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Author's Notes: Because someone asked why Josie hated Max and this is what happened. There might be a third part that focuses just on Jules and Tori; kinda depends on them.

The Storyteller's Cardinal Rule is in effect.

Zoned In

By [D](#)

Prologue

Josie wasn't surprised to find them on her doorstep almost a year to the day since she had first met... well, one of them at any rate. Julianna had been quite dedicated in her attempts to learn sign language, and she and Becca had kept in touch via Skype and email. So Josie wasn't shocked that Julianna wanted to talk to Becca face-to-face now that her skill level was so improved. What did surprise her was the difference in both of them - towards her and towards one another.

When she and Julianna had first met, Josie had been less than thrilled. The young woman billed as 'America's Sweetheart' had been angry, hateful and downright disrespectful. Now Julianna was truly happy - her smile real and her arms welcoming as she wrapped Josie in a hug as soon as she opened the door.

"Josie!!" she squealed, laughing as she wrapped her arms tightly around Josie's neck and squeezed. "Oh my God! It's so good to see you again!" squeezing again for good measure.

"Breathing," Josie croaked even as she returned the embrace as fervently as possible. The other young woman stepped up behind Julianna and loosened her grip slightly.

"Careful, Beautiful!" she whispered, causing a small shiver to shudder up Julianna's spine. "You're stronger than you realize and we don't want to damage our hostess," planting a kiss on the ear beneath her lips before wrapping her arms around Julianna's middle. Brown eyes widened as she pulled back from Josie.

"Oh Josie... I'm so sorry." Josie caught her hands before Julianna could pull completely away.

"Don't be," Josie instructed with a smile. "I wouldn't trade that kind of greeting for anything. Come on in. I think Becca's in the studio."

Julianna nodded and linked her fingers with those wrapped around her waist. "We know the way. Will you be in the kitchen or...?"

"Actually, do you think I could talk to Tori for a few minutes?" watching as green eyes rounded in startlement. "It won't take long and I promise to return her unharmed and in good condition."

Tori swallowed but nodded gamely when Julianna turned and looked at her questioningly. Julianna turned back to Josie and arched her eyebrow. "All right, but don't be too long... either of you. We have a lot of catching up to do and some news to share." She squeezed Tori's hand and Tori lifted their hands to her lips, brushing a kiss across Julianna's knuckles and smiling rakishly at the blush that traveled up tanned skin. Julianna cleared her throat. "Yes, well.... If you'll both excuse me." She slowly walked away from them, only releasing Tori's hand when she had to. With a final glance in their direction, she turned and headed to the studio.

Josie and Tori watched her go, then Josie extended her hand. "Shall we?"

Tori hesitated a long moment before accepting the hand and following Josie into the study.

The Story

Tori released Josie's hand as soon as they entered the room, walking over to the wing chairs ensconced in front of the fireplace. Even though it was unlit, it was still less formal and more comfortable than the massive desk with its straight-backed chairs. She curled into one and waited for Josie to join her.

Josie closed the door firmly but softly, taking a deep breath before following behind Tori. She knelt and flipped the switch for the gas, then lit the flame. She watched it flicker for a moment as it settled into a steady burn, then turned her attention to the young woman seated nearby. Tori seemed perfectly content to watch the fire and wait for Josie to speak, but Josie could see the wariness in her posture.

And here was the biggest difference in their attitude towards her, Josie thought to herself as she continued to observe Tori. Julianna had gone from resentful and distrustful to open and welcoming... loving even. But Tori - Tori had been broken when they'd met and now had issues of misdirected distrust because in her experience everyone had an angle; everyone wanted something from her... even Max. Only Julianna, Liora and Gideon had earned the right to be trusted. Josie was someone she hadn't yet learned to trust because she couldn't figure out her angle. And Josie was determined to put a stop to it today. They may have been a weird, nuclear dysfunctional family, but they were still family... all of them together. And it was time for Tori to realize that.

"How are you doing, Tori?" she asked gently, not at all alarmed to see the disbelief in the expression that immediately turned her way. Josie smiled, not quite able to contain her chuckle. "No, that isn't why I asked to speak to you, but exchanging pleasantries isn't too much to ask, is it?"

