

LH Excerpt

When Julia woke from her nap, she immediately felt disoriented. The sunlight was still pouring into her bedroom, giving her the sense that she may have slept through the entire night. The clock read 6:30. But was that a.m. or p.m.? Feeling the heat of the day, Julia soon realized that she had only been asleep a few hours, except her body suggested a much longer time. Even when Julia washed her face, she could not help but notice how much more rested she appeared. She even had some color on her cheeks, perhaps from yesterday's graveside service.

Most startling, however, was the sudden realization that not only had she slept well but by herself and in the very bed she and Robert had shared years before everything went haywire. Julia moaned softly as she realized that now the bed no longer belonged to her and Robert, but rather was hers alone. Odd to suddenly come to that awareness. Robert had passed away less than a week prior, and already Julia was beginning to feel him gradually disappearing from her life. A part of her knew that Robert would never be totally gone from his place in her heart, but she also knew that it was time for her to release the vice grip he had on her soul.

After a quick shower, Julia set up her computer at the dining room table, hoping to get her mind off of her loneliness for Robert. Due to Robert's illness the winery's finances had over the last year been horrendously neglected. Then just as she was clicking open one of the file folders, her mind unexpectedly drifted to the conversation she had with Diego the night before. No doubt about it, Julia had enjoyed his company. And what that was about she hadn't the foggiest. After all, she wasn't particularly interested in starting a relationship, not this early in her year of mourning. Nor did it have anything to do with the business of the winery. She simply

wanted to see him. Funny, she thought. They hardly knew each other, and yet Julia felt as if she and Diego had been dear friends for years.

She imagined he was more than likely at the compound, or perhaps out in the vineyard. It was probably best she wait to talk to him until tomorrow morning at their meeting. But something compelled her to grab her sweater and walk down the road toward the workers' housing. She thought about what she would say to him once she got there, but nothing came to mind. Several times Julia thought about turning around and returning home, but she wasn't quite able to do that either.

My God, she thought to herself. I feel as if I am in high school again.

The closer she got Mariela and Rafael's apartment, the clearer the voices of the children playing soccer became. She and Robert had once talked about having children, but with her concertizing career and his focus on the winery, nothing ever came of it. And quite honestly, children had never seemed to be her thing. The only thing that had at that time mattered was her piano. And Robert—of course. Yet she had to admit that she had enjoyed playing the piano and sharing her dinner with Felicia and Eduardo yesterday. And they seemed to have had fun with her as well. Who knew?!

“Señora!” piped up Felicia. “Señora, look. I am playing football with the big kids. They let me play with them!” The smile that overtook the child's face was enormous. Even with the few missing front teeth, Felicia's smile was a beautiful thing to behold.

Julia smiled back. “That's wonderful! Good for you!” But her focus was suddenly drawn to Diego who stood on the opposite side of the field coaching the children, giving them tips on how to warm up their muscles and stretch so as not to be injured. Julia waved at him. But he did

not return her greeting. Instead he turned his back, keeping his focus on the children at his feet. Surely he had seen her, she thought. But why did he obviously ignore her? He seemed friendly enough the evening before.

Feeling awkward, Julia did not know whether to once more try and get his attention, or merely turn around and head back up the road toward her house. But she was no dummy. Even though Julia would prefer Diego acknowledge her, she also had her pride. Just as she decided to return home, Mariela emerged from her front door.

“Eduardo. Felicia. Time now to come in for supper. And don’t forget to wash your hands.” Mariela’s voice carried like nobody’s business. When she saw Julia, she smiled at her and walked over to where she was standing.

“Señora.” She nodded toward Julia.

“Mariela.” Julia nodded in return. Now she was on the spot.

“Can I help you with something?” Julia noted a slight terseness in Mariela’s voice.

“I uh ... I just wanted to thank you one more time—before tomorrow—for all you and your people here at the compound have done to make me feel welcome and cared for. We begin a busy week tomorrow morning, and I just wanted to make sure you knew how much you were appreciated.”

Mariela looked at Julia and was silent.

“You already told me that, Señora. Why are you really here?”

Oh, boy, she thought as her face reddened. Julia was totally stumped as to what to say.

“That’s all.” Julia fidgeted. “Well, maybe I am being somewhat repetitive. It’s just that I feel a bit lost without Robert. And you and Diego were so kind to me last night ...”

Mariela took Julia’s soft and elegant hands between her own rough and calloused ones.

“I understand, Señora. But you must also understand about my brother. He has been hurt in the past. Hurt so badly that for the longest time he did not talk to anyone, let alone another woman. Now he speaks with you. And laughs. And smiles. But this cannot continue, for if it does, Diego will find himself destroyed, perhaps even worse than before. And I cannot allow that to happen. You understand?”

Julia felt the heat of shame rising up the front of her chest, flushing her cheeks. She nervously diverted her eyes to the two pairs hands clasped in front of her and nodded. Then taking in a deep breath, she raised her head and in the most business-like voice she could manage she said, “I understand your concerns. Once again, thank you for your help this weekend. I look forward to our meeting in the morning.”

Julia turned around slowly and began to make her way up the hill along the winding road connecting the housing of her workers to her own. Mariela’s eyes aimed at her back. But Julia did not dare turn around and look to see if Diego was aware of her conversation with his sister. It didn’t matter. Julia’s loneliness had allowed her to forget that Diego was merely her employee and probably nothing more. She was on her own for the first time in her life and it was time she realized it. Terrifying though that may be!