

Colton and Kelly

By Kate Simon

High School was hell. At least it was for Kelly Johnson. Mom kept saying this was the best part of her life. If she thought that were true she'd jump off Boyertown bridge. Kelly was an average girl in an above average town. She had been picked on all through school. Lisa Ambrose was head cheerleader and head bitch of Boyertown High. She'd taken a dislike to Kelly freshman year and she'd never let up. Lisa and her pack of accomplices had made her life hell. She was teased and tormented. They would bump into her in the halls and knock the books from her arms and laugh.

Kelly was small, only five foot four, sandy brown hair, and pale skin. She burned liked a lobster if she even looked at the sun. She wasn't into sports. She preferred reading and sci fi movies. At least she had gotten rid of her braces so that was one less thing for them to pick on. She was naturally quiet and her one real friend, Sandy, moved away over the summer. Senior year was going to be a nightmare. Despite being so short she always picked a seat in the back of the class. She found it best to stay out of the line of vision of the predators.

The only bright side to her day was homeroom. Homeroom and Colton Jones. He was the starting quarterback for the football team, most popular kid at Boyertown and was dating Lisa. In homeroom she could steal a glance at him without Lisa knowing. He was six feet tall with beautiful wavy hair and the brightest blue eyes she'd ever seen. She'd had a crush on him forever. He seemed really nice, not all full of himself like some of the other jocks. Sometimes she walk down his aisle of seats just so she could get a little closer to him. Once in a while he would look up and smile a little lopsided smile. Those were the best days. She would sit in her seat, her heart racing and wonder what it would be like to kiss Colton. She also knew she was being ridiculous. Colton Jones didn't even know her name.

Colton sat down for attendance in his homeroom. All he had to do was get through senior year and then he could get out of Boyertown. More accurately, get away from his father. Everybody thought it was so great to be the son of Colton Jones, Sr. the richest man in Boyertown. What it was, was hell.

Colton Sr. had taken the family's seed business from a successful family business to the largest supplier in the country. His father was a direct descendant of the founders of Boyertown and acted as it's de facto king. Those who met with his pleasure were rewarded with fat contracts. Those who did not please him met with financial ruin or the back of his hand. Sometimes both.

His father never asked him if he wanted to take over the family business, he just assumed he would. When Colton told his father he wanted to go to college and not straight into the business his father punched him in the stomach and knocked him to the ground. Colton never made that mistake again. He would get out, he just wouldn't give his father any warning. Nothing would stop him from escaping this town and his father's grasp.

He sat down and went through his notes. He'd already made starting quarterback and the coach had given him a few plays to study before practice. That quiet girl came in the room and walked down his aisle. What was her name? Karen? No, Kelly. He knew she walked down his aisle on purpose and that was okay. He was used to the girls in school hitting on him, but not Kelly. She walked toward him and he looked up at her. She gave him a nod and a small smile. He pointed to his own smile.

"You lost the braces." She flushed bright red and nodded. "Looks good." He thought he heard her say thank you, but he couldn't be sure.

Kelly had floated all day on Colton's compliment. Colton Jones noticed her and smiled. She knew she couldn't stop smiling every time she thought about it. It wasn't much, but there was so little happiness in her life that a smile from the most popular boy in school meant the world to her. She pulled out the books from her locker she needed for homework and closed it. Standing behind the door was Lisa.

"Well hello, there. I see the summer didn't change you. You're still a mouse." Kelly tried to turn away but Lisa grabbed her by the shoulder. "I was talking to you mouse."

"Leave me alone, Lisa." She tried to pull away but slipped on the tile floor and fell down, her books scattered at her feet. Lisa, along with everyone standing near starting laughing.

"Lisa! Leave her alone!"

Kelly looked up and the crowd parted and Colton walked toward her. He looked at her and held out his hand.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he held out his hand. She saw the world blur and fade away as she nodded and took his hand. He helped her to her feet and picked up her books. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"No, thank you. I'm okay."

He smiled then turned on his girlfriend. "What is wrong with you?"

"What? Colt, baby, I didn't do anything. The klutz tripped over her own feet."

"Just leave her alone," he said as he nodded at Kelly, then turned his back on his girlfriend and walked away.

Lisa looked at Kelly with a hatred that should have sent fear down her spine. But all Kelly could think of was this would always be the moment when she knew she was in love with Colton Jones.

*Fifteen Years Later*

Kelly served Mr. and Mrs. Carter their burgers and fries. They were an adorable couple who'd been coming to the diner since their first date fifty years before.

"Don't forget our milkshakes, Kelly."

"I won't, Mrs. Carter," she smiled.

She delivered the shakes to the Carters when she looked up and saw her. And the day had been going so well. Lisa Ambrose had married Paul Olson, the mayor of Boyertown. She enjoyed her status as the first lady and loved lording it over people. She also loved fine clothes, expensive jewelry and Jerry Spencer, her tennis pro lover. He was dumb as a stump and behaved like a puppy dog around her. Lisa and her husband were headed in her direction. Of course she would sit at her station. It had been fifteen years and she still blamed her. Shortly after the incident in the hallway, Colton had dumped Lisa. She was humiliated. She was head cheerleader and she was supposed to be seen with the quarterback. She never got over it.

"Hello, can I start you off with coffee?" she asked. Paul Olson barely looked up from his phone.

"Yes, decaf."

She looked over at Lisa. "Coffee for you, Lisa?"

"It's Mrs. Olson and you can start with a clean cup." Lisa handed her the perfectly clean cup and she turned and walked behind the counter.

"Why do you put up with that bitch?" asked Dorothy who'd been a waitress at the Boyertown Diner since Kelly was in high school.

"She's married to the mayor. Do you really want him pissed at us. All he needs to do is pull a permit and we're out of business. I wouldn't do that to Paulie."

Dorothy patted her on the back. "You're a good kid, Kelly."

"Ha! I'm hardly a kid. I'm thirty three."

Dorothy smiled. "Wanna trade?"

Kelly brought the coffee to the Olson's table and grabbed her pad from her skirt. "What can I get for you?" Olson tossed his menu toward her.

"Mushroom cheeseburger, well done."

She looked at Lisa, who handed her the menu like it was laced with Ebola. "Chef's salad."

She walked to the pass through and placed the Olson's order. Kelly wondered if Lisa ever got tired of being a bitch. No, probably not. She refilled a few of the regular's coffee when she heard Paulie call "Order up"

Kelly picked the order when Dorothy came up from behind her. "You know I'd wouldn't blame you if you wanted to spike her food with some laxative."

"Dorothy, you know I would never do something like that." She winked. "I might think about it, but I'd never do it." She placed the food in front of the Olson's as Lisa was telling her husband about some charity function they were to attend. He never looked up from his phone. She caught Lisa's gaze and realized how miserable her life was. Worse yet, Lisa knew she could tell.

"Don't you have a something better to do than stand there and gawk?"

"Shut up Lisa," said Paul, again without looking up from his phone.

For the first time ever, Kelly felt sorry for Lisa Ambrose Olson.

He swore nothing would ever bring him back. When he left the Army all he wanted was some peace and quiet. The only reason Colton Jones would ever come back to Boyertown was for his mother. The old man had finally died but she was left with a company she had no idea how to run and contractors who were more than likely stealing her blind. Mom was good at keeping a blind eye to things. She knew the old man was a bastard but she was old school. Once you married, you stayed married.