Tori bit her lip in contemplation as she considered the question. "I suppose it isn't," she replied finally. "I'm good, Ms... I'm sorry, Josie. And yourself?"

"I'm a little confused to tell the truth," Josie answered with a slight scowl. "Have I done something to cause your distrust of me?" Tori blinked; Josie gave her a sympathetic smile. "Which part surprised you? The fact that I knew or the fact that I said something?"

"Um... yes?" Tori mumbled a little dumbfounded though to her credit she didn't drop her gaze from Josie's despite the color that climbed up her cheeks. Josie chuckled.

"Tori, you're going to find that in this family, honesty and forthrightness are qualities that are appreciated and highly valued."

"Are you *sure* you were married to Max?" Tori blurted before slapping a hand over her mouth. She looked at Josie with wide, apologetic eyes. Josie just howled in laughter. "I'm sor...." Tori began but Josie just waved away her apology.

After another few minutes, her laughter died down and Josie wiped the tears from her face and released a slow breath. "Thank you, Tori. I haven't laughed like that in a while. I needed that."

Tori smirked. "Glad to be of service."

"And yes - I'm sure I was married to Max," Josie growled though there was a distinct twinkle in her eye. "That's why it's *was* instead of *is* and why I regard those attributes so greatly."

Tori nodded. "Fair enough." She cocked an eyebrow. "Would you really kill him?"

Josie smirked. "If I thought I could get away with it? Yes I probably would. But I settle for hating him on a daily basis."

"That doesn't sound too healthy." Tori cocked her head. "Can I ask what he did?"

Josie studied her a long moment, then sighed. "He lied to me. He lied to me about a great many things and I finally got fed up."

"Did he cheat on you?"

Josie shook her head. She'd asked for this when she'd informed Tori about her feelings on honesty and forthrightness. "Not like you're thinking, no. But I couldn't live with him anymore either. I don't care what your job is - you should trust the person you've supposedly committed your life to."

"Trust is hard for some people. Sometimes it's impossible."

"Is trust impossible for you, Tori?"

Tori sighed. "Not impossible, but extremely difficult. Everybody wants something; everybody has an angle. It's hard to trust when you know that to be the truth of your life."

"Would you believe me if I told you I have no angle where you're concerned beyond seeing you happy?"

"No," Tori responded instantly. "Because you have no reason to care about my happiness... or Jules' either if the truth be told."

"You're wrong, you know... about a number of things."

"Oh? Well, it wouldn't be the first time, but please enlighten me."

"Sometimes trust is about what you say. Sometimes it's about what you *don't* say. Sometimes it's about who you do or don't share things with. And I do have a reason to care about you and Julianna. Like it or not, you're part of this oddball family. You became part of the family when Gideon brought Jules into my home and asked for my help. And I like it when everyone in the family is happy. It makes life much more pleasant for everyone. So I guess my angle is a happy family."

Tori shook her head. "No. I'm not buying that. You have to *want something*. That's how life works. I do something for you and you do something for me."

Josie cocked her head and regarded Tori thoughtfully. "When did you become so cynical?"

Tori snorted. "Probably when I signed my first contract. So what... fifteen? Sixteen maybe?"

Josie's eyebrows flew into her hairline. "You started doing endorsements at fifteen? Is that even legal??"

Tori chuckled. "Probably not. But no - I wasn't endorsing anything. I was a model. That was when I learned everyone wants something. So really - you're not going to hurt my feelings or anything. I just want to know what your angle is. I can tell you right up front that I'll never fully trust you until I know what you want from me."

Josie pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed before she rose and moved to the bar. She pulled together what she needed for a vodka cranberry then looked at Tori. "Can I get you something?"

Tori's eyebrow rose in surprise. "Isn't it a little early?" glancing at the clock. Josie smirked.

"Maybe a little. But I have a feeling I need to stop the headache I'm developing before it becomes something serious."

Tori frowned. "I'm not trying to upset you, Josie." She shrugged. "I just know how the world works is all. But I'll have one of those if you have enough," she added with a smile.

