

Jesse, Natalie and the Secret Avenger

By Kate Simon

Natalie Bryant set coffee down in front of her friend Carolyn Sampson as she demolished a croissant with her over whitened teeth. “It such a shame about Marion,” said Carolyn.

“She was eighty nine but she never seemed like it.” Natalie was going to miss her. She was the neighborhood’s grandmother. Natalie got together with Marion for tea at least once a week. She would miss her sense of humor and bawdy stories. She was an amazing woman.

“They couldn’t have had much of a service. No one from the neighborhood was invited.”

“She didn’t want one. She told me she hated those ‘big do’s’. It was just her family. That’s why she asked for donations to the SPCA instead of flowers. You know how she loved animals.”

“Especially that little yapper she has.”

“Annabel is a perfectly nice dog.”

“She always barked like mad when I walked by.”

“She knows you don’t like her. You give off a bad energy.”

“I don’t know how she could have lived with that thing. It’s all twisted and the one eye. Ugh.”

“Carolyn, she was born that way. She’s perfectly fine.”

“Did they put her down now that Marion’s gone.”

“No! What is wrong with you? She said one of her boys and promised to take her.”

“Do you think they’ll sell the house?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one of the sons will move in.”

“Oh God, I hope it’s not the biker. That’s all we need.”

“Seriously, what is wrong with you?”

Carolyn shrugged and reached for another croissant. Natalie took a sip of her coffee and wondered why she’d been friends with Carolyn since grade school. Then she realized what a hypocrite she was. Natalie had been thinking the exact same thing.

Jesse Colburn pulled up to his mother's house. It wouldn't matter how long he lived there it would always be his mother's house. He pulled his bike into the garage and unlocked the kitchen door. It smelled like Mom. He took a breath and walked around trying to think of what changes he would make. Probably not that many. He might change the sewing room into an office. Mom had an old tube television that she wouldn't let him replace because it still worked so why replace it? That would definitely would go and he'd hang his big screen. He'd also move in his recliner.

He looked at the pictures on the mantel and couldn't help but smile. There were pictures of him and his brother as children and their teenage years. Jesse cringed at a picture of him from high school that he always begged Mom to take down. The seventies hair and clothes were an embarrassment. There was nothing stopping him now from taking it down, but he didn't. All the pictures of her grandchildren were proudly displayed on the wall. He sent his brother a box of expensive cigars every time they had a child. Every niece or nephew meant one less speech he had to listen to from Mom about never marrying and having children.

He'd promised Mom he'd move in and take care of the place. It only made sense. He paid for it. His apartment served his needs but this would give him a bit more space and he could work on his bike whenever he wanted. It was doing what Mom really wanted that would be tough.

He heard the truck horn and saw the movers pulling into his driveway. He was surprised at how much stuff he'd accumulated over the years. He directed the movers to the right rooms and had them set his big screen down in the living room.

"Hey, any of you guys want a television."

"Really? Does it work?" asked one guy.

"Yeah it works."

"Sure, I'll take it. Thanks. It's twice the size we have now. My wife is gonna be real happy with me. "

He signed the paperwork for the team leader. He smiled as Mom's old TV went off with one of the movers. She'd be okay with her TV going to someone who needed it. As he watched the truck pull away he caught the next door neighbor looking out the window. He was used to being stared at when he was wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Between his

Harley and his tattoos, people always made assumptions about him. He'd seen her once or twice when he was visiting his mother but this was the first time he'd taken a long look. Her long red hair was pulled into a ponytail. She was wearing a plain t-shirt and jeans. He smiled when she realized he was watching her and slipped back behind her drapes.

“Kyle get down here,” called Natalie from the foot of the stairs. Her twelve year old was becoming a hermit in his room. She didn’t think it was the divorce. All Todd and she did was fight for the last year of their marriage. With Todd out of the house it was blissfully peaceful. She did fine in the settlement so she could stay home to take care of her son. “Kyle!”

He came to the top of the stair. His reddish blonde hair and green eyes made him look more like Natalie than her ex, Thank God. “Mom,” he whined. “I’m busy.”

“You should be busy weeding the garden if you expect to see your allowance this week.”

“Fine.” He moped downstairs and she brushed the top of his head as he walked by. “Mom! I’m not a baby.”

“Hey, buddy I made that hair along with everything it’s attached to. If I want to love, ruffle, cuddle, kiss or hug any of you I will.” He pushed his way past her and let the back door slam. He’d recently developed a distaste for any kind of hugging from her. She knew that the hormones would hit and that would happen but she was disappointed that it would happen so soon.

She walked outside and picked up the hedge trimmers and resumed clipping the rose of sharon trees. She didn’t know why she didn’t rip these things out. They had a corner lot and Todd planted them next to the sidewalk on the far side of the house. The flowers were pretty, until it rained and they stuck to the sidewalk like glue. They also grew like weeds so she was constantly trimming them back from the sidewalk. She looked over at Kyle who was pulling weeds with a particular vengeance. “Hey, Hulk. Be care you don’t pull the flowers out too.” Kyle looked at her and smiled. He was indulgent when she tried to reference his love of comics. She worried about his obsession with comics. He read them obsessively, what friends he had were the same way. His room was covered with his own sketches. She thought he was pretty good, but she was his mother.

She glanced to the next lot and saw Marion’s son in his backyard. He was smoking a cigar and watching the small creek that ran through the back of all their yards. She couldn’t help but watch him. He looked good in his jeans and the white t-shirt. She could see several of his tattoos. She’d been afraid that he’d be a noisy neighbor with that bike and loud music. It had only been twenty four hours but so far so good.

Natalie walked over to Kyle and saw that he'd made short work of his weeding duties. "Good job, buddy."

"Can I go to Charlie's?" Charlie was Kyle's best friend up the street and one was always at the other's house. His mother, Dolores had five kids and her philosophy was there was always room for one more.

"As soon as you wash up and do not leave the house before your bed is made. And don't forget your phone."

"Thanks, Mom," he said as he ran in the back door.

She looked back at Marion's son. He was just standing there in his own back yard but he looked lost. This was not a neighborhood of fences, so walked over to Marion's yard. "Hello." She was startled when he turned toward her. Even under his blue shaded sun glasses she could tell he'd be crying. She extended her hand. "We've never been formally introduced by Marion but she talked about you, Jesse. I'm Natalie."

He extended his hand. "Mom mentioned you too. It's nice to meet you."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He held up his cigar. "Mom didn't like me smoking in the house."

"Isn't it your house now? I would think you could smoke where you wanted."

Jesse chuckled. "You'd think so wouldn't you?"

Natalie smiled and touched his shoulder. "I miss her too. She was a..."

"She was a what?"

"I was going to say she was a feisty broad, but I didn't want to be disrespectful."

Jesse laughed. "She would have loved that." He turned away to wipe his eyes.

She touched his arm. "It's okay, Jesse. She was a great lady. She had a great long life but I know that doesn't make it any easier. I know she loved you and your brother a lot. We weren't sure if you were going to sell or if one of you would move in."

"Mom didn't want it sold and my brother has all those kids. Three bedrooms and five kids is a non-starter."

"So it was up to you."

"It's a lot bigger than my apartment."

"Are you all moved in?"

"I still have a lot to unpack but I'm getting there. I took a week off so I could get everything done. My brother was supposed to help but he bailed at the last minute."

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Ah, I hate to ask but there is. He was supposed to give me a ride to my old apartment so I can pick up my car."

"You have a car?"

Jesse grinned. "It's a little awkward to ride my bike in the rain and snow."

Natalie could feel her blush. "Of course it is."

"That really would be a big help."

"My son is at his friend's house so I'm free now."

"That'd be great, Natalie. I'll go get my keys."

"I'll meet you out front." Natalie went into the house and grabbed her purse and her phone. She hit the contact number for Dolores.

"Hey girl, what's up?"

"I'm going to help Marion's son with an errand so can you make sure Kyle stays put until I get back."

"No problem. They're in Charlie's room talking comics."

"I appreciate it."

"Is it the biker or the baby daddy?"

"Biker."

"Nice. I want details."

"Dolores! I'm just helping a neighbor."

"Yeah, right. Kyle can stay for dinner. He's going to want to anyway. So you will owe me details, girlfriend."

"There are no details."

"Natalie I have five kids and another on the way. My life is laundry and packing lunches. You know I live through my single friends."

"You are relentless."

Dolores laughed. "No that would be Jim."

Natalie couldn't help but laugh. Dolores often said all Jim had to do was wink at her and she was pregnant. "Fine. I will fill you in."

Natalie was surprised at the apartment complex where he'd lived. It was definitely not the type of place she'd have expected Jesse to live. But then, neither was their suburban neighborhood. It was a tall, well manicured building with a doorman. Jesse got out of her car and approached the doorman. He shook his hand and gave him a tip large enough to make the man smile from ear to ear. The man left and came back and drove up with a very nice sedan. Not over the top nice. Not a BMW or a Mercedes but no older than a year and well maintained. Jesse walked toward her car.

"I have to stop and pick up Annabel at the vet. Thanks for the ride, Natalie. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Let me know if you need anything else. You know where you can find me."

"Yeah I do," he said with a lopsided smile. Natalie returned the smile as heart raced. She drove behind Jesse until he turned off toward the vet. There was something about Jesse that was off and she didn't know what. He looked like a badass biker but he was soft spoken, gentle. Maybe that's just how he was with women. She imagined Jesse Colburn did just fine with women. He didn't mention a girlfriend. She shook her head. That was none of her business. Jesse was a neighbor, that's all.

Natalie was enjoying the quiet of Kyle staying overnight with Charlie when there was a knock at the door. She looked through the peephole and saw Jesse standing there looking frantic.

"Jesse, what's wrong."

"It's Annabel. I don't know what to do. She won't stop crying and she's going from room to room looking for my mother."

Natalie's heart broke when she saw tears in his eyes. He shared his dog's pain. "I may have an idea."

"Please, anything."

She grabbed her keys and locked her door, then followed Jesse to his house. She could hear Annabel from the other room. "Annabel, come here girl." The dog darted toward her. She was a purebred long hair Chihuahua but she'd been born with only one eye and several deformities. Annabel scratched at her feet and cried, begging to be

picked up. She picked her up and gave her a kiss. Her cries lessened but didn't stop. "Did you pack away your mother's clothes?"

"No, why?"

"Why don't you get me that blue sweater. She wore that a lot." Jesse went upstairs and came back down with the sweater. She took it and wrapped it around the dog. Her cries lessened to whimpers.

"What did you do?"

"This still smells like your Mom. It's a comfort to her. It may take her some time to get used to the idea that she's gone." She sat down on the couch. "Sit down next to me." She kissed the dog on the head and handed her to Jesse. Annabel whimpered but didn't cry. "You may have to pay a lot of extra attention to her for a while."

He looked the dog in her eye. "It's just you and me, short stuff." The dog leaned forward and licked his nose.

Natalie laughed. "That's a good sign. She's not usually friendly with too many people."

"Oh, we've always gotten on. I was with Mom when she got her as a puppy."

She touched his leg. "You're a good man, Jesse."

He smiled. "Why, because I like the ankle biter."

"Your mom told me. She said you were always there for her. She could count on you. She said your brother was a good man too but he had so many family responsibilities that she depended on you. Too heavily, she said."