He drove up the long driveway to the elaborate Victorian farmhouse. He put his car in park and looked at the front door. There was a wreath on the door with a black band across it. He'd seen a lot of death in his time in the service, but this was the first time it had ever given him a sense of relief. He wondered if that made him just as bad as his old man.

He knocked on the door and the family housekeeper, Hannah opened it to him. "Mr. Colton, oh it's so good to see you."

Colton gave the older woman a hug. "It's good to see you again."

She gave him a wink and a smile. "I made bread pudding."

He kissed her cheek. "You're the best." He looked around the open rooms. "Where is she?"

"In the den." Hannah touched his arm. "She's not doing well."

He stood in the doorway of the den and looked at his mother. Mary Jones looked twenty years older than she actually was. Life with the old man could do that to you. "Hi Mom."

She looked up at him and began to weep. "Colton, my baby." She held out her arms and he folds his mother into his arms. "I've missed you so much."

"I missed you too, Mom."

"You could have come home."

"No I couldn't and you know why."

"I don't know what to do about the funeral."

This was Mom. When she didn't want to talk about something she changed the subject, sometimes fast enough to give you whiplash. He tried not to blame her. She did what she had to do to survive living with the old man. "I'll handle things."

The relief on his mother was so profound he thought she'd collapse. "Oh, thank you, sweetheart. I don't know what I'd do without you. You can do the eulogy."

"No."

"What?"

"Mom, I will do everything I can to help you, but I will not stand up before this town and sing the praises of a man who used to beat the crap out of me."

"Colton, I...I tried."

"What?"

She sat down in the wingchair and began to weep. "I tried to stop him. He hurt me. He said if I didn't mind my own business he'd do worse. I believed him. I'm so sorry, baby. I should have tried harder."

Colton stood stock still. She hadn't ignored what was going on. She'd been a victim too. He knelt by her side and gave her a hug. "Mom, it's okay."

"No it's not. I'm your mother. I should have protected you from that bastard."

He smiled the first genuine smile he ever had in that house. "Mom, I forgive you. You need to forgive yourself." He tried to calm his raging emotions. Everything he thought was true for most of his life wasn't. "I'm sorry I left you to him. I didn't know. Do you forgive me?"

She smiled and touched his cheek. "As much as I missed you, I was glad when you left. You were safe from him. Once you were gone he spent all his time with his business and his women. He was happy to leave me to my garden club and charity work."

"Mom, why are we having a funeral for him? Why not bury him and forget him?"



"I can't, Colton. No one knows. My reputation in this town is all I ever had. If I didn't well, there would be talk."

"Okay, Mom. We will do what ever you want." His mother smiled and looked suddenly tired. "Why don't you have a little nap? Hannah will wake you for dinner."

She grabbed his arm with surprising strength. "You'll still be here?"

"I may go out for a bit, but I promise I will be home for dinner." He leaned in and kissed her cheek and smiled. "I promise, Mom."

She seemed to relax. "Maybe I'll do that."

He pressed the intercom and called for Hannah. "Yes, Mr. Colton?"

"My mother wants to take a nap. Will you help her up the stairs?"

"Of course." A few moments later Hannah came into the den. "Let's get you up stairs, Mrs."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Hannah."

"Don't you worry about that. I'm not going anywhere."

His mother looked at him and smiled. "Neither is Colton. He's going to stay and help me."

Hannah gave him a big smile. "Of course he is. He's a good boy."

Colton watched them go up the stairs and into his mother's room. He went out to his car and grabbed his bag. He hadn't planned on staying that long but his mother's state may change that. He took his bag up to his old room and set it down. Nothing had changed. Not a single thing. It looked exactly the way he'd left it. He suddenly felt like an eighteen year old kid again. A failure his father was ashamed of. He walked into the hallway and ran into Hannah.

"She'll be asleep in a minute. She was so worried you wouldn't come. I don't think she's slept more than a few hours this week."

He marveled how Hannah had taken care of his family since he was a baby. She was town girl who's parents had died and she had no family to take her in. She came to work for them as a maid, then as a cook. Her sandy brown hair had turned grey but she was still the trim, lovely woman she'd always been. It had been Hannah who'd taken care of his skinned knees and fed him homemade chicken soup when he was sick. "Hannah, I'm going out for a bit but I promise I'll be home by six."

"You better be or I'll come looking for you."

He smiled and kissed her cheek. "I promise, Ma'am."

Kelly took a double shift, letting Dorothy go home to take care of her sick husband. He had been home sick with the flu and Dorothy was concerned. "Dave never calls out sick so I just want to check on him."

"It's no problem. Go on. Paulie doesn't care so long as he has the coverage."

It was four thirty. The lunch rush was over and it gave her time to prepare for the dinner rush. She was wiping down the counter when he walked in. Her vision blurred, he looked just like he did that day in the hall. She blinked and he walked closer. She saw some trace of grey at his temples, a few lines by his eyes. Colton Jones was back in town.

He sat down at the counter and she walked towards him. "Hello, Colton," she thought she said it out loud, but wasn't sure.

He looked at her and then smiled. "Kelly?" She nodded. "How are you?" He extended his hand. She took it and held it.

"I'm fine. I was sorry to hear about your father."

"Don't be. He was a bastard and if there's any justice he's roasting in hell." She gasped and he quickly apologized. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I've been in the car for hours and I'm tired."

"It's okay. How about some coffee."

"God, yes."

Kelly poured the coffee and tried to steady her hand. Colton Jones was sitting at her counter. Fifteen years later and her heart still pounded. She brought him his coffee and he took a deep sip. "Cream and sugar?"

"No. I'm ex-Army. We drink it black and strong. This is perfect."

"Would you like some pie to go with it?"

"I would but my mother is expecting me for dinner soon. If I spoil my appetite Hannah will be cross with me."

"Hannah?"

“She’s been our housekeeper since I was a kid.”

“Did you come back for the funeral?” He nodded and took another sip of his coffee.  
“So you’re not staying.”

“I thought it would be a short trip, but now I think I might be here longer. My mom needs some help.”

“You always were a good guy, Colton.”

“Thanks, Kelly.”

“You can tell me it’s none of my business but everyone thought you’d go to college after high school. I know you had offers.”

He smiled the lopsided smile she loved. “You know I had offers?”

“I paid attention.”

His face got dark. “My father. He wanted me to go straight into the family business. I didn’t want to. The only way I could get away from him was to join the Army without telling anyone. I left a note for my mother one night and I didn’t see her again until today.”

Kelly reached her hand for his. “I’m so sorry.”

He looked at her with misted eyes. “No one knows that outside my family. I don’t know why I told you.”

She smiled. “Maybe because you needed to. Don’t worry Colton. I won’t say anything.”

He looked at her a little crooked and smiled, “Yeah, I know you won’t.”

Colton couldn't believe the change in Kelly. She looked so different from the quiet girl he'd known in school. She'd really grown into a beautiful woman. He didn't understand why she was behind the counter at Paulie's. She was obviously so much more. "Okay, I've answered your questions. Now it's my turn. Why didn't you go to college? You were always the smartest person in class. I'm sure you had offers."

Kelly smiled. "How do you know I had offers?"