Josie smiled back at her. "As it is currently my drink of choice, the bar is always stocked for it." She poured a portion into a tumbler, twisting a slice of orange on the rim before passing it over to Tori. "I was a bartender when I was in college... you know, back in the dark ages. Don't argue with me young lady," she instructed, pointing a finger before Tori could comment. "I know what kids think about anyone over the age of thirty and I'm old enough to be your mother."

Tori snorted. "My mother would probably like you, Josie." Josie blinked, a little taken aback by the non sequitur but willing to use whatever opening was offered.

"Would she trust me?" Tori stared at her for a moment, then took a long sip of her drink. Her eyes widened as she felt the alcohol hit her system almost immediately. Josie snickered. "Sorry - I should have warned you. I don't skimp on the alcohol content at home."

Tori coughed gently. "No, you sure don't," clearing her throat. "As for my mom - I don't know... probably? She considers herself a pretty good judge of character, but then she hasn't lived in my world for a long time. She doesn't see the truth the way I do."

"Does she know the truth of why you walked away from Julianna? Does Jules?"

Tori's eyes widened before she frowned. "Do you???" she growled.

"I do. Would you like me to share what I know?"

"Please. Because I don't think you really know."

Josie stepped back around the bar, filling Tori's glass and placing the empty shaker on the table between them as she resumed her seat in front of the blazing fire. "Why would I make it up, Tori? How would that possibly help... anything? Especially when I want you to trust me?"

"Why is that so important to you, Josie? The only reason I'm even here...." stopping when Josie held up her hand.

"Family is important to me, Tori. And you're never going to relax and let yourself be part of the family until you can trust me."

"How do you trust anyone after what Max did? After he lied to you."

"I can't let what he did make me mistrust everyone. That's not fair to me or Becca or anyone else. I have to trust and hope that trust is returned. I find that it usually is... to my great delight." She sighed. "Max was the exception... not the rule. He's a government agent and he's spent years lying about everything to everyone... including me."

"And you couldn't forgive him for that?"

"Could you?" Josie snapped, then blew out a frustrated breath. "I could have actually, had he deigned to admit to the truth when I first confronted him. But he continued to lie to me and his lies killed my son," hearing Tori's indrawn breath. "That I couldn't forgive him for. And I have hated him every single day of my life since."

"Then why do you continue to help him? He's the one who sent us to you."

"Because I'm not helping him - I'm helping you and Jules and Gideon. I'm helping the kids he sends to me; because I know the kids he sends me need my help and because I promised my son that I would never turn anyone away just because his father sent them to me. Max has his own reasons for those he chooses to help. The cases he sends me are the only things aside from Becca that we can agree on, and that mostly because he sends them to me and then leaves me alone to work my magic. Even if all that magic just translates to providing a place to hide or heal or be."

Tori held Josie's gaze for a long moment before breaking the tableau and looking down at the drink in her hands. She lifted it to her lips and took a significant draught, then she turned back to Josie patiently waiting. "I think Max is lucky he married you instead of me."

Josie smiled. "Why's that?"

"Because you're much more forgiving than I ever could be. I'd have already killed him."

Josie laughed aloud. "I think about it. I give myself ten minutes every day to feel the rage and anger and hatred and then I move on with my day. Just as you pointed out the shrink told me it was unhealthy - that I just needed to let it go. I explained to the quack that nothing would ever make it

go away and as long as Max is still breathing, I should probably just do things my way so I didn't end up in jail for murder."

"You do that for Becca," Tori stated flatly." Josie nodded.

"I do. For her and for all the other kids we've rescued in one way or another. You'll have to come to a gathering some time and meet some of the others. It's very private; only the kids we've helped are invited to that family reunion."

"Hmm," Tori acknowledged noncommittally. "So are you going to share with me why you think I walked away from Jules?"

Josie smiled. "I am. But I want your word that you're going to give me a real shot at being trusted when I tell you what I know to be true; what I haven't shared with anyone because you don't want it bandied about as public knowledge."