"She said that? I never minded. I loved her but I liked her too. She was a pistol, fun to be with."

"Yes she was. She was proud of her family but she didn't brag on them like some women. She talked politics and books and movies. She was a very interesting woman."

"Yeah," he said, choking back tears.

Natalie tried to divert his attention. "Annabel is going to need some close contact for a while but you know she can't jump up in bed."

"The one eye means no depth perception, I know. I'll rig something up."

"I'm a stay at home mom so if you want to leave her with me while you work or check in on her I will."

“I’d really appreciate that.”

“I doubt a bike shop is the best place for such a tiny dog.”

“Bike shop?”

“Isn’t that what you do? Marion never said and I figured with the big bike and the tattoos...”

Jesse smiled. “You aren’t the first person to think that.”

“So no bike shop.”

“No bike shop.”

“So what do you do?”

He smiled that lopsided grin. “I’m a lawyer.”

Jesse always loved the look on people’s when they found out he’s a lawyer. Natalie was trying to hide her shock. She was failing.

“Ah, your Mom never mentioned that.”

“She wouldn’t.”

“What kind of law do you practice?”

“Defense attorney, private practice.”

“Well, that’s...” she lost it and started laughing. “I’m sorry. I just imagined you so differently.”

He cuddled Annabel close who seemed to have fallen asleep. “What did you imagine about me?”

She stopped laughing. “You know. Badass biker. Maybe a bit of trouble.”

Jesse gave her a heart skipping smile. “Just because I’m a lawyer doesn’t mean you’re not right.”

Natalie blushed an adorable shade of red, then covered her embarrassment with a laugh. “Have you had a decent meal since you’ve moved in?”

“Does pizza count?”

“No. Bring Annabel with you and I’ll make some dinner. Give me an hour.”

“You don’t have to do that, Natalie.”

“It’s either that or I’m eating alone. My son is sleeping over at a friend’s house.”

“Fine. Thank you.” He held up the dog. “We’ll see you in an hour.” He set Annabel on the couch and saw Natalie to the door. Just as the door closed behind her he got a call. He picked his phone off the coffee table. “Goose, what have you got?”

“Hello to you too.” Edward “Goose” Davis was a private investigator who worked on his team. Jesse wasn’t quite sure how he got the nickname and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. “I’m still in the preliminary stages. Background checks, work history, juvenile records.”

“Do I want to know how you’re getting sealed juvenile records?”

“God, no. You said this was totally off the books. You wouldn’t have to go to court with it. You just need the info.”

“Keep working on it.”

“Will do.”

Jesse hung up and went upstairs to shower and change.

Natalie tried not to be too nervous. She made a quick oven fried chicken dish and some french fries. She steamed some vegetables in deference to being an adult. If Jesse or Kyle weren't at the table, she wouldn't have bothered.

She tied her hair on top of her head and jumped in the shower. In and out in five minutes, changed her shirt and jeans and pulled out her ponytail. She was about to put it back in when she decided to leave it down. She stared at herself in the mirror. "What are you doing? He's a neighbor, not a date." She should know she hadn't had one of those in fifteen years. She'd been divorced from Todd for about a year but she had no desire to jump back into that fire. She looked at the mirror one more time and tossed down the clip. "Oh, what the hell."

She turned off the oven just as there was a knock at the door. She opened the door and had to take a breath. It was the first time she'd seen Jesse without his blue shades. She thought the color of his eyes were a trick of the shades. It wasn't. They were the most amazing shade of blue. He was wearing some fresh jeans and a white button down that was opened two buttons, giving her a glimpse of a tattoo on his chest. He was also carrying a wiggly Annabel.

"Ah, I need to put her down before she jumps down."

"Of course, I'm sorry. Come in. I have a bed for her. I used to watch her occasionally for your mom." Jesse set Annabel down and she ran to a big beige dog bed. "She's used to being here."

"I would say so."

"Oh, that reminds me." She went into the kitchen and came back with a key. "Your mom gave me a key to your house. I'm sure you'll want it back."

Jesse smiled. "You have a key to my house?"

Natalie was suddenly nervous, thinking this was a bad idea. "When your mom was out or away visiting, I would look in on Annabel."

"Actually if you wouldn't mind, I'd rather you keep it. It would be a big help to me if I get hung up in court. Of course that means you'll have to give me your phone number."

"Of course. I'd be happy too." She mentally chastised herself. She was as nervous as a school girl on her first date. "Let's sit down. Dinner is ready." She'd set up on the

dining room table, instead of the kitchen table like she would have been if she was alone.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Natalie handed him the bottle. “Would you mind opening while I get the dinner.”

“Of course.” Jesse opened the wine and poured while Natalie served the dinner.

When she sat he picked up his glass. “I feel like we should have a toast.”

Natalie smiled. “To Marion.” Jesse’s smile made her heart race.

“I like that. “To Mom and to new friends.”

“To new friends.”

They had a lovely dinner with an informative chat about who’s who in the neighborhood. “Five kids and another on the way?” Sounds like my brother Richie and his wife.

“You’ll like the Haney’s. They’re good people. They love kids and they feel like the more the merrier.”

“Yup, just like Richie and Robin.”

“Marion never told me what he did either.”

“He’s a pediatrician.”

Natalie looked at Jesse and set down her glass. She tried to hold it in, but she couldn’t. She started laughing and couldn’t stop. “Oh my God. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh,” she said as wiped the tears from her eyes.

“No need to apologize. I think it’s funny too.”

“Maybe when you have a gathering you could invite the Haney’s. It would give your brother’s kids someone to play with.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

“I have to admit there was a lot of speculation on what you and your brother would do with Marion’s house. Does your brother mind you moved in?”

“What do you mean?”

“That you didn’t sell and split it. I know how much Marion loved you both. I would have imagined she would have left it to both of you.”

Jesse smiled. “No, it’s my house.”

“Yours?”

“I bought it for her.”

Natalie gasped. “I had no idea.”

“Saves all those pesky estate filings.”

“You were a good son, Jesse.”

He looked down and set his glass down. “I tried to be. She was a great mother. She worked her ass off to send us both to school. Scholarships only go so far. Richie helped out too but...”

“All those kids.”

“Yeah. But he did bring them to visit. She loved seeing her grandkids.”

Natalie looked at Jesse and took a sip of her wine. “I owe you an apology.”

“For what?”

“For my close minded assumptions. Whenever you road up on your bike, and your tattoos, I assumed you were trouble.”

Jesse grinned. “Bad seed?”

“I’m afraid so. I’m sorry.”

“No need. A lot of people make that assumption about me when I’m dressed like that. When I go to court I look like any other stiff.”

“I doubt that,” she replied a little too quickly. She needed to stop drinking. “Can I get you any more chicken?”

“No, thank you. It was delicious. I really appreciate it. I haven’t gotten around to doing any grocery shopping. I still have a lot to unpack. I can’t decide...well it’s a lot.”

“You can’t decide what to put away of your mother’s and what to keep.”

“Yes.”

“If you would like I could help you.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“It wouldn’t be imposing. Marion helped me more times than I could count.”

Jesse smiled. “Thank you, Natalie. I’d really appreciate that.”

“Woof”

Natalie looked down at Annabel sitting at her feet. “Ah, the Chihuahua mafia is demanding her percentage of our meal.”

“Little bugger.”

"I saved her some in the kitchen." She stood and began to clear the table. Jesse picked up his plate and followed her into the kitchen.

"Woof"

"All right all ready," said Jesse. "She's such a little diva."

Natalie laughed. "She certainly is." She pulled a double bowl out of a drawer and put some chicken in one side and water in the other. She set the bowl down and Annabel gobbled it down.

"You have quite the set up for her."

"She's here enough that I wanted her to be comfortable."

Jesse put his hand over hers. "You're a good person, Natalie."

"Thank you," she whispered. They cleaned up the dinner dishes and turned the dishwasher on. "Would you like some more wine?"

"I'm not driving so I think that would be fine." He refilled their glasses and handed one to Natalie.

"Why don't we sit in the living room?" They got comfortable on opposite sides of the couch and sipped their wine.

"You should know, my Mom filled me in on your story."

"Really? The whole divorced single mother thing? Very original stuff," she said.

"No. She said you were a strong woman who kicked your, these are her words, no good husband, to the curb."

Natalie laughed. "That's Marion. She said she never minced words because she was old and had no time bullshit."

Jesse smiled. "Yeah, that was Mom. She also liked your son very much."

"He liked her too. She never talked down to him. She always talked to him like he she cared what he thought. Most adults don't do that. He was pretty upset when she died."

I saw a framed drawing of roses in her bedroom. The signature says Kyle. Is that his work?"

"Yes, it is."

"He's very good."

"I thinks so too, but I'm his mother."

“How old is he?”

“Twelve”

“That’s amazing. He really has talent.”

“The roses were a request from Marion, which he would never deny. He’s mostly draws comic book stuff. Superheroes and Villains.”

“You know, comics are a big business.”

“Really?”

“Really. Comic book conventions, movies. Everyone loves a superhero.”

“I never thought of that.”

“You just want him to be normal.”

“Yeah, I’m afraid that’s true.”

“Trust me, normal is highly overrated.”

Natalie opened the door to Kyle as he came home from his sleep over. “Hey sweetie, did you have a good time?”

“Yeah.”

She held out her arms and he walked passed her. “Hey mister, get back here and give your mother a hug.” He turned around and gave his mother a grudging hug. She kissed his cheek while she had him in a clinch.

“Mom!”

She held him by the shoulders and looked into the same green eyes she had. “Kyle, I love you. You can stamp your feet and whine like a two year old but I still love you. I will love you when you’re an old man. I will always love you and nothing you say or do will ever change that.” She let him go. “So deal with it.” He started to stomp upstairs. Seemed like all he did these days was stomp.

“I’m going next door to help Mr. Colburn move in.”

“Which one? The guy with all the kids or the guy with the Harley?”

“The Harley.”

“Cool! Can I see it?”

“I tell you what. You go shower and pick up your room and then come over. I’m sure we could use your help with Annabel while we work.”

“He’s keeping her?” he said with a broad smile.

“Yes he’s keeping her. She seems quite attached to him. Mr. Colburn also asked if we could keep doing what we did for his mom, taking care of her when he’s running late.”

“Awesome,” he said as he bounded up the stairs. It was the first genuine smile she seen on her son’s face in longer than she cared to remember. She better warn Jesse. She yelled up the stairs. “I’m going now. Don’t come over until you take the shower.”

“Yes, Mom.”

She shook her head in disbelief. She walked out of her house and knocked on Jesse’s door. He opened it and her breath caught. He was wearing dark blue jeans and a blue t-shirt. They fit on him perfectly. “Hi, come on in.”

“I need to warn you that Kyle is coming over.”

“Why do I need to be warned?”

“Because he wants to see your bike. He also wants to play with Annabel. He’s really attached to her. I thought he could play with her in the back yard while we worked.”

“I’m sure Annabel would like that and I’m always happy to show off my bike.”

“Oh something you should know, never let Annabel out alone. You need to be close enough to catch her.”

“Why? She’s little and eight years old. It’s not like she’s going to beat me in wind sprints.”

“Eagles.”

“Eagles?”

“Eagles, hawks, the occasional vulture. To them she looks like a funny colored rabbit.” She could see he was confused. “Dinner. She’s only six pounds. They could pick her up and fly away before you could catch her.” She smiled when Jesse looked a little green.