"I paid attention."

"I did. I had a scholarship to Temple University but I couldn't go. Right after graduation my mother got sick. Actually, she'd been sick for awhile but didn't tell me. She had ALS. I stayed home to take care of her. She died five years ago."

He took her hand. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you."

"What were you going to study?"

"Actually I am studying, psychology. One course a time at the local campus. It's taken me awhile but I'm only a few courses short of my degree."

"That's great! Are you going to be a therapist?"

"Actually, I want to be a school counselor. I want to help kids like me. And kids like Lisa."

Colton rolled his eyes. "Good Lord. That girl made your life miserable."

"It was so good of you to defend me."

"She never let up, did she?"

"No, she blamed me for you breaking up with her."

"That was definitely part of it. Lisa was a bully but she was also banging half the team. My so called friends finally came to me and owned up."

“Why did they own up?”

“Because the coach caught them.”

“Oh, Colton. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not. Not now and not then. I was with her because it seemed like the thing to do. I was like that back then. I did things because I was supposed to, not because I wanted to.”

“Protecting me wasn’t what you were supposed to do. No one else would. You did it because you’ve always been a good man.”

“Thank you, Kelly.” He looked at his watch and gasped. “Oh Lord, I’ve got to run. If I’m late Hannah will have my hide.”

“It was good to see you again,” she said with a smile.

“Will you be here tomorrow?”

“Ah, yes. I have the lunch shift.”

“I think I’m going to want one of Paulie’s burgers for lunch tomorrow,” he smiled.

She smiled. “I’ll see you then.”

He left twenty dollars for the two dollar bill and left the diner. He started the drive back home thinking of Kelly Johnson and the beautiful smile he’d never seen before.

Colton sat down to dinner with Mom and was surprised when Hannah joined them. His father would have never allowed it. Hannah was a servant and never let her forget it. His mother looked more rested and caught his look as Hannah joined him.

“Your father spent less and less time with me so Hannah would join me.” Mary reached over and patted Hannah’s hand. “She’s taken such good care of me. She’s been such a good friend.”

“I’m so glad,” he smiled. He enjoyed Hannah’s excellent cooking. He took a bite of Hannah’s stew and sighed, “Oh I have missed your food, Hannah.”

“You’re so sweet,” she smiled.

“Hannah, thank you looking after Mom all these years. And thank you for getting my letters to her.” Every time he was transferred to a new post he would send Hannah a letter to a post office box and she would make sure his mother got it. He knew if he sent something to the house the old man would never let her have it. When he got out of the service he let his mother know he was living in upstate New York. As much as he’d thought his mother had been blind to his father’s abuse, he knew she loved him. He couldn’t let her worry about him.

“Colton, could you speak with the Reverend tomorrow about the arrangements?”

“Of course, Mom. Who’s handling the will?” Mary and Hannah looked at each other. “What is it?”

“There isn’t one?”

“What?”

“Bill Sampson was always on him to make one but he said he was too young to think about that.”

“So who’s handling the bills?”

“He is.”

Colton didn't like that. He had known Bill Sampson and he was just like his father. "Mom, would it be okay with you if I asked Sampson to come here tomorrow. I'd like to go over details of the estate."

"Of course, dear. I was hoping you would. I don't know anything about those things."

"Well one thing I can tell you for sure, if he died without a will, you are his sole beneficiary."

"What? What about you?"

"I could have a claim on the estate because I'm his son but I would never take it. You know I've never wanted anything from him and I would never take anything from you."

Mary grabbed his hand. "Colton, this home is your heritage. This will all come to you someday."

"Not for a very, very long time. See to that, Mom. Fifty five is still young. I'm counting on you being around forever."

Mary smiled a smile he hadn't seen in longer than he could remember. "I will do my very best, sweetheart."

"Mom when all this is over why don't you take a trip. Go somewhere you've always wanted to see."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"There must be somewhere you've always wanted to see." He saw a glint in her eye and he knew he was right. "Where? Tell me."

"I always wanted to see Paris."

"Great. After all the estate stuff is settled you and Hannah go to Paris."

Hannah dropped her fork. "Me?"

"Sure. You deserve it and who's been a better friend to my mother better than you."



“Oh I don’t know, dear,” said Mary. “Paris would be a very expensive trip.”

“Mom, don’t you know? You’re now the richest woman in town, probably the whole state.”

Mary paled. “What? Your father said...”

“Yeah well we all know he was a lying bastard. Forget everything he told you. I will get a complete accounting of the estate and go over it with you.”

“Oh Colton, thank you. I feel so much better knowing you will be doing this. You’re so good with numbers.”

Colton grinned. “Yes, Mom. I’m good with numbers.” After he’d gotten out of the service he’d finished his four year degree in less than three years and his masters in just over a year. He was now a high school physics teacher.

“Did you enjoy your drive?” Hannah asked.

“I did. Not that much has changed.”

“No it hasn’t.”

“I stopped at the diner and one of my classmates was working behind the counter. Kelly Johnson.”

“I don’t remember you mentioning her, dear,” said his mother.

“She was a quiet girl. Always studying and always getting picked on by Lisa.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “I never liked that girl Mr. Colton. She was trouble from the get go. Still is.”

“You always were a good judge of character, Hannah. And from now on, just call me Colton. After all these years, you’re family.” He was surprised when her eyes misted over.

Mary patted Hannah’s hand. “That’s very true.”

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Hannah whispered.

“Hey, someone promised me bread pudding.”

Hannah grinned. “That I did.” She got up from the table and started clearing. Colton stood to help. She looked at him in shock.

“Family helps.”

Colton visited the funeral home. He picked out the coffin and asked the director to recommend a florist. The advantage with living in a fairly small town was every thing was close. He stopped in at the florist and gave her a price point and told her to do what ever she thought appropriate. His mother had gratefully passed all of these tasks to him. He didn't want her to have to deal with any of it. The next stop was a bit more difficult. The reverend didn't understand why Colton didn't want to do the eulogy.

"I'm sure your mother would want you to talk about your father's life."

"Trust me, reverend, she's fine with it. If you want to say a few words, that would be fine."

"Very well. If that's what you want?"

"It is."

He drove past Paulie's and smiled. He'd make the meeting with his father's lawyer quick enough to make lunch with Kelly. He pulled into the driveway and sighed. He knew he had no reason to be nervous, not any more. The old man was dead. He couldn't hurt him anymore. But he still had butterflies in his stomach.

He went into the kitchen and saw the massive number of flowers and fruit baskets that had been delivered. His mother and Hannah were sitting at the table writing down a list of who sent what.

"Hello, dear. Did everything go alright?"

"It was fine. There is one thing I want to talk to you about, actually to Hannah. Everything is set for a Monday service at noon and then the reception back here. I'd like to hire a caterer and wait staff."

"What? You want strangers in my kitchen? Do you think I can't handle it?"

"Of course not, but there could be as many as one hundred people going through here on Monday. You could supervise the food but I'd rather you be available for my mother. It's going to be a difficult day and she will need you with her, not in the kitchen."

Mary smiled at her friend. "He's right, Hannah."

“Very well,” she said with a bit of reluctance. “But don’t you go thinking I can’t handle things. I’m not that old. I’ll be making my fried chicken tonight, so don’t be late.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” He grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. “Mom, there is something I want to talk to you about, something important.”