Tori studied Josie for several minutes and Josie simply kept her dark eyes locked on green as they searched for something Tori needed to see. Finally the blonde head nodded and Tori closed her eyes and licked her lips before releasing a slow, deep breath. "All right, Josie. You have my word. I know the truth hasn't gotten out and if you truly know why I walked out of Jules' life, I promise to try and trust you. Because I'll know you can keep a secret at least."

"Thank you, Tori. Would you like something else to drink before we get started?" Tori shook her head and Josie nodded. "Very well. Let me tell you a little story."

"Usually when Max sends someone to me, he sends me a little background information so I know the basics of whom and what I'm dealing with. The theory is that the individual in question will share their story and fill in the blanks for me."

"That's not what happened with Jules, is it?"

Josie smiled. "Not even close. Gideon is Max's nephew. Because he stayed with us during his summer breaks, he's known about Max's extracurricular activities in regards to his more philanthropic efforts for years." Tori's eyes widened in surprise and Josie chuckled. "Yeah - he's really good at keeping a secret too. You wouldn't believe the people he's met here, and he's never said a word. But all he really knew is that Max occasionally sent people to me who needed help. So he and Jules just showed up one day in Max's office."

"Max didn't choose Jules?"

Josie shook her head. "No. Gideon did. And I didn't know any of this until well after all of you were gone from here. Gideon told Max he and Julianna needed a place to decompress away from the public eye. Of course Max knew at least part of story - Julianna was making the news a lot in those days."

Tori covered her eyes. "Oh yes. I was getting a number of phone calls from her agent and manager around that time. It's one reason I was so glad to hear from Max offering me a peaceful place to hide out for a little while. You have no idea...."

"How wearing it was?" Josie interposed. "I do actually. Wait...." she continued when Tori's lips opened to speak. "Let me finish." Tori studied her a long moment then nodded. "I can't say I know what it is to be constantly called by agents or managers about someone I wasn't supposed to have any contact with by their own directive but I do know what it's like to be harassed endlessly for any number of things by people that I don't know or give two shits about." Josie cut her eyes at Tori. "Another reason I hate Max, but that's a story for another day... or maybe never."

"That bad?"

Josie shrugged. "There's a reason I can empathize with many of the people Max sends here." She waved a hand. "We've gotten completely off-track. I suspected Julianna was in some sort of trouble just from what the news agencies were reporting about her tarnished image, but it wasn't until Gideon showed up here with her that I understood how serious it was."

"How long did it take... before she shared with you?"

Josie chuckled. "She didn't; Gideon did. It was the only way he could ensure that I didn't throw Jules out on her ass when she lifted a hand to Becca."

"She felt *really* bad about that," Tori interjected. "I heard about it when we left here. It's one reason she's been so determined to learn to sign. She wanted Becca to know...."

"I know. But at the time I was furious and Gideon knew that. He knew that once I had the whole story - or what he knew of the story - I'd be more inclined to forgive Julianna and help find a solution that worked for everyone. That's where you came in."

Tori's brows shot into her hairline. "You had Max send me and Liora here?"

Josie snorted. "Um... NO. I got about twelve hours' notice from Max before that particular circumstance occurred. No. That's when I started doing my own research because I only had one side of a story that had at least four active participants and who knew how many more behind the scenes. I needed the whole story if I was going to be able to help anyone."

"Four?"

"You, Jules, Gideon and Liora. I knew what Gideon knew and Jules confirmed the story he told me though she didn't add much to it. So I started digging. Imagine my surprise when I discovered the truth that even Julianna wasn't privy to."

"What did you find?" Tori demanded wearily.

"I found that Alice and Bishop Larkin visited you first - demanding that you leave Julianna or they would destroy your career. You refused. It wasn't until they threatened her that you walked away from her without a fight."

"How can you possibly know that?" Tori challenged in a sibilant whisper, standing over Josie with her arms akimbo and her eyes flaring in fury. "We were the only people in that room when they tried to force that agreement on me."

"You were," Josie agreed with a nod. "But you weren't the only people who knew why they were there. A person can discover anything if they ask the right questions of the right people. I don't understand why Jules doesn't know...."