“Ah geez. Noted.”

“Where do you want to start?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Have you moved your Mom’s stuff out of the master?”

“No, I’ve been sleeping in the guest room.”

“Jesse, you know what your Mom would say about that. There’s a perfectly nice master bath going to waste.”

“I just...It’s so much of her in there.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “How about I start with her clothes. I assume no one in the family wants any of them.”

Jesse managed a smile. “Only Annabel. That trick with the sweater worked. She slept through the night.”

“I’ll put a few things aside for Annabel when she’s feeling anxious and the rest I’ll box up for charity. Is that okay?”

He sighed and nodded. “Yeah, she’d be happy that they’re going to someone who can use them.”

Another knock on the door spurred Annabel from her nap and she began to bark. “That would be Kyle.” Natalie opened the door and let him in. “Kyle, this is Mr. Colburn”

Jesse extended his hand and Kyle shook it. "It's very nice to officially meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

Kyle looked at Natalie. "Mom!"

"Not your mom, mine. She liked you a lot."

"She was a nice lady. I'm sorry she died."

"Yeah, me too."

Annabel scratched at Kyle's foot. "Hi girl." He picked her up and she licked his face. "Can we see your bike now?" Jesse looked at Natalie and shrugged.

"I tell you what. Why don't you two go look at the bike while I get started upstairs."

"Yes!" said Kyle.

"You sure you don't mind?" asked Jesse.

"No. I was going to do this alone. Go be boys."

"Cool. Thanks Mom." Kyle ran outside with Annabel.

"You better get out there before he decides to ride off into the sunset with Annabel."

Jesse laughed as he followed Kyle outside. Natalie shook her head as she walked up the stairs. "Damn dog gets a hug and kisses without asking."

Jesse opened the garage door and Kyle darted in with Annabel. "Keep an eye on her. Don't let her get into trouble."

"Yes, sir," he said and scooped up the dog and held her close. He walked around the bike with wide eyes. "What type is it?"

"It's a Road Glide Ultra. I like to take it on road trips."

"That is so cool. Can I have a ride?"

"Not without your Mom's permission."

"Oh, man. She'll say no."

"Maybe not."

"She still treats me like I'm a baby."

"You are pretty young but you'll always be her baby." Jesse absently ran his hand through his hair. "My mother was always messing with my hair."

"My mom does that to me too."

"She wanted me to cut it short. She said a lawyer shouldn't look so shaggy."

Kyle looked up at him. "You're a lawyer?"

"Yeah."

"You don't look like a lawyer."

"You don't look like an artist but you are one. I saw that picture you did for my mom. You're very talented."

"It's no big deal."

"Yes it is. You have a real gift."

"You're just being nice because you want my mom to like you."

"That's not true. Yes, your mom is very nice. It's very kind of her to help me with moving in but I don't lie, especially to kids. I meant what I said."

Kyle and Annabel both looked up at him. "What do you mean especially to kids?"

"Because kids can spot bullshit a mile off." Kyle snickered at Jesse's swearing. "Your mom tells me you do a lot of drawing. I'd like to see it."

Kyle shrugged. "Maybe." He touched the bike almost reverently. "Could I hear it?"

"Okay but hold on to Annabel. I don't want her to get scared." Jesse got on his bike and revved the engine. Kyle got a broad smile but Annabel started to shake. Kyle backed out of the garage and Jesse turned off the bike.

“I better take her in the back and let her run,” said Kyle.

“Okay. I’ll be in the house.” Kyle nodded and walked around the garage to the back of the house. He was a good kid. As much as he liked Jesse’s bike he knew Annabel was scared. He put her first. Good instincts. Good kid.

Natalie heard the engine of Jesse's motorcycle and looked out the front window. He wouldn't take Kyle riding without permission, would he? The engine cut off a few minutes later and then she heard the front door. She let out a sigh of relief as she heard the front door open and close. She looked out the back window and saw Kyle playing with Annabel in the backyard. Heavy footsteps came up the stairs.

"Hi. Did he like your bike?"

"He loved it but Annabel had other ideas. He did ask for a ride."

"Oh no. He's too young."

"That's what he said you'd say. I have an idea. The parking lot at my office building is empty on Sunday's. You could bring him over and I could drive around the parking lot."

"You don't have to do that."

"I wouldn't offer if I didn't want to. I have an extra helmet."

Natalie looked at him and smiled. "I'll think about it."

Jesse looked around his mother's bedroom. "You've made quite a dent."

She pointed to a couple of large trash bags. "I started with the closet. She had excellent taste in clothes but they were clothes for an eighty nine year old woman."

"You're not throwing them out?"

She put a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Of course not. This is how you pack up for the Salvation Army. You push the bags through the chute."

"Oh, okay."

"Jesse, I would never disrespect Marion."

He nodded. "Of course not. I should know better."

"I wanted to clean out the closet so you'd have space for your suits. I took a peek in the guest room and you have them jammed in the closet."

"Good idea."

"Also, I think for the time being we swap the sheets and comforter between the guest room and here. You don't strike me as a cabbage rose kind of guy."

Jesse gave her a big grin. "You never know."

She looked him up and down. "I know." She picked up a bag and handed it to him. "How about you carry these downstairs and I'll finish in the closet."

Jesse walked down stairs with the bags and thought he might be losing control of the situation. He'd made promises he had to keep. Romancing Natalie was not one of them. He set the bags near the kitchen door and saw Kyle sitting cross-legged in the grass with a sleeping Annabel. He was slowly petting her and whispering to her. He wished he could hear what he was saying to her. He opened the back door and waved.

"She wore herself out," said Kyle.

"All that exercise is good for her. Look, your Mom and I have a lot of work left to do. Would you mind taking Annabel to your house? That way she can sleep and we can get some more work done."

"Sure." He stood up and cradled the yawning dog. "Tell my mom where I am. She'll get mad if she looks outside and doesn't see me."

"I'll tell her."

Jesse watched the boy walk to his home and go in the back door.

Natalie had made enough progress that Jesse was able to move into the master suite and the guest room was now passable for company with his mother's comforter on the bed. "What do we say call it a night?" said Jesse. "We've made a lot more progress than I thought possible. I can't believe how you lifted all those heavy boxes."

"I'm a single mom. There's only me to do things." She smiled as she picked up the last bag. "You never know how strong you can be until strong is your only choice"

Jesse smiled. "Bob Marley." He took the bag from her hand and they walked downstairs. His living room was a sea of trash bags. "Oh shit," he whispered.

"We can fill both cars and you can follow me over to the donation bins. I'll need to check on Kyle."

"Why don't we get some dinner? Do you like Chinese?"

"Actually, we love Chinese."

Jesse followed Natalie into her house. She had the same layout as his house except reversed. The first thing they saw was Annabel sacked out in her bed. She raised her head, looked at them, and then went back to sleep. Natalie walked upstairs and knocked on Kyle's door. He opened the door and, as usual, had different colors smeared on his hands. "I'm going to need your help moving some of Ms. Colburn's things in the car for Salvation Army."

"Mom, I'm busy."

"Mr. Colburn is going to take us out for Chinese."

"Oh. Cool. What about Annabel?"

"I think she'll be fine alone for a little while. Go wash up." Natalie went into her bathroom and washed up. She changed her blouse and ran a brush through her hair. She decided to leave her hair down. She looked at the mirror and shook her head. "You're being ridiculous."

She went downstairs and found Jesse petting Annabel. "I should feed her before we go."

"I already did and walked her," said Kyle.

"Thank you, Kyle." He looked at the two of them and smiled. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, let's get the bags in the cars." They loaded all the bags in both cars. "Just follow me to the bins." Natalie drove the short distance to the Salvation Army charity drop.

They pulled into the parking lot and got out of the cars. Kyle started unloading her car but she saw the look on Jesse's face. She walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay with this."

"Yes, I am. It just ... it makes it real."

"Try to think of the good these clothes will do for the people who need them and the money it will raise. Marion would be fine with that."

Jesse sighed and then smiled at her. "Yes, yes she would."

They loaded all the bags into the bins and then Jesse led the way to a very nice Chinese restaurant. Natalie pulled at Jesse's arm. "I thought we were going to that place on the West Side. This is a nice place. Kyle and I aren't exactly dressed for it. Jesse smiled a lopsided smile and her heart did a flip.

"You both look fine. Come on. I made reservations."

They walked into restaurant and were immediately greeted by the maître d. "Mr. Colburn, welcome. It's been too long."

"Hello, Phillip. It's good to see you."

"I'm so sorry about your mother. She was a lovely woman."

Jesse smiled. "Thank you. This is my friend Mrs. Bryant and her son Kyle."

Phillip extended his hand to Natalie and then to Kyle. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Phillip Wong and this is my place."

"It looks really fancy," said Kyle. Natalie blushed bright red.

"I'm glad you like our décor, young sir. I hope you enjoy our menu."

"I'm sure we will," said Jesse. Phillip lead them to a nice booth. Natalie had Kyle sit toward the wall and then slid in next to him. Jesse sat opposite Natalie.

"I take it you come here a lot."

"My office isn't far from here. I bring clients here and Mom liked it too." Natalie gasped when she saw the prices on the menu. She glanced up at Jesse who just smiled. "Kyle, if the menu is confusing just let me know. I'm here a lot."

"Okay."

Jesse gave them some recommendations and they were enjoying their meal. "I really appreciate your help with Annabel today, Kyle."

"You're welcome. I like her. She's like me, weird."

“Kyle Bryant you are not weird,” said Natalie.

“Well to be honest, I don’t know you that well,” said Jesse. Natalie shot him a look. “But as I’ve told your mother, normal is highly overrated.” Kyle laughed.

Natalie looked at her son and back at Jesse. “You were a big help today, Kyle. Mr. Colburn said you asked if you could have a ride on his bike.”

“I told him you’d say no.”

“I did, at first. But he said the parking lot at his office is empty on Sunday’s. He said if I approved he’d take you for a ride there.”

“Do you mean it?!”

“Shush. Indoor voice. Yes, I mean it.”

“You will have to wear a helmet,” said Jesse.

“Okay, I promise! This is so cool!”

“I do have a request,” said Jesse.

Kyle lost his smile. “I knew they’re be a catch.”

“It’s a request, not a requirement. I’ll take you for the ride either way.”

“Okay, what?”

“Kyle!”

“I would like to see some more of your art.”

“It’s nothing special.”

“I still want to see it.”

Kyle shrugged. “Okay.”

They ate their meal and discussed bikes and the neighborhood and plans Jesse had for the house. “I want to get a barbeque and I’ll have to get a big outdoor table for when Richie and his family come over. Of course you and Kyle will have to come.”

“That sounds nice,” said Natalie.

“Does anyone want desert?”

“I’m full,” said Kyle.

Natalie laughed. “Well, that’s a first. I’m full too. It was a delicious meal.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Jesse and Natalie pulled into their driveways at the same time. He knew he shouldn't push but he wanted to see Kyle's art. His mother was adamant. She was sure he was gifted. Marion Colburn didn't gush. Not over her children, not over her grandchildren. She loved them all but she knew they were all taken care of. For some reason she was worried about Kyle Bryant slipping through the cracks. She'd made him promise to look out for him and he could never deny her anything, not even now that she was gone.