Hannah stood. “I’ll give you two a moment.” She began to leave and he indicated she sit.

“No Hannah. It’s nothing you can’t hear.” He took a sip of his coffee and took a breath. “There will be a lot of decisions to be made, bills to be paid. If I’m going to act on your behalf I’m going to need a power of attorney.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Mom, you don’t have to answer right away. You can think about it. I don’t want you to feel pressure.”

“Colton, I have no idea about the business or estate matters. I would feel so much better if I know you were taking care of things.”

“Mom, I will go over everything with you. I don’t want you to think I’d ever take advantage of you.”

Mary took her son’s hand. “I know you. I trust you would always act in my best interest.”

“I haven’t been home in fifteen years. You don’t know what I’ve become.”

Mary smiled and gave her son the best compliment he’d ever had. “I know you. You’re not your father.”

Colton vaguely remembered Bill Sampson. He'd been in some classes with his son. He'd told Sampson to be here at ten and he arrived on time. Hannah escorted the attorney to what had been his father's office. He stood from behind the desk and his extended his hand. "Thank you for coming."

"You're welcome. I must say I was surprised when I got your call. Your family hasn't heard from you in fifteen years," he said as he sat opposite .

"That's not exactly true. My father hadn't heard from me. I never lost contact with my mother."

His head snapped up. "Excuse me." Colton hit the intercom button and asked his mother to join him. Mary came into the office and Sampson stood and offered his hand. "Mary, it's a real tragedy about Colton. He was too young to go."

"Thank you, Bill. Now there is something I want you to do for me."

He smiled broadly. "Of course, Mary, anything."

"We both know that I have no idea how to run the business."

"We can continue as is and I'll take care of things for you."

"No we can't"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm giving my son power of attorney. He will be acting on my behalf."

Sampson looked back and forth between Colton and Mary. "I wouldn't advise that, Mary. Colton has been MIA for fifteen years. He has no more idea how to run the business than you do."

Mary smiled at her son. "I have every faith in him." She turned to Sampson. "Make it happen." She walked over to Colton and kissed his cheek. "I'll be in the kitchen with Hannah. There are so many thank you notes to write."

Colton smiled at his mother as she closed the door. He was starting to see a side of her he hadn't seen before and he liked what he was seeing. "Well, Bill, shall we get

started?” Sampson looked like he was frozen, trying to process what had happened. “Bill, files, books, you brought them, yes?”

“Ah, yes. He opened his briefcase and he pulled out a bound report. This is the last quarterly report for the business. You’ll want me to go over that with you.”

“That won’t be necessary.” He opened the top desk drawer and pulled out his father’s checkbook. It was a large, leather bound book and he flipped it open. His stomach fluttered when he saw his father’s handwriting. He had to remind himself he was no longer an eighteen year old kid and the old man was dead. “I was reviewing the expenses last night and I found two checks written every month to The Summit for twelve hundred dollars each. The Summit is an apartment complex and these look like rent checks. Why was my father paying rent on two apartments?”

“Well...your father covered the rent for a few...friends.”

“Girlfriends.”

“Well I...”

“I’m not shocked. I’m not even mildly surprised. Are there any children involved?”

“No, of course not.”

“Don’t sound like that makes it alright. How long are the leases?”

Sampson’s shoulders dropped as he realized he was outmatched. “Month to month.”

Colton snickered. “I’m not surprised. Notify the occupants they will have one month to find different situations. I will write them each a check for five thousand to cover expenses. To get the checks they will sign agreements not to make any further claims on the estate. They can keep whatever my father gave them. And make it clear neither of them are to show at the funeral. “Draft the power of attorney and take care of the girlfriends. Everything else can wait until after the funeral and I’ve had time to review this report.”

“Very well...sir. I’ll have the documents ready for you to sign later today. After that you will have full authority to act on your mother’s behalf.”

Colton stood and extended his hand, showing Sampson their meeting was over. “Thank you, Bill.” Sampson closed the door behind him and he sat back down in his father’s chair. He took a look at the list of employees and their positions in the company. Some of the names he knew, but most he didn’t. He knew someone who would.

Kelly was nervous to see Colton again. He said he was coming for lunch but men say things. She chastised herself. Colton Jones wasn't just any man. She was serving a regular his lunch when Colton came through the door. She smiled and he took a seat at the counter.

Dorothy came up from behind her. "Is he why you've been so distracted today?"

"What? I'm not distracted."

"You've been looking at the door every few minutes for the last hour."

"I have not."

"Who is he."

Kelly turned and smiled. "Colton Jones." She enjoyed the shocked look on Dorothy's face as she walked toward him. Everyone in town knew the story of the heir of the richest man in town taking off never to be heard from again, until now. "Hi."

"Hi," he smiled.

"How are you?"

"Okay. I'm dealing with the details. The funeral is Monday. There's a lot of paperwork."

"How about a Paulie special?"

"That sounds great."

"Coffee?"

"No, I think I'll have an ice tea."

Kelly placed the order and came back with his ice tea. "Can I get you anything else?"

He looked around the diner and back at Kelly. "Do you have a few minutes to talk? I would like to ask your help with something."



“Of course.” She walked toward Dorothy and asked her to cover for her for a few minutes. Dorothy nodded and winked. Kelly rolled her eyes and walked back to Colton, grabbing his burger on the way.

He took a bite, set down his burger and smiled. “Paulie hasn’t lost his touch. Still the best burgers in the state.” He took a sip of his tea.

“You said you needed my help?”

“Yes. Everyone in town comes here. I haven’t been in town for so long I don’t know a lot of people. I’ve been given the Jones Quarterly Report and it has lists of executives and employees. I was hoping you could give me an idea of who these people are.”

“Me? Colton, I’m just a waitress.”

“First of all your not ‘just’ anyone. I’ve always thought you could tell a lot about people by how they treat wait staff. And with your background in psychology there isn’t anyone I can think of who could give me better insight.”

“Well, okay, if you think it will help.”

“Thank you,” he said with a broad smile.

“But we shouldn’t do it here. If someone were to overhear.”

“Excellent point. Where would you like to go?”

“My apartment is a few blocks from here. We can do it there.”

“That would be great. When do you get off?”

“Three.”

“Do you mind if I hang out until then?”

Kelly smiled. “I have an idea.” She walked over to Dorothy. “You said Phil was feeling better.”

“Yeah, he’s good.”

“Do you think you could cover the rest of my shift for me?”

“Does this have something to do with Mr. Dreamy over there?” Kelly couldn’t hide her blush. “Oh thank God. Finally. Go. Now.”

“Thanks Dorothy.” She went back to Colton where he was gobbling up some of Paulie’s fries. “Dorothy’s going to cover the rest of my shift. You finish your lunch and I’ll go in the back and change.”

Kelly changed into her jeans and a t-shirt. She tied up her sneakers. She pulled out her ponytail and ran a brush through her hair. She set her brush down and looked in the mirror. “Close enough.” She walked out to the counter just as Colton was paying his bill. “Ready.” Colton turned around, looked her up and down and smiled.

“After you,” he said as he held the door. He walked towards his car. “I’ll follow you.”

Kelly laughed. “Well, you’ll be following me pretty slow. I don’t have a car.”

“What?”

“I walk to work.”