Tori crossed her arms over her chest and looked up at the ceiling to keep her tears from spilling over. "Because I wanted Jules to choose me for no other reason other than I was her first choice; I wanted to be the one she wanted to be with! And I didn't think..." Josie remained silent, knowing there was more because Julianna *had* chosen Tori when she'd been given the opportunity to choose. Tori pressed her lips together firmly and breathed slowly through her nose, closing her eyes for a long moment. When she opened them again, Josie bit her tongue to keep a gasp from escaping at the pain she saw reflected back at her. Tori shook her head. "I love Jules. I have since the very first moment she introduced herself and gave me that big, beautiful smile. Of course I didn't realize it at the time. I was a kid and so was she. I just knew she was my best friend. Even when we lost one another...."

"When did you know?"

Tori blinked and turned her attention to Josie. "Excuse me?"

"When did you understand that it wasn't just friendship, but real love that you felt for her? When did you know she was your soulmate?"

Tori shook her head and chuckled sadly. "I don't... I can't really pin it down. But I knew for certain when we met up again at the Games that first time. When she jumped into my arms I felt complete... like I was finally coming home at last."

"So what caused you to doubt her?"

Tori snorted. "Honestly? She did." She walked to the bar and pulled two bottles of water from the small fridge, offering one to Josie before dropping into her chair and taking a long draught herself. "Jules is a beautiful person inside and out, but she is also inherently selfish and somewhat single-minded in her focus. She sets goals and meets them before moving onto the next item on her list. I've seen the list. I was never on it."

"So you walked away?"

"I couldn't be certain she would choose me if it came down to it, and I wasn't going to be the reason she didn't get everything she wanted out of life."

"So why not tell her now? Why continue to take sole responsibility for walking away?"

"Because I did walk away because of my lack of faith in her and in us; nothing is going to change that. The reason for my leaving is simply semantics. The fact that I did is my responsibility."

"So you don't trust her?"

Tori shook her head and let her eyes drop to the loosely clasped hands in her lap. "I do. I'm ashamed that I let myself doubt... even for a moment."

"Even though I'm to blame for your doubts?" Julianna's soft voice coming from the doorway caused both Josie and Tori to jump in surprise and they jerked their heads in her direction. She pushed off the doorjamb and walked around the wingback chairs until she was in front of them. She offered

Josie a cursory nod before kneeling at Tori's feet and covering her clenched hands. Their eyes were focused on their joined hands and neither woman noticed Josie slip from her chair and exit the room. "Liora and I had quite the conversation the last time we were all here together." Julianna chuckled sadly and shook her head. "She took me to task over a number of things concerning you and at first...? At first I was so *angry* at her - for butting in; for accusing me of committing grievous sins against you; but mostly for presuming to think she knew you better than I did. Until I realized she *did* know you better than I did. And then I was angry at myself for not understanding... so much."

"You couldn't have known...." Soft fingers covered Tori's lips.

"I could have and I should have. I'm finally learning. And I want you to know you're at the top of my list - you always were... even when I didn't know it." Julianna took a deep breath and shifted her gaze from their hands to the ceiling in an effort to still her tears. "Do you remember the day that we met? In gymnastics class?"

Tori laughed softly and sniffed as a tear dropped from her chin onto their hands. Julianna lifted a hand and cupped her cheek, gently wiping the wetness from her face and urging green eyes to meet hers. Tori leaned into the touch and let her eyes close briefly at the swirl of emotions reflected back at her, then blinked her eyes opened and smiled. "Of course I do," she whispered. "You were all big brown eyes and wide smiles and you took my hand and proclaimed us friends."

"Did you ever wonder *why* I did that? Tori, gymnastics is a cutthroat business. It's all about the individual. The only time there is 'team spirit'," said with more than a hint of mockery, "is when the team is competing as a whole because everyone wants that gold. But the minute that's over...." Julianna shook her head.

"We didn't know that when we were four and five years old."