He walked over to Natalie's and followed them into their house. Annabel greeted them and Kyle grabbed her leash to take her out for her walk. "Thanks, Kyle. I'm afraid I'm still not used to walking her. She's so tiny.

"I'll show you what to do," said Kyle.

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it." Natalie stared at Kyle as he walked out the back door. "What is it?"

"Honestly, my son has spoken more to you than he has to anyone in months. Normally all I get is a grunt or a whiny, Mom!"

"He's twelve. They're all hormones and angst at that age."

"I hope that's all it is."

Kyle came back into the house with Annabel and handed the leash to Jesse. "Here you go."

"Thanks. Do you think I could see some of your art?"

"Sure. It's in my bedroom."

Jesse and Natalie followed Kyle to his room. He opened the door and Jesse looked around in awe. Mom was right. This kid is amazing. He saw Natalie's maternal pride. "Dude, this is awesome."

"It's okay."

"What did I tell you before?"

"You don't lie, especially to kids."

"Why especially not to kids?" asked Natalie.

"Because we can spot bullshit a mile away," Kyle said with a smile.

Natalie shot a look at Jesse and he shrugged. "Sorry." He started to look through some of the drawings on his desk. Kyle pushed his hand aside.

“Those aren’t done.”

“Okay. You have a gift, Kyle. You really do. My mother was right.”

Natalie looked at Jesse and knew he was telling the truth but she couldn’t understand why he was so interested in her son. “Kyle, get ready for bed. It’s been a long day.”

“Mom!”

She looked at Jesse. “See what I mean.” She turned to her son. “Change into your pajamas, which means dirty clothes in the hamper, not the floor. Then you can stay up for an hour.”

“Okay,” he mumbled.

Natalie followed Jesse downstairs and he reached for Annabel’s leash. “Do you have some time for coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Natalie made two mugs of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. “Ok, spill. Why are you so interested in my son. Am I going to find you on a predator registry?”

Jesse smiled. “You’re a good mom, Natalie. This is about my mother.”

“Marion? What has she got to do with it?”

“My mother was very fond of Kyle.”

“He liked her too. She was the grandmother he never had.”

“My mother was a woman of strong opinions.”

Natalie laughed. “That’s for sure.”

“She was sure Kyle was an exceptionally gifted artist. She was so sure that she left a trust fund for him.”

“She what?”

“She left him a fund of \$100,000 to be held in trust for his education.” Natalie’s mouth dropped open. She tried to speak but no sound would come out. “I know this is a surprise.”

“You being a lawyer, that was a surprise. This? This is a complete and total shock. How was she able...what about her grandchildren?”

“They were provided for. I wanted to see Kyle’s art to make sure Mom was right. She was, of course. His talent should be nurtured. In fact if you want him to take courses now I can release the funds for it.”

“Okay, my mind is spinning. I need to think.”

“Of course, I understand.” He stood and picked up Annabel. “We’ll be going. Thanks again for all your help today. I’ll call you about tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“The ride? I promised.”

“Yes of course.” She followed him to the door. “You realize I’m still going to check the offender registry.”

Jesse gave her a smile that made her heart race. “I’d be disappointed in you if you didn’t.”

Natalie wasn't surprised when Carolyn showed up on her doorstep first thing Sunday morning with a box of danish. She sat down at the kitchen table while Natalie made coffee. "So, fill me in."

"On what?"

"On what? On biker boy. I saw you going back and forth to his house."

"I was helping him move in."

"Uh huh." She took a bite of her danish. "So what's his deal. Are we going to be flooded with a bunch of bikers in the neighborhood. That'll shoot property values all to hell."

"Okay, seriously Carolyn. When did you become so...so..."

"So what?"

"So pretentious. You flunked out of community college because you were too busy partying. Then you marry a doctor and now you're the arbiter of Belair Road society."

"Hey, we have standards."

Natalie shook her head. Carolyn really was a sweet woman and been a friend for years. But the woman loved her position as a rich doctor's wife and one of the first residents of the development. Carolyn was the reason she and Todd had bought the house. It was as close to a Donna Reed, 1950's neighborhood as you could find anywhere. Block parties, kids playing in the street, great school district. "Well, Carolyn, I don't think you'll have much to worry about with Jesse."

"Jesse is it?" she smiled like she'd just gotten a juicy piece of gossip.

"Yes it is. Yes he likes bikes but they aren't his profession."

"Oh yeah? What does he do?"

Natalie smiled and waited until she was sipping her coffee. "He's a lawyer." She enjoyed seeing Carolyn cough on her coffee.

"He's a defense lawyer. Private practice." She sipped her coffee and smiled.

"He doesn't look like a lawyer."

"Yeah, how about that? Now if you'll excuse me I've got to get somethings done before Kyle gets up."

"Yeah, sure." She took another bite of her danish and sipped her coffee. "I have to get going too. My mother in law is coming for lunch." She got up and walked Natalie to

the front door. She closed the door behind her and went straight to her phone. She had checked all the registries in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. She called her neighbor Carl. He was a police sergeant with the local department so he might know about Jesse.

“Carl, hey how are you? Sorry for calling so early.”

“No problem. What can I do for you?”

“You remember Marion Colburn?”

“Yeah, nice lady. Sorry she passed.”

“Her son moved in. His name is Jesse.”

“Jesse Colburn? Six feet, sandy grey hair and a lot of tattoos?”

“You know him?”

“Sure. I see him at the station and the courthouse all the time. He’s a good guy. Does a lot of charity work for the police and for veterans.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Carl laughed. “Did the tats freak you out?”

“Well, maybe a little bit.”

“I’ll have to stop by and welcome him to the neighborhood. Don’t worry, Natalie. He’s a good guy.”

Natalie could feel every muscle in her body relax. “Thanks Carl. I really appreciate the information.”

She hung up the phone and stared at the screensaver of Kyle. It was a rare picture of him smiling. Jesse Colburn was apparently the real deal. He was too good to be true. She knew better than to let her guard down. There had to be a catch. There always was. Todd taught her that.

Jesse was getting ready to take Kyle on his ride. He had his spare helmet ready and he was about to walk next door when his phone rang. "Goose, what have you got?"

"Well we already know the guy's a slime."

"Yeah, we do." Jesse and Todd Bryant were both attorney's. The difference was Todd would represent people Jesse wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. So long as they could pay his fees, Todd Bryant was their man. He knew the guy walked the line between legal defense and disbarment. One of these days it would catch up with him. In the mean time it had made him a very wealthy man.

"Okay, so here's the timeline. Bryant married Natalie Curtis as soon as he passed the bar. Son Kyle came along within the year. He started taking on sketchy clients from the beginning. He also started fooling around with everything with a pulse. The wife caught him and kicked his ass to the curb."

"Good for her."

"He seems to have little interest in his son except for helping to normalize his image."

"Bastard."

"That's all I've got on him so far but I did find something interesting in his juvenile file. Seems he and his buddies enjoyed boosting cars."

"How the hell did he get into law school?"

"Because one of his friends was the son of a judge. He had enough juice to get their records expunged."

"Alright keep on it."

"It would help if I knew what I was looking for."

"Can you get into the divorce settlement, specifically the financials?"

"Don't insult me."

"Let me know what you find."

"Will do."

Jesse disconnected the call and wondered how a woman as bright as Natalie wound up with a lowlife like Bryant.

“Kyle wake up, Mr. Colburn will be here soon.” Kyle sat up in bed and Natalie spotted a large bruise on his arm. “What happened here.” She touched it and he flinched.

“Nothing. I fell during gym.”

“That’s a couple of days old. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s no big deal.”

She sat down on the edge of his bed. “Sweetheart, everything about you is a big deal to me.” She leaned in and kissed his forehead. “Please don’t keep things from me. I love you.” She stood and smiled. “Now get dressed. Mr. Colburn is going to take you on that ride.”

Kyle stared at the bedroom door as she closed it behind her. She was a good mom. She treated him like a baby sometimes, but sometimes, like now it was okay. Today would be fun. Mr. Colburn was keeping his promise about taking him for a ride. Maybe he could be trusted.

He got dressed and got downstairs just Mr. Colburn knocked on the front door. He opened the door and smiled. He looked like a badass. T-shirt and jeans, all those tattoos, so cool. Mom said he was a lawyer, like Dad, but he didn’t seem anything like his father.

“You ready to ride?” he asked.

“Sure! Let’s go!”

“Slow your roll there, mister,” said Mom. “I will be driving you to Mr. Colburn’s office. He has a big parking lot and he will be riding you around there.”

“Mom! Come on!”

Mr. Colburn leaned over to talked to him. “Look, dude. For your Mom this is a take it or leave it situation. Let’s do this and then maybe she’ll see I can keep you safe on the bike. Then maybe she’d let us ride somewhere else.”

“Oh.” He looked at his Mom who had that look that told him not to argue with her. Maybe Mr. Colburn was right. “Okay.” He faked a smile. “Let’s go, Mom.” She rolled her eyes and went for her purse. Mr. Colburn smiled and gave him a fist bump.

“Good job, dude,” he whispered.

Jesse pulled into his parking lot and as he expected it was empty. He indicated Natalie should park. She pulled into the spot in front of the building and Kyle all but popped out of the car.

“Are you sure this is okay? Will you get in trouble with the landlord?”

“No, the landlord’s cool.”

Natalie looked up at the ten story building and then back at him. “You’re the landlord, aren’t you?”

Jesse laughed. “Yeah.” He looked over at Kyle who looked like he was ready to explode. “Kyle, Go around the back of the building. It’s a large open space.” He took off toward the back parking lot. He smiled at Natalie. “Did you check me out?”

“Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.”

“So we’re good?”

“I also called Carl Collins. He lives up the street.”

“Sergeant Collins?”

“Yes.”

“He’s the first baseman on the precinct team. He’s not bad.”

Natalie smiled. “That’s what he said about you. He said he’d be stopping by to welcome you to the neighborhood.”

“That’s nice of him.”

Kyle stuck his head around the corner. “Guys, come on!”

Jesse laughed. “We’ve been summoned.”

Jesse pulled his extra helmet out storage bin and called Kyle over. He smiled because the kid looked happier than a kid at Christmas. He put the helmet on him and tightened the strap.

“Wait, wait,” called Natalie. “Let me look at this thing. Is there enough space for him? He won’t fall, will he?”

Jesse took her hand. “Natalie, I promise I’ll keep him safe. Now go stand over on the grass and you can watch us.” He watched Natalie walk away as he turn toward Kyle. “I’m going to pick you up and set you on the bike. You hold tight around my waist.” He got on the bike and felt Kyle wrap his arms around him. He revved his engine and peeled out just a bit. He knew Natalie would be pissed but he could hear Kyle’s woo hoo. He rode back and forth for about fifteen minutes. Then to finish he ran a bunch of tight circles. He pulled up next to where Natalie was standing and turned off the bike.

“Wow, that was great!” said Kyle.

Natalie pulled Kyle off the bike. “I’m glad you had a good time.”

Jesse tried not to laugh at the glare she shot at him. “Wanna ride?”

“You totally should, Mom!”

“What do you say, Natalie?”

Her expression changed into a sly smile. “Fine.” He got off the bike and took the helmet off Kyle and put it on Natalie. As he tightened the strap she spread her perfectly manicured nails on his arm and whispered. “Try anything fancy and you’ll see what damage fake nails can do.”