Colton shook his head. “Well then hop in.” Kelly got in the passenger side of his car and buckled up. “You walk to work. Every day?”

“Yes.”

“What if it’s raining or snowing?”

“That would be the reason I keep my uniforms in the back.” Kelly directed Colton through the few turns to her apartment. She lived on the top floor of a large Victorian that had been turned into a four block of apartments. As she opened the door to her place she was glad she’d done her dishes this morning. Her place may be small but it was tidy and suited her needs. It was one great room with a small bedroom and bath. She sat her purse on the sideboard. “Can I get you a drink. I have iced tea and...” She opened her fridge. “and iced tea.”

“Uh, let’s see...Iced tea,” Colton smiled.

“Good choice.” She poured them each a drink and they sat at her small dining table. Colton set a binder on the table and opened the cover.

“This is the last quarterly report for Jones Seeds. It lists all the executives and if I do know them it’s been fifteen years since I’ve seen any of them. A lot can happen in fifteen years.”

Kelly took a sip of her drink. “Very true.”

“I really appreciate you doing this for me.”

“I’m happy to help.”

“The first person I want to ask you about is Bill Sampson. He’s my father’s lawyer.”

“He’s been in a lot with your father. He always struck me as the ‘go along to get along’ type. I don’t know if your father was his only client but he’s certainly the biggest. I think your father’s behavior embarrassed him but he never spoke against him.”

“What do you mean, my father’s behavior?”

She glanced down at her drink. “Well...”

“Nothing you can tell me about my father would surprise me.”

“Your father could get a bit...fresh.”

“Fresh?”

“He liked to get handsy. He thought he was so smooth. He wasn’t.”

“Did he try something with you?”

“Once.” She couldn’t help but grin. “It’s amazing fast how an ice cold soda in his lap cooled his ardor.”

Colton laughed. “I would have loved to see that.”

“He tried to have me fired but Paulie told him to go to hell. Paulie treats me like a daughter.”

Colton reached for her hand. “I’m sorry for what he did.”

“You don’t owe me an apology. You’re not your father. In fact, you’re nothing like him.”

“Thank you.” His smile made her heart leap. “Do you think I can trust Sampson?”

“I think once he understands who you really are and not what your father may have told him, I think he’ll be relieved.”

“Thanks. That’s helpful.” He looked at the list of executives. Each had a photo next to their name. “How about this guy, Dean Wilkins? He’s head of operations.”

“Oh, I know him. Nice man. Good tipper. Very polite.”

They continued down the list until they came to a picture of Wayne Barlow, a sales rep covering the east coast. Kelly physically recoiled. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s nothing I can put a finger on. He’s been in the diner. He’s never done anything inappropriate, but there is something about him.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Animals are hard wired for fight or flight response. It saves prey from predators. We have that instinct too but we have been raised not to listen to it, to not judge. There is something about this guy that makes my skin crawl.”

“Okay. I’ll look into him, quietly.”

He reviewed some of the employee names, most of whom, Kelly had at least a passing knowledge of them. “I can’t thank you enough for all of this.”

“I hope it’s some help.”

“It is. At least when I go into a meeting I’ll have a some idea who I’m dealing with.” He closed the report and sighed. “When I think about it all it’s pretty overwhelming.”

Kelly reached over and closed the report. “Why don’t you take a break from this for a while.” She nodded toward her living room area. “It’s not much but it’s more comfortable than these chairs.” They got up and sat on her small couch.

“You don’t need to apologize for your home. It’s perfectly comfortable.”

“After my mother died I sold the house and moved here. It’s walking distance to work and I could use the rest of the money to pay for school.”

Colton smiled. "Sounds like a very logical plan to me."

"You haven't told me what you're doing. You said you got out of the Army but that's all."

"I teach high school physics."

Kelly gasped and smiled. "That's fantastic."

"I enjoy it."

"Do you do any coaching?"

"I used to do some pee wee football but it got too crazy with the parents."

Kelly paused. She had to ask. "Is there someone waiting for you at home?"

Colton smiled. "No, Kelly. I'm very single. What about you? Is there someone gonna want to punch me out for being alone with you?"

She laughed. "No. Between work and school I don't have much time for anything. Even if I did, well..."

"Well what?"

"The men in this town know me from school. A lot of them still call me Mouse."

Colton look genuinely surprised. "Are they all blind?" Kelly laughed. "I'm very serious. You were a cute girl in school but you grew up to be a beautiful woman. Anyone who can't see that must be blind."

"Thank you, Colton. That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me." She was surprised when he reached over and touched her hair, pushing a stray strand off her cheek.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," she whispered trying to maintain her composure.

"When we were in school, did you walk down my aisle on purpose?" Kelly could feel her face flush bright red. All she could do was nod. "I always thought there was

something special about you. I think I was right.” He leaned in slowly. “May I?” She smiled and he gave her the softest of kisses. He pulled back and smiled. “Yeah, I was definitely right. You’re very special.”

Kelly’s heart was pounding as he kissed her again this time with a passion she never expected. She ran her fingers around his neck and up into his hair. She lost all ability to think and gave over to the passion that had been simmering for fifteen years.

When they finally came up for air Kelly giggled. Colton smiled. “What is it?”

“When we were in school I always wondered what it would be like to kiss you.”

He took her hands in his. “What’s the verdict?”

“I couldn’t have imagined,” she whispered. He gave her another soft kiss.

“Neither could I.”

“I was so sad when you left town. Why didn’t you come back?”

He leaned back against the sofa. “I didn’t think I had a reason to come back. My father was an abusive bastard. Ever since I could remember he was beating the crap out of me. He was smart and never left marks where anyone could see. I thought my mother was turning a blind eye to what was going on. She was always so concerned with appearance and her place in the town. I left her a note when I joined the army but I couldn’t let her worry. I kept in touch through Hannah. I would send the letters to her so I knew Mom would get them. I only came back for the funeral because my mother asked me. When I got home she told me he’d done the same thing to her. She had tried to protect me but she couldn’t.” He closed his eyes and pushed a tear off his cheek. “All this time I blamed her.”

Her heart broke for him. She’d had no idea what he’d been going through. No one did. She held his hands to her heart. “Listen to me. You can’t change history but you still have time to have the relationship with your mother he denied you. It’s not too late.”

He gave her a sad smile. “ You’re right, of course.”

“You can come back and visit more often.”

“I could.” He smiled and gave her another soft kiss. “Or I could stay.”

Kelly’s heart pounded. “That would be wonderful. I’m sure your mother would be so pleased.”

“That’s true. I need to get the business set with the right people so my mother doesn’t have to worry about it.”

She forced a smile. “Of course.”

He ran a finger over her cheek. “Would you like it if I stayed?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “but I don’t want you to make a decision because of me. This needs to be right for you.”

Colton gave her a smile she didn’t quite understand. “I promise we’ll talk before I make any decisions.” He reached his hand to her cheek and pulled her into a kiss. “Normally, this is the part when I ask you out on a date tonight.”

“Normally?”

“Hannah is making me her fried chicken tonight. She’s making all my favorites. She’ll have my head if I’m late.”

“Of course, I understand. They’re both happy to have you home.”

“Hold on.” He pulled out his phone and hit a contact picture. “Hi Mom.”

“Hello, dear.”