"No, but our parents did. And mine had been drilling it into me for months by the time we met - that none of you were my *friends*... you were the *competition*. And that made you *bad* in my book because you were a threat. Wait," she commanded when Tori would have interrupted. "The thing was I never saw you as bad or a threat or as competition. When I saw you, we just clicked. In you I saw someone to be trusted and treasured; I saw you as my *friend*. And Tori... that never changed. Not even when we lost contact with one another after you moved away. And I knew... I *knew*... when we found one another again that what we had been as children was only the beginning for us."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Julianna offered her a wry smile. "You know why. You said it yourself. I tend to be very self-centered and selfish and I get so focused on whatever small goal is in front of me to achieve in the moment that I often miss the big picture right in front of me. I thought you knew what you were to me. I thought you knew you were at the top of my list... especially when I didn't agree to any of the terms and conditions Alice and the Bishop demanded of me. It wasn't until my talk with Liora that I realized you *didn't* know because I had never given you a reason to understand otherwise. Why didn't you tell me about their threat to you?"

Tori shrugged. "It wasn't important, Jules. What could they do to me really? Liora and I have a lot of fun together and we've made some good money from the endorsement deals we've done, but it's never been the be-all and end-all for either of us. We've both got opportunities in career fields outside the volleyball court - things we enjoy just as much as the sport. But you.... your athletic

career has always been so much of your life, and I couldn't let them destroy that or your prospects for some sort of television or movie deal."

"So what about after?" Julianna smiled at Tori's confused expression. "Sorry. Why didn't you tell me the truth when we got back together?"

Tori shrugged. "I didn't think it mattered. I still left."

Julianna frowned and glared. "Of course it matters, Sweetheart. It changes the perspective on everything that happened. You were protecting me and that's just...." She grinned and shivered. "However," she continued as her countenance sobered. "We need to come to an understanding about things between us." She shifted her hand to stroke Tori's bottom lip from between her teeth. "I'm going to need that later," she whispered. "So try not to bruise it too much before it's my turn."

Tori blushed, but wiggled her eyebrows rakishly. "Promises, promises."

"A sure bet, Lover... later. First we need to settle this."

Tori huffed. "Fine. If we must."

Julianna rolled her eyes. "We must, you goof, because this is important to both of us. I need you to know you can talk to me about anything... even things that are going to make me angry or upset. And you need to know you can share those things with me without judgment or recrimination. Tori, if we're going to make our life together work, we're going to have to be open and honest about everything so that nothing can come back and bite us in the ass later. You know what it is to live a public life like a celebrity."

Tori snorted. "I don't think I have ever reached the kind of celebrity status you're talking about, but I get what you're saying. I just.... A part of me just wanted to know you'd choose me anyway."

"Now you know I will... every single time." Julianna rose from her knees and immediately found herself comfortably ensconced in Tori's lap. "Well, hello there."

"Hi. Fancy meeting you here."

"It's amazing how that happened," Julianna commented with a smirk before bringing their lips together for a long moment.

"You do seem to bring out the hedonist in me," Tori remarked when they separated while she continued to trace random patterns up and down Julianna's back.

"Which would explain how your hands wound up underneath my shirt."

"Well whaddya know? Imagine that. I wonder how... Jesus CHRIST!!" Tori jumped and tightened her hold on Julianna's waist. She blew out a breath and looked up into twinkling brown eyes. She glared but couldn't stop the smile that crooked her lips. "Hi Becca."

Becca grinned and waved then turned to Julianna and began signing. *Mama says come to the kitchen now. Lunch is ready and you can make out with your fiancée later. But not in her study!*

Julianna slapped a hand over her eyes, unable to stop the blush or curtail the laughter that rippled through her. She stood and offered her hand to Tori who rose beside her but didn't release her hand until Julianna pulled away to sign. *All right, Becca. Lead the way.*

Becca nodded and headed out the door. Tori caught Julianna's hand in hers again and leaned in to whisper in her ear. "How did she know we're engaged? We haven't told anyone, and no one has discovered it in *months*."