“Got it,” he smiled. She got on the bike behind him and to prove her point flexed her nails into his waist. He took off and did a few turns around the parking lot and finished with one tight circle. He helped her off the bike and she pulled off the helmet.

“What did you think, Mom? Wasn’t it cool?”

Natalie looked at Jesse and smiled. “Actually, it was.”

Jesse returned her smile and thought, “Well what do you know?”

Kyle was sitting in his room drawing. He was always drawing. It was when he felt his best. He was putting the finishing touches on his latest character, The Secret Avenger. He was like Superman, only cooler. He had a regular day job but when there was trouble he turned into the Secret Avenger. He jumps on his supercharged motorcycle and saves the day.

He thought about his ride with Mr. Colburn. He'd kept his promise. He said he never lied, especially to kids. He wondered if he really could be trusted. He rolled up one of his pictures, threw on his jacket and walked downstairs. "Hey Mom, I'm going next door to Mr. Colburn's. I promised to show him how to get Annabel to walk on the lead."

Mom yelled out from the kitchen. "Okay, but if he's busy don't pester him."

"I won't."

Kyle walked next door and took a deep breath. He said he would never lie to a kid. He knocked on the door and when Mr. Colburn opened the door he smiled. "Hey Kyle, what's up?"

"Can I talk to you?"

"Sure, come on in. Have a seat." Kyle sat down on his couch and tried to find the words. "What do you have there?"

"I don't have any money but you said my pictures were good. I thought maybe you would take one as payment. I want to hire you." He handed it to Mr. Colburn who smiled.

"Kyle is this me?"

"Yeah."

"This is awesome and normally I would accept this as a retainer."

"Normally?"

"It's not legal for a minor to hire an attorney on their own."

Kyle's heart sank and he tried not to cry. "Oh. Okay, never mind. You can keep the picture." He got up to leave but Mr. Colburn stopped him.

"You can't hire me as an attorney but I can help you as a friend."

"Really?"

"Yes. I think of us as friends. After all, we both love bikes."

Kyle smiled. "Yeah we do."

"Kyle what can I do to help?"

“Can you fix it so I don’t have to see my father anymore?”

Mr. Colburn sat back against the chair. “I need to tell you something before you go any further. If you tell me something that I think puts you in danger, I have to tell your Mom.”

He stood back up and tried to leave. “Never mind.”

“Kyle, please wait.”

He sat back down. Mr. Colburn was always nice and never raised his voice. He said please. “Okay.”

“Let me ask you something. Do you think your Mom loves you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I agree. From what I see she loves you more than anything in the world. If you had gotten hurt on my bike I have no doubt she would have shredded me with those pretty nails of hers.”

Kyle laughed. “Probably.”

“So why wouldn’t you want her to know what’s going on?”

“I’m afraid he’ll hurt her.”

“Okay, I understand. This is how this can work. Your mother can hire me. I will accept your picture as a retainer. Then I will do my best to make this happen for you.”

“Do you promise to keep her safe?”

“Kyle, remember how I said I never lie, especially to kids?”

“Yeah.”

“I will do everything possible to keep you safe. Even if that means hiring guards.”

“You would do that?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Does that mean I can call your Mom?” Kyle nodded. Mr. Colburn picked up his phone and called Mom. “Hey, Natalie. Kyle and I are having a talk and I was wondering if you could join us?”

Mom showed up a couple of minutes later looking all worried. He was afraid of that. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Have a seat,” said Mr. Colburn. She sat down next to him on the couch.

“Kyle brought me one of his pictures as a retainer. He wants to hire me.”

“Why, baby? What’s going on?”

Kyle was afraid of this. Now she was scared.

“He wants me to fix it so he doesn’t have to see his father again.”

“What?” Mom looked at him. “What has he done?” Then she got a funny look on her face. “That bruise on your arm, was that him?”

Kyle just nodded. Then Mom got a look on his face that he’d never seen before.

“I’ll kill him! I’ll fucking kill him!”

He gasped because she never swore.

Mr. Colburn put his hand on Mom’s shoulder. “Take a breath. We’re going to deal with this.” He looked at Kyle and he realized he knew. The man was smart. “That’s why the long sleeves and the jackets. You’re old enough to take your own showers so you could make sure your Mom never saw.”

Kyle nodded and he hated that he started to cry. Mom held him close and kissed the top of his head. “My baby,” she whispered.

“Kyle, I’m going to ask you to do something difficult. I want you take off your jacket and shirt.”

He looked at Mom. “It’s okay, sweetheart.” He did what they asked and Mom started to cry hard. “Oh my God.”

“Bastard,” said Mr. Colburn.

They could see had bruises of varying degrees up and down his body. There were some on his legs too, but they couldn’t see those.

“Okay son, you can put your shirt back on.” He did and when he sat back down she held him close.

“You’re not mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad at you?”

“Because I didn’t tell. He said no one would believe me.”

“Kyle you listen to me. First of all I’m not mad at you. I love you. You have never lied to me. He has. I will always believe you. I will always, always be on your side.”

He could feel all his muscles relax. They believed him.

“When is Kyle supposed to see his father next?”

“Next weekend.”

“Well, he’s going to have the flu. He won’t be able to leave his room.”

“What if he insists.”

“Do you think your ex will want to deal with projectile vomiting?”

“Not a chance.”

“I’m going to need to document your bruises. I’m guessing there are more than what we’ve just seen.

Kyle nodded and Natalie gasped. “Normally this would be done by a doctor but if we do that the police will get involved.”

“No!” said Kyle.

“I think we can handle this without getting the police involved. The goal is to get him away from you permanently. Now there is something you both need to know. My mother asked me to move in here to keep an eye out for you, Kyle.”

“She did?”

“She knew you were a gifted artist and she wanted to make sure you were able to pursue that. But she also knew that when you came back from your father’s you were different, quiet. She thought something was going on and she wanted me to find out, to protect you.”

“She knew?” asked Mom. “Why didn’t she say anything?”

“All she had was suspicion. I’ve been looking into your ex-husband’s activities for a few weeks.”

“Kyle why don’t you take Annabel outside? Mr. Colburn and I need to talk.”

“No Mom. This is about me. I need to hear it.”

“Your son is right. He was brave enough to ask for help. He should know what we’re going to do.”

“Fine.”

“His activities are sketchy at best. Illegal at worst. I believe I can use what my investigator has gathered to get him to surrender his parental rights. Kyle wouldn’t have to see him again.”

“I wouldn’t?”

“No. I think can make this work. Do you trust me?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Okay. Good. Now there are some financial details I want to go over with your Mom.”

“You said my picture...”

“Oh no, your picture is a perfectly acceptable fee. It’s going to be worth a lot of money one day when you’re a famous artist. I won’t be taking any money from your mother.”

Kyle relaxed. “Okay. I’ll take Annabel out back.” He grabbed the leash and Annabel ran toward him knowing it meant she was going outside. “Come on, girl.” He walked around Mr. Colburn’s backyard feeling better for the first time in longer than he could remember. He realized he wasn’t afraid anymore. The Secret Avenger was going to save him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Natalie.

“Because I didn’t have enough proof. But Kyle advanced the plan. He’s a brave boy.”

“Do you think you can make this happen?”

“Yes.”

She looked at him with tears in her eyes. “Don’t you dare promise what you can’t deliver.”

“I wouldn’t do that, not to you and not to Kyle.”

“I don’t want him to ever touch Kyle again.”

“Neither do I.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you care? Why did you move in here?”

“Because my mother cared and she asked me to help. I could never deny her anything not even now that she’s gone.”

“I miss her,” she whispered.

His wave of emotion caught him by surprise. “So do I.”

“What were you talking about financial?”

“If I get Todd to surrender his parental rights he no longer has to pay support.”

“Oh God,” she gasped, then thought for a moment. “The house is paid for. I’ll get a job. It’s been a while but I’ll manage.”

“I’m sure you would, but I don’t think that will be necessary. I think we can get a settlement. Something that would provide you with an income.”

“How?”

“Do you know how sketchy his clients are?”

“He never brought clients home. He never brought anyone home. He was angry when I got pregnant so soon after getting married. He was never involved with any of Kyle’s activities. I thought as he got older he’d change but he never did. Then I caught him banging his paralegal. That was it and he was happy to get out.”

“If he was so happy to get out, why did he insist on visitation?”

“It was his way of making me pay, not letting me win completely. He knows not having Kyle with me hurts me.”

“Kyle is the spitting image of you.”

“Oh God! It’s my fault. He’s taking his anger at me out on my son!”

Jesse moved next to her and put his arm around her. “None of this is your fault. He’s a cowardly bastard who hurts his own child. He would have done it no matter who Kyle looked like.”

Kyle came back in with Annabel and found Jesse with his arm around his mom. “Liar! You said you wanted to help me. You just want to get close to my mom.” Annabel started growling at the raised voices and Kyle picked her up and held her close. “Shush, Annabel,” he whispered.

“Kyle please sit down,” said Jesse.

“No, you’re just like him. You say whatever you want to get what you want. And if you don’t get it, you take it.”

“Kyle Bryant, you sit down now,” said Natalie. He sat down close to his mother.

Jesse smiled at Natalie as she nodded for him to go on. “Kyle your mother was upset and I was offering her some comfort like you did just now for Annabel.” He looked at Natalie and smiled. “I’m not comparing you to a dog.”

Natalie smiled. “That’s okay. I can get just as testy as she can.”

“Kyle, you and your mother are my clients. I can not have a romantic relationship with her, no matter how much I would like to. It’s a breach of ethics. I could be disbarred”

“Excuse me,” Natalie gasped.

He took a breath and decided now was as good as time as any to come clean. “You know how I told you my mother asked me to keep an eye out for you?” Kyle nodded. “Well, she never said anything but I think she wanted me to get to know your mom.”

“What?”

“I think she knew how much I would like your mom, and I do. I think she’s smart and strong and beautiful.”

“Jesse, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. Not now. After all of this is settled you and I will have a long talk.”

Natalie smiled. “Do you really think Marion set us up?”

“It’s something she would do.”

Jesse looked at Kyle. “Are we okay, buddy?”

“Well...” he looked at his mother. “He didn’t try any funny business did he?”

Jesse and Natalie were both suppressing a smile. “What you saw was all there was. Mr. Colburn was just being a good friend.”

“Well, okay then. I guess it’s alright.”

“Kyle, so long as you have Annabel on the leash do you think you could show me? The truth is I’m scared to handle her.”

Kyle looked stunned. “You’re scared...of Annabel?”

“Well she’s so tiny and if she doesn’t like something she does that freak out growl and I don’t know how to stop her.”

“Let’s take her back out and I’ll show you.” He looked at Natalie. “Come on, Mom.”

Jesse followed Natalie and Kyle out back. Annabel was extra excited to get another walk. Kyle handed him the lead and Jesse froze.

“Don’t worry. She’s happy when she’s outside. Just let her know you’re in charge.”

“How do I do that?”

“Dogs can tell if you’re scared. Just be calm, no matter what she does. Start to walk around the lawn. She’s already pooped so she’ll just want to smell stuff.”

Jesse laughed. “Good to know.”

“Don’t let her run ahead of you.” Jesse walked with Annabel for a short distance before she wanted to go in a different direction. “Just give her a little tug on the leash and walk where you want her to go.” He tugged and Annabel started her freak out growl.