“Hannah’s making me her chicken tonight.”

“Oh Colton, she’s been working all afternoon. Chicken, scratch biscuits, all your favorites. You’re not cancelling are you?”

“No Mom, I wouldn’t think about it. I was wondering if Hannah could set an extra place?” Kelly gasped. “Remember my friend Kelly I told you about?”

“You told her about me?” she whispered.

He smiled and nodded. “I was just telling Kelly what a wonderful cook Hannah is.”

“Of course dear. Bring your friend,” said Mary.

“Thanks Mom. See you soon.” He disconnected the call and Kelly smacked his shoulder. “What?” he laughed.

“You want me to have dinner with your mother, without asking me first?”

He grinned. “I apologize. Will you please have dinner at my home tonight?” He threaded his fingers through hers. “The truth of the matter is, I’m being selfish.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I’m with you I feel so...comfortable isn’t the right word. Coming back to this town has been difficult for me. Even though my mother and I are good now, I still feel on edge and I’m not sure why.”

“You’ve had such an emotional upheaval in the past few days and then taking on the responsibility of the business, it’s no wonder you feel uneasy.”

Colton smiled. “You’re going to be a great counselor one day. What you said is true, but not when I’m with you. In high school I always thought you were so cute.”

“You did?”

“The way you would walk past me and smile but you weren’t like the other girls.”

Kelly laughed. “That’s for sure.”

“You were better. I could see you had plans, you were focused. I thought about you over the years, wondering what you were doing.”

“You did?”

“I did. When I walked into the diner and saw you, I was so glad. I don’t know how to describe it, Kelly and I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, other than to say when I’m with you everything feels right, like it’s supposed to. Am I make any sense?”

She smiled and gave him a light kiss. “Now that is definitely the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. After that I can’t refuse your invitation.”



“Great. We should get going.”

“Oh no. I’m not meeting your mother smelling like French fries. I need a shower.” She stood and he took her hand and smiled.

“You do not smell like French fries.”

“Colton Jones this is not up for debate. I won’t be long.” She ran into the bathroom and closed the door. She looked into the mirror. “This is crazy.” She knew if she gave herself time to think about it she’d chicken out so she pulled her hair into a quick ponytail so she wouldn’t get her hair wet. She pulled off her clothes and tossed them in the hamper. A few minutes in the shower and she felt she’d sluffed off enough of the diner to pass muster. She wrapped the towel tight around herself to make the quick dash to her bedroom. She opened the door and Colton was staring at her.

“Damn,” he whispered. She felt herself frozen as he walked toward her and looked her up and down. “So beautiful.” He gave her a soft kiss. She wanted more than anything to fall into his arms but she pushed him back. “You can’t look like that and not expect me to want you.”

“Your mother is waiting for us.”

He smiled and turned around. “That’ll do it.”

Colton looked over at Kelly as he drove home. He couldn't believe how good it felt to be with her. He had never felt this unguarded with any woman. He'd had a few relationships over the years but he'd always been on the defensive, never letting anyone get too close. Maybe it was his relationship with Lisa or with his mother that always had him looking for their faults. He smiled to himself. That's probably what Kelly would tell him. They pulled into the driveway and he could feel her tense. "Calm down. They are going to love you."

"How can you be so sure? Your family is...well your family. I'm just a waitress in a diner."

He turned her face toward him. "I'm going to say this one more time and maybe this time you'll listen. You're not 'just' anything. You are a wonderful, smart, funny, beautiful woman. You are a woman I am proud to be seen with, proud to bring home to meet my mother. Are we clear?" She smiled and nodded. "Good." He pulled her close for a deep kiss. "Don't forget it. Now let's go have some fried chicken." They got out of the car and he took Kelly by the hand. He wanted her to relax and to know what he'd told her was true. He really was happy to bring her home. He opened the door and tossed his keys on the sideboard. "Mom, Hannah, we're home."

His mother came out of the living room to meet them. "There you are," she said as she kissed her son's cheek. She looked at Kelly and smiled. "Oh yes, I remember you from Paulie's." She extended her hand. "You are always so sweet."

"Is he finally here?" asked Hannah as she came out of the kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am. I wouldn't miss your chicken for anything. Mom said it was alright to bring my friend, Kelly, to dinner."

"Oh yes, I know you now. You're that nice girl from Paulie's."

"Yes, ma'am."

Hannah put her hand on Colton's arm. "Come on now. Dinner's ready."

They went into the dining room and Colton held out the chair next to his mother for Kelly. His mother took her seat at the head of the table and Hannah set the chicken on the table. Hannah started passing bowls and platters.

“So you went to school with my son?”

“Yes ma’am. We had a few classes together and homeroom because my last name is Johnson.”

“Colton, you never mentioned Kelly.”

Colton stumbled, “Well I...”

“We traveled in different circles, Mrs. Jones. Colton was the sports star and I was always in the library. I was pretty quiet in school. They called me Mouse.”

“Colton! You never called her such a name.”

“No ma’am.” He reached for her hand. “I thought she was very sweet.”

“You should have gone out with her instead of that...cheerleader.”

Colton smiled. “Yes, Mom. You’re absolutely right.”

“How long have you been at Paulie’s?” asked Hannah.

“Five years full time. Before that I was taking care of my mother.”

“Oh dear, what happened?” asked Mary.

“She had ALS. By the time I graduated from high school it was apparent she would need full time care. I would pick up the occasional shift at Paulie’s in the beginning but toward the end,” she paused. “I didn’t want to leave her. She passed five years ago.”

Mary reached for her hand. “Oh dear, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jones.”

“Oh please, call me Mary.”

Kelly smiled. “Okay, Mary.”

Colton patted Kelly's leg under the table. She was doing great and he could tell Mom liked her. He didn't want her to have to talk about her mother. He could tell how much he missed her. "Kelly had to put her studies on hold but she's almost finished her degree in psychology."

"Really? That's wonderful."

"It took a while but I'm almost there."

"She wants to be a school counselor."

"That's wonderful, dear. You know my Colton teaches physics."

"I do. You must be so proud of him."

Mary's eyes teared. "I am. So proud. He grew up into a very good man."

Kelly reached for Mary's hand. "Yes he did, but he was always good. When I was in school and kids were picking on me, Colton defended me."

"Why would they pick on you? You're so sweet."

"Thank you, Mary. I was very shy, braces and I always had my head in a book. Kids can be very mean."

"I could tell even then she was going to be someone special. I was right," he said. He smiled when she blushed right red.

"You hush," she whispered. "Miss Hannah your food is delicious. I know Paulie would kill for your chicken."

"Oh no," she smiled. "That's my family's secret recipe."

Colton noticed his mother had stopped eating. She was staring down at her lap and he saw a tear fall. "Mom? What's wrong?"

"Why couldn't it have always been like this? This is how it's supposed to be, a family gathered around the table enjoying food and good company."

Before he could do anything, Kelly reached over and took his mother's hand. "It's okay to enjoy yourself, Mary."

"I'm about to bury my husband of thirty five years and I'm sitting here laughing and smiling."

Colton watched with fascination as Kelly met his mother's gaze. "You're allowed to have happiness. I'd say it's been too long coming."

"Amen," said Hannah.