"Please remember what my ex does for a living. He has resources and contacts *everywhere*," Josie stated as they entered the kitchen. Becca giggled and Josie smirked. Julianna put her hands on her hips while keeping her fingers linked with Tori's. Josie smiled at the picture they made.

"How long have you known?"

"Officially? About a minute and a half," Josie replied with a laugh. "But I've known about the rings since you purchased them," letting her eyes meet Tori's before focusing on Julianna again. "So I've suspected for a while because God knows I didn't think either of you would wait *too* long without doing something." She motioned to the table. "Now can we sit down and eat?"

"That sounds lovely," Tori responded before Julianna could get reply. Tori tugged on their joined hands. "C'mon, Baby. It's still our secret to share." She glanced at Josie. "Isn't it?"

"Not even Gideon knows to my knowledge. Max and I certainly haven't told anyone; it's not our place to tell. And Becca likes knowing secrets that no one else does... especially Gideon even though he can obviously keep a secret."

"Obviously," Julianna repeated drolly but with a wide smile. "So do you know why we're here?" signing as she spoke but keeping her eyes away from Becca who she had already spoken to.

Josie kept her eyes on the two young women in front of her though she could feel Becca's excitement. "Why don't you tell me?"

Julianna narrowed her eyes and pinched her lips together, but Tori simply smiled and covered her hand. "Thank you, Josie. We'd like to invite you to our wedding... our official wedding anyway," she added with a blush.

"We'd be delighted to come," Josie stated graciously. "Just let us know the time and place and we'll be there."

"You know it's likely to become a circus if the press gets wind. It's one reason we haven't...."

"I know. That's another reason we haven't said anything. You deserve to decide *who* celebrates with you and *when* you celebrate."

"Thank you, Jo," Julianna acknowledged. "You don't know how much...."

"You two are family now... oddball as we are. And we look out for family."

"Fabulous! Does that mean we can get the recipe for this?" motioning to her half-empty plate. "Because it is wonderful."

"Pretty sure we can work something out."

Maybe they can do the dishes, Becca signed with a giggle.

Oh yeah... I see how this works Julianna replied. *Don't think I won't find a way to get you for that, Becca-girl. You know how I feel about dishes.*

Tori and Josie exchanged smirks while Becca and Julianna maintained their bantering. And they began the integration of their new family members as lunch continued. It was a good start to what would be a lifelong relationship.

Epilogue

"You think she knows?" Julianna asked Tori when they were comfortably tucked into bed many hours later. They had cleaned up after lunch, then Josie had chased them outside to play. After hours of sledding and boarding and snowball fighting, they had all come in cherry-cheeked and laughing. They had all collapsed in front of the fireplace in the study drinking hot toddies and cocoa while making s'mores and telling embarrassing stories on one another. Only once the yawning had commenced did they decide to break up the party and settle in for the night. Josie had shown Tori and Julianna to their room, then whispered goodnight before disappearing down the hall. They had watched her leave before changing into some warm, dry flannel pajamas and crawling into bed. Now they were curled around one another in the dark and Tori had shared with Julianna her conversation with Josie.

"If she doesn't, she strongly suspects. But now we know... I know without a doubt the woman can keep a secret."

"Did you think she couldn't?"

Tori shrugged. "I figured there had to be an angle. There always is," feeling Julianna nod her head in agreement. "But if she's got one beyond the whole happy family thing, I can't even begin to guess what it is. No one else knows about what Alice and Bishop Larkin said to me in that room; no one knows about the rings; and no one knows we're already married."

"Well, what no one knows won't hurt them and I don't think Josie will be telling anyone. But I don't want to think about that anymore tonight," she added as she started unbuttoning Tori's pajama top. "Tonight I want to concentrate my attention on my beautiful wife."

Tori blushed even as she returned Julianna's rakish grin. "I do like the sound of that... all of it. But we have to be quiet. We already know our hostess has mad skillz." Their laughter was muted as the blankets covered them completely and then it was cut off completely when their lips met in passion.

Josie just shook her head in amusement and smiled as she turned off the bedside lamp. "I really do hate you, Max. But we sure do good work." Then she closed her eyes and the house settled into silence... well, mostly anyway.

THE END

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