“Now what?”

Kyle bent over the growling dog. “Just hold your hand in front of her eye and tell her no.” He held his hand over Annabel’s eye. “Stop it, now,” he said in a calm voice. “He’s your new Daddy. He won’t hurt you.” He pulled his hand away and she started up again. “Annabel, hush.” He pulled his hand away and the dog looked doubtful but was quiet. He looked up at Jesse. “Go on. She just has to get used to you. If she does it again just hold your hand in front of her eye.”

Jesse smiled. “Thanks, buddy.” He started walking the small dog around the yard and let her stop at the small stream and let her look at the water. She slipped and squealed as she fell into the water. He scooped her up and held her against his shirt. “It’s okay, girl. I’ve got you.” They all walked back to the house and Kyle grabbed a dishtowel. He handed it to Jesse and he dried her off. “There you go, little thing.” He leaned down and accepted a lick on the nose from the wet dog.

“See. She likes you. She just has to get used to you,” said Kyle.

“Thanks, buddy. Can I call you if I have any more problems?”

Kyle smiled. “Yeah sure.”

Natalie put her hands on her son’s shoulders. “It’s time for you to go finish your homework and I need to get dinner started.”

“Okay.” He looked at Jesse and smiled. “Call me if you need any help with her.”

“Count on it.”

Jesse saw them to the front door as Kyle walked back to his house Natalie turned towards him.

“When this mess is over you and I are going to have a long conversation.” She looked over her shoulder and saw Kyle had gone inside. She turned back and gave Jesse

a quick kiss. “If you won’t tell the ethics board, I won’t.” She smiled and turned back toward her house.

Jesse smiled. “Mom, what did you get me into?”

Jesse sat in his office and tried to concentrate on his other clients while waiting for Goose. He needed all the information Goose could find to lock down his plans against Bryant. He and Natalie had photographed Kyle's bruises. He couldn't believe her strength at keeping her son calm and not crying like he knew she wanted to. Before he left her house that night he leaned over and whispered to her. "You're very brave and I'm very proud you."

He was passing a client off to an associate when Goose came into the waiting room. He nodded toward his office and Goose followed him and closed the door. "Did you get what I need?"

"You realize this the bill on this is going to be hefty. I had to bring in some computer experts."

"Better than you?"

"I'm good. This case required genius good."

"I don't care what it costs. I need the information."

"Wow. This client must have deep pockets."

"This is a pro-bono case."

"What? Are you crazy? This is going to cost you a bundle."

"Goose, he's abusing his twelve year old son. His son asked me to fix it so I wouldn't have to see him again."

"Shit," whispered Goose. He opened his briefcase and handed him a thick file. "This is everything."

Jesse paged through the file. "Holy crap."

"Exactly. I don't know why one of his," Goose made air quotes "Clients hasn't dumped his body in the mountains."

"Thanks Goose. This is everything I need."

Goose stood and shook his hand. "Get the bastard."

“I will.”

Natalie went upstairs to Kyle's room. This was the weekend he was supposed to have the flu and Jesse said to make sure he stayed in the house. "Hey sweetheart, I brought you some lunch." She set the tomato soup and grilled cheese on his night stand. It was his favorite.

"Cool, thanks Mom." He got up from his drawing board and picked up his grilled cheese. He took a bite and smiled. "I know you're scared, Mom. I'm sorry."

She threw her arms around her son. "I'm fine, baby."

"No you're not. I can tell. You're making all my favorite foods, not that I mind," he smiled. Natalie laughed and gave him a hug. "Mom, are you sorry you married Dad?"

Natalie smiled. "Not at all. In fact I'm very grateful."

"Why? He was always so mean."

"Because I got you. You are the flat out best thing that has ever happened to me."

Kyle looked genuinely shocked. "Really?"

"Really."

"Hey Mom, The X Men is on soon. Wanna watch with me?"

Natalie smiled. "I'd love to." She sat next to her son on his bed as they watched superheroes save the universe. She just hoped Jesse Colburn could save them.

Jesse was as prepared for this meeting as he had been for any trial. He had originally thought of having the meeting in his own office but he didn't want to put Bryant on the defensive. He thought he had every base covered. He had better. Their lives depended on it.

"Mr. Bryant will see you now," said the bottle blonde.

He walked into Bryant's office and wasn't surprised. Overdone, leather everything and a throne-like chair behind his desk. He'd seen pictures of Bryant and he was handsome by GQ standards, but in person he was smarmy. Jesse wanted to shower just standing next to him.

Bryant extended his hand and Jesse took it, not wanting to telegraph his purpose. "Mr. Colburn, it's nice to officially meet. My wife and son had such nice things to say about your mother. I'm sorry for your loss." He said it with a smile and Jesse wanted to deck him. Jesse took a seat and took a breath, calming himself. "I was surprised to get your call. Do you need my assistance with a case."

"Not in a million fucking years," he thought. "No, I'm here on behalf of my clients," he paused and looked Bryant in the eyes, "Your ex-wife and your son."

"What?"

"It would be better for you if you just shut up and listen."

"Who do you think...?" Bryant started to turn red.

Jesse leaned into him and growled, "You sit your ass down in that chair or I'll put you down." He opened his briefcase and took out a file. He opened it and tossed the pictures of Kyle's bruises on his body. "You are beating up your kid."

"You can't prove this. That bitch could have done it."

"Your son is old enough to testify in court. Do you really want that?" Bryant paled. "Now if these pictures were taken by a doctor he would have been obligated to report it. That hasn't happened...yet." He pulled out another paper. This is a surrender of parental rights. You will sign it and never go near your son and your ex wife again."

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” shouted Bryant. “You think you can come in here and take my son from me.”

Jesse gave a small smile. “Oh, I’m not done yet.” He pushed a paper toward him. “Before I leave this office you will wire three million dollars from your personal accounts to this account for the future welfare of your son.” Thanks to Goose’s computer geniuses, Jesse knew exactly what accounts Bryant had, which were legitimate and which were definitely not. He had to make sure that Bryant transferred only legitimate funds. “Before you start arguing with me I know exactly what you have to the penny. You’ve been a very busy boy. I think your clients would be very interested in a forensic accounting of your firm.” Jesse thought Bryant might vomit. “I gotta say, Bryant you’ve got some brass ones. You’ve skimmed from some of the nastiest SOB’s there are.” He pushed the papers at him. “Sign the papers.” Jesse noticed his hand was steady as he signed away his child. “Now the transfer.”

“You bastard.”

“You can call me anything you want. Now transfer the money.” He saw that his hands started to shake as he turned as he pulled up the correct program on his computer and wired the money. Jesse’s phone dinged and he pulled up the notice on his phone confirming the money had been transferred. He picked up the signed papers and the photos and put them back in his briefcase.

“How do I know my son will ever see a dime of that money?”

“You don’t give a damn about your son, but you know me and you know my reputation. You know your son and your ex-wife will get every penny.” He turned to leave.

“You’re screwing her, aren’t you!”

Jesse stopped. He slowly turned around and looked into Bryant’s eyes. “I am not some one you want to piss off. If you come near either of them ever again you won’t have to worry about your clients.”

Jesse sat in his driveway. He'd filed the papers with the court and Todd Bryant had no more legal claims to Kyle. He got out of the car and headed next door. He knew Kyle wouldn't be home from school yet so he could discuss the details with Natalie. He knocked on her front door and when she opened her door she gasped.

"What?"

"I've never seen you in a suit." She looked him up and down. "It works for you."

Jesse tried to hide his blush in a murmured, "Thank you." He didn't mention how adorable she looked. The woman was made to wear jeans. "Can I come in?"

"Oh, yes come in." They sat down in the living room and he opened his briefcase. "These are the documents. I've already filed them at the courthouse."

"It's done?" she said with a broad smile. "He can't touch him again?"

"Todd Bryant no longer has any legal rights to your son."

"Oh Jesse, I don't know how to thank you." She brushed a tear from her eye.

Jesse hoped Kyle would be as happy when he realized his father had so easily signed him away. "I also got a settlement from him. I set up a trust account for Kyle with you as trustee. You'll have some papers to sign for it but you'll have control over the assets."

She looked at the amount on the papers and gasped. "How much?"

"Three million."

"Where did he come up with that kind of money?"

"He had a lot of hidden assets my associates found."

"Bastard."

"You'll have no argument from me. Do you have a financial advisor?"

"Yes."

"If he was Todd's recommendation I would change immediately."

“I wouldn’t know who to pick. Todd always handled all of that.”

“I have an advisor I’ve been happy with. I’ll give you her number. She’ll listen to you and not take unnecessary risks. You also won’t have to worry about her being in Todd’s pocket.”

“Thank you.”

The front door flew open and Kyle bound into the house. “Mom, I’m home!”

“We’re in the living room.”

Kyle saw Jesse in his suit and froze. “Is it over?” he whispered.

“Yes, Kyle it is. He signed the papers.” Jesse thought that sounded better than your father signed you away. Kyle’s eyes filled and he began to sob.

Natalie and Jesse both stood and walked toward him. “Sweetheart,” said Natalie. “This is what you said you wanted.” They were both stunned when he threw his arms around Jesse’s waist.

“I knew you’d save me. I just knew it.” He looked up at Jesse with such devotion and he realized how much he loved this child. “You kept your promise.”

He looked down at Kyle and whispered. “I always will.” Kyle smiled then gave his mother a hug.

“I’m making dinner and Kyle has to do his homework. Why don’t you go change and join us in about an hour.”

“Sounds great.”

“Kyle, homework, now,” she said. Natalie walked Jesse toward the door but stopped him. “Now that this is finished does that mean I’m not your client and more?” she asked with a smile.

“Yes it does,” he smiled and leaned in for a kiss when he noticed Kyle grinning at him from the stairwell.

“Go for it, dude!”

Jesse laughed. "Apparently we have your son's blessing." He gave her a soft kiss and whispered. "We will continue this discussion later."

"Count on it, counselor."

Jesse was sitting on his chaise lounge, smoking a cigar and petting Annabel. He'd had a great dinner with Natalie and Kyle. They talked and laughed and enjoyed Natalie's cooking. He even did the dishes with her after she sent Kyle off to bed. They'd snuck in a real kiss before Kyle came back downstairs for a snack. He'd never felt like this. This wasn't like dinner at Mom's or dinner at Richie's with all his nieces and nephews. It was like they were a family. His family.

Natalie said she would join him for a glass of wine and that long overdue conversation. He took a deep breath and smelled the lilacs that his mother loved. "Mom, I get it. She's perfect for me." Annabel took that moment to sneeze in his face. "I'm sorry baby. Did you get a nose full of smoke?" He gave her a kiss on the head and set her on the ground. She started her freak out growl. "Hey, I apologized. He tried to hold his hand in front of her eye and realized the dog was pointed toward Natalie's. The dog's growl was reaching epic proportion when he heard a crash and a scream. "Natalie!" he screamed. He grabbed the barking dog and ran into his house. He opened a drawer in the kitchen. "Damn it, Mom, show me where it is! It has to be here! He pulled out a junk drawer and saw a house key with a large plastic key ring. Written in his mother's handwriting was "Natalie." He grabbed the key and ran back out the door but not before calling out, "Thanks, Mom." He ran towards Natalie's and unlocked the front door. He saw Todd Bryant holding a gun on her. He'd already smacked her and her cheek was bruised and bleeding. Kyle was quivering on the stairs, looking over the rail.