"Mary, he used to come into the diner. He was not a nice man. He behaved as if he owned the town and everyone in it." Mary nodded. "Colton told me what it was like to live with him, what he did." Mary gasped and looked at him. "Don't worry, Mary. I'll keep his confidence. You were loyal to him for thirty five years. Your obligations to him are done after Monday."

"But I just feel so...relieved!" she cried. "He was my husband. I should be in mourning but I'm not."

"Mary, he was a coward. He took his frustrations out on his child and his wife. He doesn't deserve to be mourned. And both of you are allowed to be happy he's gone." Mary jumped up from the table and ran from the room. Kelly looked panicked. "Oh my God, Colton! What have I done?" She jumped up from the table and ran after his mother. He followed and found his mother in the living room, crying.

Kelly touched Mary's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Mary. I had no business saying..." Mary turned around and pulled Kelly into a tight hug.

"Oh you dear girl. All you did was say everything I was thinking. I thought I was horrible."

"No, Mary," she said through her own tears. "You're reaction is completely normal."

"You'll be with us, won't you? On Monday?"

"If that's what you want." She looked at Colton who nodded and gave her a small smile. "Of course I'll be there."

Mary looking over Kelly's shoulder and saw a worried Hannah standing in the doorway. She walked over and hugged her friend. "I'm sorry I spoiled your wonderful meal."

Hannah smiled and patted her back. "You did no such thing. Why don't you go wipe your eyes and I'll get dessert." Hannah looked at Colton. "Lemon meringue pie"

Colton rolled his eyes. "Oh Hannah, I love you. Kelly, this is the best pie ever."

Hannah and Kelly went back to the kitchen as Colton stopped his mother. "Mom are you okay?"

"Sweetheart, I'm fine, really. Your girl is wonderful. She's so kind." She glanced over to the dining room. "I think you should hold on to her."

He leaned toward his mother and whispered, "I think I should too."

Colton drove Kelly back to her apartment and pulled into the driveway. He followed her up to her apartment and waited at the door. "May I come in?"

"Of course. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, thanks."

Kelly held up a small plastic cup. "Decaf."

"Good idea."

Kelly put the cup in the machine and made a mug for him and one for her. She kicked off her shoes as they both got comfortable. "Colton, are you sure about me being at the funeral?"

He took her hand. "Absolutely. It seems you have a calming effect on not just me but my mother as well."

"I don't know about that. I seemed to get her pretty upset. I forget sometimes, I'm a waitress, not a therapist."

"Kelly, you gave voice to what my mother was thinking and feeling. You told her she was right. She may have been crying but you made her feel better."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. She took me aside and said 'Your girl is wonderful. She's so kind.'"

"She did?"

"Her exact words."

Kelly blushed. "Your girl?"

He put his arm around her shoulder. "Yeah. My girl." He gave her a kiss and she tasted of coffee and passion. "What do you think about that?"

She smiled. "The kiss? First rate."

"You know what I meant. Being my girl."

“I like it very much.” She gave him a quick kiss. “Of course, that would make you my man.”

Colton grinned. “Yeah it would.”

“I like that too.”

“So do I.” He pulled her into a deep kiss. She melted into him and he ran his hands up her waist. He nibbled at her neck as she ran her hands through his hair.

“Colton,” she whispered.

“Hmmm?”

“I want nothing more than for you to stay.”

“I’m sensing a but.”

“But...I have the seven a.m. shift.”

“How late do you have to work?”

“I work until three.”

“Good. Then we have time for a proper date. I’ll make reservations at Le Jardien.”

Kelly smiled. “Le Jardien. Fancy.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.”

He smiled and kissed her. Then he started to lose himself. It took everything he had to push himself away. “If I don’t leave now I won’t be able to.” He stood up and pulled Kelly to her feet. They walked to the door and he gave her a hug. He kissed her on the tip of her nose. “Sweet dreams, angel.”

“You too,” she whispered.

As he drove home he realized if the old man hadn’t died, he might never have reconnected with Kelly. It was the only good thing he’d ever done for him.



Kelly put on one of the few dresses she owned. It was a simple navy blue dress with some shirring over the hip. It fit her well and she liked it. She put her hair up in a twist with a few strands framing her face. She put on a pair of a simple pearl drop earrings and a light touch of perfume. She looked in the mirror and checked her light makeup. "This will have to do," she said to her reflection. She hadn't dated much over the years and certainly no one like Colton. Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. She opened the door and gasped. Colton was wearing an elegant blue suit and holding a single rose. "Oh my," she whispered.

He handed her the rose and gave her a kiss. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." She put the rose in a small vase and grabbed her purse. "All set." She tried to hide her nervousness as she walked into the fanciest restaurant in town. The maître d greeted Colton with the same deference he would have his father. They had a view of lights reflecting off the lake. She looked at Colton and realized this was every high school fantasy come true. He looked at her and smiled a crooked smile.

"What is it?"

"You look so handsome."

"Why thank you," he smiled trying to hide an adorable blush.

The waiter arrived and handed them the menus. Colton took a quick glance and asked the waiter "What do you recommend?"

The waiter smiled. "We have an excellent Chateaubriand and a salmon that is amazing."

"That sounds great. Kelly, have you decided?"

"I'll have the salmon."

"I'll have the Chateaubriand and bring us a bottle of champagne."

"Yes, sir." The waiter took the menus and walked off with a smile.

Colton caught her staring at him. "What?"

“Most people don’t ask the wait staff’s opinion.”

“I always do. They know what’s best in the kitchen.”

“Yes they do.” She leaned closer. “Champagne?”

“I want us to celebrate our first official date.” He reached for her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. The waiter returned with the champagne and popped the cork. He poured two glasses with a flourish, then wrapped the bottle in a white linen cloth and placed it in the bucket. Colton raised his glass to make a toast. “To new beginnings.”

Kelly smiled. “To new beginnings.” She took a sip and smiled. “Mmm. Delicious.” She set down her glass. “How’s your Mom doing?”

“She’s doing better, at least better than when I first arrived. She and Hannah are busying themselves with thank you notes for flowers and fruit baskets. Hannah seems to have forgiven me for hiring a caterer for the reception at the house.”

“Of course. It will be a big crowd. I’m sure your Mom will need her friend with her.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you concerned about tomorrow?”

“No, not anymore. I went over the last of the details. Everything seems in place. It’s the books for the business that will take some time. It’s so much to sort out. Fortunately, I’m on semester break so I have a few weeks to get it sorted.”

Kelly forced a smile. She knew that meant he had a job waiting for him in New York. “I’m sure you’ll manage.” They sat back as the waiter brought their food. Colton waited until he left before he reached for her hand.

“Kelly a few weeks means I have time to decide what I want to do, including whether or not I will stay here. I promised you I’d talk to you before I made any decisions and I meant it.”

She smiled with relief. “I know. I’m just trying really hard not to be selfish.”

Colton grinned. “Selfish?”

She sat back in her chair. "Of course I want you to stay. I love having you here and spending time with you."

"I love spending time with you too."

"But I don't want you to make your decision because of me. It has to be right for you."

"What if being with you is the right decision for me?"

"Colton, that would make me very happy, but this has been a very emotional time. Let's agree that you won't make any decisions until things settle down."

He took her hand and kissed it. "Okay. I promise."

"Well, well, well. Look who decided come back to town." Neither of them had noticed Lisa come up to their table. She'd obviously had more than the one glass of wine she was holding.

