carefully choosing her words. “I love you all, especially my daughters. When you were little I had no idea you’d grow up like this. I’m so proud, so very proud.”

Jenny stepped forward and engulfed her in a hug, with Eileen right behind her. “Thank you, Mom,” one of them whispered in her ear—which one, she couldn’t be sure, but it didn’t matter. When it came to love, they spoke with one voice.