"Take one move and I'll kill her."

"Let her go, Bryant."

"No, you took from me. I'm taking from you. I'm a defense lawyer too. I can read people just like you. I could see it in your face in my office. I see it now. You love them. You'd die for them." He smiled. "Maybe I'll make that happen."

A voice came from behind him. "I don't think so." Jesse didn't turn around. He recognized the voice as Carl Collins, the police sergeant who lived a few doors up. "Warminster P.D. Put down your weapon."

“Hell no,” shouted Bryant as he moved the weapon from Natalie toward the door. Jesse took his moment and lunged. Bryant fired and Jesse was barely aware of the sting in his arm. He knocked Bryant to the ground and the gun flew out of his hand. Jesse started pummeling his face. As Bryant groaned Kyle called out from the stairs.

“Jesse, no, stop.” He looked up at Kyle who was pale as a ghost. “You need to stop. If you don’t you’ll be just like him.” Jesse felt like he’d been gut punched. “Mr. Collins is here now.”

He looked down at the whimpering Bryant. “Kyle is more of a man at twelve than either of us will ever be.” Police lights started to flash in the driveway and several uniformed police entered the house along with the EMT’s. He went over to Natalie who was equally pale and still bleeding. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “I am now. Kyle, come here, baby.” He rushed to his mother’s side and she pulled him into the hug. “How did Carl know to come here?”

“I called him,” said Kyle. “He’s only two doors up. I knew he’d get here quicker.”

Jesse laughed and kissed the top of his head. “You’re brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.”

Natalie looked up at Jesse. “For that matter, how did you know? And how did you get in. Todd locked the door.”

“Annabel went into freak out mode but she was pointed at your house. Then I heard you.”

“She always hated him,” she said.

“I told you she was smart,” said Kyle.

“Yes you did.”

“So how did you get in?”

“Well, I figured if she had given you a key to my house, you must have given her one too. At first I couldn’t find it so I yelled out for her to help me. I no sooner asked her than I found it.”

Natalie buried her head in his chest and whispered, "Thank you, Marion." She ran her hand up Jesse's arm, only then realizing he'd been shot. "Oh my God. Jesse, you're hurt."

Jesse looked down and then he felt the pain. "Yeah, I think so. Maybe we should let those EMT's do their job. He looked over at Carl who was briefing the other policemen. "Carl, we need to get to the hospital. Can we go?"

"Yeah. You'll all have to make statements but we can do that later."

"Thanks." He led Natalie and Kyle out to the EMT's. They all sat on the edge of the ambulance while the EMT's started tending their wounds. "It's all going to come out now. We have no choice."

"All of it?" asked Kyle.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, buddy."

"You'll be with us, right?"

"Every step of the way." He looked at Natalie. "He did get one thing right. I do love you." He looked over at Kyle. "Both of you."

Natalie smiled. "I kind of figured that out."

"So did I," said Kyle with a smile.

Natalie poured more coffee for Carolyn Sampson and Dolores Haney. Dolores had brought her youngest girl, Eileen with her. Natalie had taken her from her mother so she could enjoy her coffee and danish. She had to admit it felt nice to have a baby on her hip again. She had to avoid the baby's fascination with the butterfly stitches on her cheek.

"I can't believe he came after you like that," said Carolyn.

"We couldn't let him continue to hurt Kyle."

"Of course not, but it seemed so out of character for him."

"No it didn't," said Dolores. She gave Natalie a smile as she took her daughter back in her lap. "Jesse came to your rescue."

Natalie smile. "Yes he did."

"Is he okay? I heard he was shot?" asked Carolyn.

"It was a graze. He needed a couple of stitches and it messed up one of his tattoos."

"Does he have them all over?" asked Dolores with a big grin.

Natalie could feel her flush. "I wouldn't know."

"Oh that's a shame," she replied.

"Dolores!" said Carolyn. "They're not a couple."

"Well..."

"What!"

"Spill," said Dolores. "You know I live vicariously through my single friends."

"He told me he loved me and he loves Kyle." She sat at the table with her friends. She realized it was the first time she'd said it out loud and it felt great.

"Oh my God! This is great. Have you been dating?"

"He's recovering from a being shot, I look like I was the loser in a prize fight, and I have Kyle to take care of."

“Okay, we have to do something about this,” said Dolores. “You know it’s been a long time since Kyle’s spent the weekend with Charlie.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Ask him.”

“Ask him what?” The women looked at the doorway and Jesse was standing there. Both women were obviously shocked at the change in his appearance when he wore a suit. Natalie caught Carolyn in a bit broader smile than she cared for. “Hello ladies,” he said with a smile. He walked over to Natalie and gave her a kiss. “What do you need to ask me?”

“Not you, Kyle. Dolores asked if Kyle would like to spend the weekend with her son Charlie.”

Dolores smiled. “They’re best friends.”

“Sounds like he’d enjoy that,” he said with a lopsided smile. Dolores could see he knew what she was doing. He leaned over to her daughter. “Who is this little beauty?”

“This is Eileen, my youngest.”

“But not her last,” said Natalie.

“Really? Congratulations.” Eileen seemed as captivated by Jesse as the women and extended her hands to him to be picked up.

Dolores laughed. “Looks like you have a fan.” She handed the baby to Jesse and he took her in his arms. “You might as well get used to that. There are a lot of kids in this neighborhood. Someone’s always going to need carrying.”

“Well, hello angel,” said Jesse. Eileen giggled and made a grab for his nose. He laughed and gave her little hand a kiss.

“Mom! I’m home!” Kyle called.

“We’re in the kitchen.”

Kyle joined them and smiled. "Hi Jesse. Hi Mrs. Sampson, Mrs. H." Eileen squealed and put his hands out to Kyle. He took her from him and gave her a little kiss.

"She's quite the flirt, your girl," said Jesse.

"She likes men but she love Kyle."

"She has excellent taste." He walked over to Natalie and whispered, "I need to talk to you and Kyle."

"Kyle, Mrs. Haney wants to know if you want to spend the weekend at her house with Charlie."

"Cool! We could work on my new comic. Charlie helps me with dialogue."

"Okay, that's settled," said Dolores as she stood and retrieved her daughter. "Come on Carolyn. Time to hit the road."

"What? Ah, okay." She stood and followed Dolores toward the front door.

"I'll bring him up later," said Jesse.

"I can walk."

"So can I," he said with a fatherly finality.

"Okay."

Jesse sat Kyle and Natalie back down at the kitchen table. He was nervous as hell. He didn't know how they'd react to what he had to tell them. Hell, he didn't know how he felt about it. "I've just come from the courthouse." He looked at Kyle. "It's about your father's case.

"He's not my father!"

"You're right. He's not anymore." Natalie put a hand on Kyle's shoulder.

"Jesse, what's going on?"

"Todd has made a deal with the federal government. He's going to testify against a few of his more shady clients. In return the government will put him in witness protection."

"What?" cried Natalie. "That means he'll get away with what he did to Kyle, to me. For God's sake, Jesse. He shot you! This isn't right."

"Kyle are you okay?" asked Jesse.

"Yeah. I think so."

"Do you know what witness protection is?"

"Yeah, I've seen TV shows. They move somebody far away so the bad people can't find them."

"Yes, that's right."

"Jesse, why would he do this? Isn't witness protection forever? Even though what he did to us was awful, he wouldn't have done that much time, would he?"

"You're right. He might have gotten ten years max. With good behavior he could have been out in six."

"So why a forever option?"

"Probably because he knows that if his clients didn't get him in prison for snitching, whether he did or not, that people who beat up kids are the lowest of the low in prison. He would never survive."

“Jesse, when I saw this on TV they put the guy in some remote town in a boring job and he hated it. They wouldn’t still let him be a lawyer, would they?” asked Kyle.

“No, he’s lost his license.”

“Mom, this is better.”

“How is this better?”

“This way he’s away from us forever. I don’t want him dead. I just want him gone.”

Jesse looked at Natalie and smiled. “Are you sure he’s only twelve?” Natalie looked over at her son and smiled. He leaned over and placed a kiss on top of Kyle’s head. “You’re a good man, Kyle. A very good man.”

Kyle’s eyes got misty. “Thanks, Jesse.”

“Why don’t you go upstairs and pack what you need for the weekend,” said Natalie.

“Okay,” he smiled and bolted upstairs.

Jesse stood up from the table and stretched. “Wow. That was…” He was silenced when Natalie pulled him into a deep kiss.

“You are an amazing man, Jesse Colburn. You have shown my son more love and strength and what’s it like to be a real man than he has ever known.”

He held her tight. “I love him.”

“I’m ready!” said Kyle as he came downstairs with a backpack. They pulled apart quickly. “I’m not that much of a kid. I know what’s going on.”

“Oh you do, do you?” laughed Natalie.

“As much as I want to. Can I go now?”

“Yes,” they both replied.

“I’ll walk you up.”

“I walk up there all the time by myself.”

“It’s getting dark. Indulge me.”

“Okay.”

Jesse turned and gave Natalie a kiss. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll start dinner,” she smiled.

Jesse started walking up the sidewalk with Kyle. “Did you pack enough?”

“Yeah. If I need anything I can use Charlie’s stuff. We’re the same.” He stopped walking and looked at Jesse. “Do you really love my mother?”

“Yes I do, very much.”

Kyle continued walking. “Good. I think she loves you a lot too.”

Jesse smiled. “Why do you think that?”

“Because she’s smiling all the time, especially when she talks about you. She gets this look.”

“A look?”

“If I were drawing it I would put little hearts where her eyes are, you know the look.”

“How do feel about that?”

“I’m glad. You’re nice to her and you always tell the truth.”

“What do you think about me being around a lot?”

Kyle looked up at him as he reached the Haney’s front door. “I like it,” he smiled. “You make me feel safe.”

“I’m very glad, Kyle,” he said choking back emotion. “Do you have your phone?”

“Yeah.”

“Call your mother tonight to say goodnight.”

“Okay.” He knocked on the door and Dolores opened the door.

“Perfect timing, Kyle. We’re just sitting down to dinner.”

Kyle turned and hugged Jesse. “Thanks for walking me,” he smiles. He walked inside the house and was met by his friend.

“Now you get going,” Dolores smiled. “There is a very nice woman waiting for you.”

“Thanks Dolores.”

He walked back down the street thinking about the conversation they would finally have. There were some difficult realities for them but the one thing he knew for sure is he was in love with her.

He went into Natalie’s and locked the door behind him. “Natalie, I’m back.” She came out of the kitchen smiling. Maybe Kyle was right. She slipped her arms around his waist and gave him a quick kiss.

“Did you two have a nice talk?”

“What?”

“I assume you two talked on the way to Dolores’s.”

“He’s a smart kid. I think he wanted to spend the weekend with his friend to give us time alone.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

“Sweetheart there is one very big elephant in the room we haven’t talked about.”

“What?”

“Our age difference.”

“It’s not that big, you’re what forty eight, forty nine?”

Jesse smiled. “Sweetheart, I’m fifty four.”

She looked him up and down and smiled. “Okay.”

That was not the reaction he was expecting. "Sweetheart, I never would normally ask a woman this..."

"I'm thirty seven."

"Good Lord," he murmured.

"Jesse I just have two questions and I know you so I know you won't lie to me. First, are you in love with me?"

"Yes, sweetheart, very much."

Natalie gave him a sly smile. "Good, because I'm in love with you too. Question two, do you want me?" Jesse pulled her into deeply passionate kiss. He ran his hands down her back to her bottom, holding her tight against him. When they finally come up for a breath Natalie gasped. "Whoa. I'll take that for a yes. Okay, I'm not having a problem with the age thing. You?"

Jesse smiled, "Guess not." She took him by the hand and started to lead him upstairs.

He pointed to the kitchen. "Stove?"

"Off."

He pointed upstairs. "Bed?"

"New."

Jesse smiled. "In that case..." Natalie squealed as he picked her up and carried her upstairs. He tossed her on the bed and started pulling off his tie. He looked around the room. "Are you sure that..."

"I completely redecorated the room after he left. I didn't want anything he'd touched to ever touch me again."

Jesse smiled and tossed off his jacket. He liked the look of fascination as he stripped off his slacks. When he was down to his boxers and t-shirt Natalie jumped to her knees. "Wait. Come closer. She slipped her hands under his t-shirt and pulled it over his

head. "Wow," she whispered. She ran her fingers over the tattoos on his chest and arms. She made him turn around and saw the eagle tattooed across his shoulders. "This is beautiful," she whispered. He gasped as she ran her fingertips over its wings.

Jesse turned around. "Sweetheart you can study my ink later. You're killing me here." He started to unbutton her blouse.

"Sorry, research."

"Research?"

"Dolores wanted to know if you had tattoos all over. I told her I didn't know."

"And that's when she offered the sleepover for Kyle."

"Exactly."

"Remind me to send her flowers," he said as he slipped her blouse off her shoulders. She sat and slipped off her jeans. "Good Lord, woman. You're beautiful." She leaned back and he slipped off her lingerie. Her pale skin was flawless. Her auburn hair fell loose about her shoulders. He ran his fingers over her skin, not quite believing what was happening was real.

"Jesse, please. I need you."

He slipped off his boxers and covered her with his body. She pulled him into a deep kiss, as passionate as he'd ever felt. He nipped at her lip, her ear. When he nipped at her neck she moaned. He traveled down her body, tasting and nipping, memorizing every curve. He caressed her and she begged for him.

"Please, baby. I need you."

When they came together he paused and looked into her eyes. He felt washed over with a sensation of home. This was how it was supposed to be. This was forever.

Natalie curled up next to Jesse and felt more content than she had in years, maybe ever. Her son was safe and the man she loves, loves them both. "Sometime you're going to have to give me a tour of all these. Where and why you got them. I love the eagle."

"I will. Is your phone up here?"

She leaned up on one elbow. "You want to make a call? Now?"

Jesse smiled. "No, but it's getting late and I told Kyle to call you to say goodnight."

"I tell you what. Throw on your boxers and we can go downstairs and get some dinner and wait for his call."

"Sounds like a plan." He put on his boxers and reached for his t-shirt. Natalie took it from his hand. "No." she smiled. She grabbed his button down shirt and fastened only one button mid waist.

"You like my shirt?"

"I see this in the movies, the woman putting on the man's shirt after. I thought it looked sexy. Is it working for you, counselor?"

He looked at her with a big grin. "Hell yeah."

"Good to know. Let's eat."

She heated up some mushroom ravioli and set out two plates with some fresh rolls. She poured the both a glass of wine. They touched glasses and smiled. "Cheers."

"Mmm, this is delicious."

"Thanks." Her phone rang and Kyle's picture appeared. "Hi sweetheart. Are you having a good time?"

"Yeah, Charlie's helping me with my story."

"That's good. Did you thank Mrs. Haney for dinner?"

"Yes, Ma'am"

"Good boy. You call if you need me."

“I will. Night, Mom.”

“Good night, baby.”

“Tell Jesse I said good night.”

Natalie laughed. “I will.” She disconnected the call and smiled.

“What’s so funny?”

“He said to say good night to you for him.”

Jesse smiled. “Smart kid.”

“Yeah, he is.”

They finished their dinner and Jesse helped her with the dishes. In between dishes he would slip his arm around her waist and kiss her neck. “I’ll never finish if you keep distracting me.”

“So I should stop?”

“Hell no!” she giggled. They put the last of the dishes and Jesse topped off their wine. Let’s go sit in the living room. I want to talk to you about something.”

“Okay, should I be nervous?”

“I hope not.”

They sat next to each other on the couch and Jesse put his arm around her. “You know I love you and I love Kyle.”

“I know.”

“I’ve never said that to anyone before.”

Natalie smiled. “Really?”

“Really. I never say anything I don’t mean. I want you to know that I’m committed to us, all three of us.”

Her eyes misted and she gave him a soft kiss. "I love you, Jesse Colburn. I'm committed to us too."

Jesse sighed like he'd been afraid of his answer. "Believe it or not I'm an old fashioned guy. I want us to be together as a family. Forever."

Natalie didn't hold back her tears. "I want that too."

"Good. I know I'm moving fast here, but sweetheart at my age I don't want to waste time. Natalie Bryant, will you marry me?"

She gasped and then threw her arms around him. "Yes!" He pulled her into a deep kiss.

"I love you so much, sweetheart. There's something else I need to talk to you about."

They had an amazing weekend. They talked and laughed and got very little sleep. They also made plans, where they would live, what they wanted in a wedding. They agreed on the biggest reception/block party Belair Road had ever seen. Now all they had to do was tell Kyle.

“Do you think he’ll be happy about this?” asked Jesse.

She slipped her arms around his waist. “Calm down, babe. I think he’ll be very happy.”

“Mom, Jesse, I’m home.”

“Well, I guess we’re about to find out.” Jesse took a deep calming breath. He thought he’d been nervous when he asked Natalie to marry him. That was nothing compared to this. They walked into the living room and Kyle was about to go upstairs. “Hi guys.”

“Sweetheart will you sit down for a moment? We need to talk to you.”

His face fell. “Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all,” said Natalie. “Just sit down for a minute.” He sat down on the couch and they took up spots on either side of him. Natalie looked at Jesse and he nodded. “Sweetheart, Jesse has asked me to marry him.” Kyle gasped. “I said yes.” He threw his arms around his mother’s waist.

“This is great!” He quickly got a concerned look on his face. “Do we have to move?”

“We talked about moving next door and selling this house. That means you would have all the same friends and school.”

“Phew. That’s good.” He turned Jesse. “I like it here. All my friends are here.”

“We thought about that.” He looked at Natalie for strength. She nodded and smiled. “Kyle I want to ask you something.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“When your mom marries me she’ll be Natalie Colburn. How would you feel about being Kyle Colburn?”

“What?” he gasped.

“I love you, Kyle. I would like to adopt you and make you my son. Your mom has given me her permission. But this is your decision. You can take your time to think about it. If you decide not to it would be okay.” Kyle burst into tears.

He put a steadying hand on Kyle’s back. “Are you okay?”

“For real?” he whispered. “You really want to be my Dad? Not just because of Mom?”

“For real, Kyle. You know I always tell you the truth.” Kyle threw himself into Jesse’s chest and sobbed. “Are you okay?”

Kyle looked up at him. “I get to call you Dad?”

“I’d like that so much.”

He wept harder. “So would I.”

Jesse looked over at Natalie who was smiling through her tears. So was he. In less than a month he’d gone from an unencumbered bachelor to a man with a family. All thanks to his mother’s meddling. He closed eyes, held his new son tight to his chest and said a silent thank you to Mom.

It had been a crazy, busy three months. They had sold Natalie's house and they'd moved everything into his place. Their place. Much to his pleasure, Natalie was an organizing fiend and proclaimed she didn't need his help. He declared the only room off limits was his office and the den had to keep his big screen and his recliner. Other than that, he was good with anything she wanted to do.

It was summertime and school was out so that meant every kid in the neighborhood was around all the time. The wedding was tomorrow and the tent was already set up in the back yard. He'd arranged his case load so he could take Natalie for ten days in Hawaii. He'd offered to take Kyle with them but Natalie put her foot down. She said the honeymoon was their time. Dolores had already offered to take him and Annabel while they were gone.

He was sitting in the chaise with Annabel, an iced tea and enjoying the breeze.

"Hey there handsome. You have room in there for me?"

He smiled as Natalie walked outside. "Sure thing, cutie. He moved Annabel to the patio and moved over so she could join him. He put his arm around her and gave her a kiss. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"I am. How about you?"

"Tuxedos are in the closet and I've picked up the rings."

"Kyle is going to look so grown up in his tux. He was so happy when you asked him to be his best man."

"He's my son. Who else would I ask?" He smiled. They'd finalized the adoption a few weeks ago and Kyle was officially Kyle Colburn.

"Was Richie upset you didn't ask him?"

"No. He's so happy I will finally know what he's been talking about fatherhood. All the hassles and headaches. He sent me those cigars after the adoption and every time I talk to him he laughs a lot. I think because I talk about my one kid twice as much as he talks about his five kids." Natalie got a funny look on her face and smiled. "What?"

She took his hand and placed it on her belly. "Two kids."

"What?"

"I was at the doctor and he confirmed it. I'm about six weeks pregnant."

"What?" he repeated.

"Jesse, babe. Are you okay? Are you alright about it?"

He rubbed his hand over her belly. "A baby."

Natalie grinned. "Yes, sweetheart, we've established that. You've gotten me pregnant and in pretty short order, so I never again want to hear that 'too old' discussion.

He continued to rub her belly and smiled. "I bet it's a girl."

"Oh Lord, I bet it is. She's going to have you wrapped her around your little finger."

"If it is a girl..."

"I know. We'll call her Marion."

That night they told Kyle about the baby and he seemed happy but after dinner he locked himself in his room. They were concerned until the next morning when he came downstairs with his wedding present.

"I had to make some adjustments last night." He opened the portfolio and the both gasped. It was a comic book rendering of their family. Jesse was standing broad chested in a t-shirt and jeans with his tattoos very accurately placed. He was wearing a red cape with a big A on it. Natalie was drawn in her normal clothes but she was looking at Jesse. Kyle had put hearts on her eyes. Kyle was standing next to Jesse wearing the same t-shirt and jeans as Jesse. He was smiling broadly holding a sign that said "My Dad is the Secret Avenger." Even Annabel made the drawing, sitting proudly next to Natalie wearing a bright red cape with a small A.

"Annabel gets a cape?" asked Natalie.

“Sure. If she hadn’t freaked out that night, Jes...Dad wouldn’t have known to come save us.”

Natalie ruffled his hair and smiled. “Very true.”

Jesse pointed to the reason Kyle had to make changes. Natalie was holding a baby. Underneath the drawing read “The Secret Avenger and his Family.” “Kyle this is amazing. This is the best gift ever. We have to have this framed.”

“We’ll hang it in the living room over the sofa,” said Natalie

“You will?” Kyle asked.

“Absolutely. It’s terrific. Like I said. You’re going to be a famous artist one day and...” he looked at his son to complete his sentence.

“And you always tell me the truth.”

“Exactly.” He gave his son a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, Kyle. Thank you for this, Thank you for being my son.”

“You’re welcome, Dad.”

Jesse looked at Natalie and grinned. “What do you say we go get married?”

...and they did.