"Hello Lisa," said Colton.

"You're here with the Mouse? Really Colton," she smiled and got closer to him. "You could do so much better."

"Where's your husband?"

Lisa rolled her eyes. "He's glad handing as usual." She took a step closer to Colton, ignoring Kelly's presence. "How long are you going to be in town?"

Colton waved at the maître d. "Yes, sir?"

"Would you please see that Mrs. Olson gets back to her table?"

"Of course, sir. Mrs. Olson, I know your husband is looking for you."

"I doubt it," she said as she looked at Kelly with a red faced fury.

"I'm sorry about that," said Colton.

"That's not your fault."

"I'm surprised she was so obviously drunk. She was never drinker in school."

“You don’t know Paul Olson. I’d drink too if I was married to him. She married everything she wanted, money, position, power. From what I can see when they come into the diner, she’s a very unhappy woman.”

“That’s a shame, but she got herself into it. Now, can we not talk about her and get back to us?”

Kelly smiled and nodded. They spent the rest of their dinner talking about his teaching, her studies and possibilities for the future. Colton paid the bill and he took her hand as they walked out of the restaurant. It wasn’t long before they were back at her apartment.

“Do you want to come in?”

“Yes,” he whispered as he gave her a kiss.

Kelly tried to hide her nerves as he followed her into her apartment and she smiled at him as she locked the door behind him. “It was a wonderful dinner. Thank you.”

He slipped his arms around her waist. “You’re very welcome.” He gave her a soft kiss and she slid her arms around Colton’s neck. She stared into the blue eyes she’d loved for longer than she could remember. She took his hand in his and led him to her bedroom. “Are you sure?” he whispered.

“Yes.” Her hear raced as she pulled him into a deep kiss. She turned around and let him unzip her dress. She let it fall to the ground and was pleased when she heard him gasp.

“My God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered.

“Thank you.” She began to undo his tie but couldn’t take her eyes off his crystal blue eyes. She tossed his tie over a chair then slipped of his jacket and set it with the tie. She ran her hands up his chest and smiled. “I always wanted to do that, ever since high school.”

“Oh really?” he smiled.

“Oh yeah. You’ve kept in shape.”

“I’m glad you’re pleased. You’ve only gotten better. I had no idea you had such fantastic legs.”

“Leg man are you?”

“Oh yeah, and I’m about to show you my appreciation for such fabulous gams.” She squealed when she picked her up and set her on the bed. He shed the rest of his clothes and smiled at Kelly’s “Good Lord.” He had a similar reaction when he relieved her of the rest of her lingerie. He covered her with his body and fell into a deeply passionate kiss. Colton traveled down her body with a series of kisses and nips. He set about showing Kelly his appreciation for her beautiful legs. He traveled up and down each, tasting, licking and nipping. He was driving himself as crazy as he was making her until he took her in his mouth. She groaned his name as she broke apart.

“Colton please, I need you.”

He kissed her deeply as he slipped inside her. What little thought he had at that moment was he could have never imagined who Kelly really was all those years ago. He lost himself in her passion and heat as he cried out her name. He rested his head on her shoulder. “My God, Kelly.”

“My thoughts exactly.” She looked at him smiled. “You really have a thing for my legs.”

“God, yes,” he said as he rolled next to her and pulled her close. “Does that bother you?”

“Hell no. I feel the same way about your chest.”

“Oh really?”

She rolled over and traced her fingers over his pecs and down to his waist. “Ummm. Very nice.” She put her head on his chest and closed her eyes. She smiled when she realized his heart was beating as fast as his. She smiled and propped herself on her elbow. “Colton, any other night I would want you to stay the night. Hell, I wouldn’t let you out of the bed for the rest of the weekend.”

He laughed and rolled her over on her back. "I like this side of you."

"I'm very glad of that, but this isn't any other day. Tomorrow is going to be a trying day. Your mom needs to wake up with you in the house. If you're not there..."

He gave her a kiss. "You are a remarkable woman, Kelly Johnson."

"Why thank you, Mr. Jones," she said with a grin.

He laughed. "I think it would be appropriate for you to call me Colton."

"Very well," she giggled. "Colton."

"Of course you're right, but not just yet," he said as gave her another deep kiss.

Colton got out of the shower and quickly dried his hair. He couldn't stop smiling about last night. Only a woman like Kelly would have sent him home so he could be with his mother. She was right, of course. He threw on some jeans and a polo so he could get down to breakfast before Hannah started yelling for him. He went downstairs and Hannah was already scrambling eggs. The biscuits were already warm and on the table.

"Good morning, Hannah," he said as he kissed her cheek and grabbed a biscuit.

"Did you have a nice time with your girlfriend last night?"

"I did."

"I'm glad to hear that." They both turned around to see Mary standing in the doorway. She didn't look like she slept well. "Where did you take her?"

"Le Jardien." He gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Are you okay, Mom?"

"I'll be fine."

Colton wrapped his arms around his mother. "I'm here, Mom," he whispered.

"I'm so glad, sweetheart."

"Bill Sampson is supposed to stop by soon with the paperwork. That way I'll be able to sign for you. Then I have to go get Kelly. She doesn't have a car."

"She doesn't? How does she get to work?" asked Hannah.

"She walks."

Mary smiled. "Your girl is something else."

"You don't mind that she's a waitress?"

"Of course not, dear. She's a lovely woman. Besides, it wouldn't matter if I did. You're in love with her."

Colton nearly choked on his biscuit. "Mom, we've only just started seeing each other."

"Sweetheart, you light up like a Christmas tree every time you talk about her."

“I do?”

Hannah laughed and put her hand on his shoulder “Remember that line.” She set a plate in front of him. “Now eat your eggs before they get cold.”

“Yes, Ma’am” He took a bite of his eggs and thought about Kelly. Was he in love? Was Mom right? More likely, Kelly was right. It’s been an emotional time and now was not the time to make any decisions. But he thought about last night and he couldn’t hide his smile. He glanced up at his mother to see she was grinning.

He’d just put his dish in the dishwasher when the doorbell rang. “That’s probably Sampson. I’ll get it. Mom, he’s going to need you to sign too.”

“I’ll go get dressed,” she said as she turned and went up the back stairs.

He opened the door and Sampson appeared ready for the funeral in a black suit and grey tie. Colton extended his hand. “Thank you for coming, Bill.”

He seemed taken aback by Colton’s greeting. “You’re welcome. Whatever I can do to help. I would like to talk privately with you for a moment.”

“Of course. Let’s go into the office.” Colton sat in his father’s chair and Sampson took up the seat opposite. “I’ve dealt with the...tenants.”

“Girlfriends. You can say girlfriends. It doesn’t bother me.”

“The girlfriends were not please but the promise of checks to start over softened the blow. One threatened to go public if we didn’t give her one hundred thousand. I told her if she did she would be branded a whore by the town and she wouldn’t get a dime from the estate.”

Colton smiled. This town, more than most, was all about image. Even someone like a kept woman couldn’t afford that type of stigma. “She agreed to our terms?”

“Rather quickly.”

“Excellent work, Bill.”



Bill smiled but the smile faded when he opened a file. "I was getting the paperwork ready to file the insurance claims and I saw the death certificate."

"What is it? He died of a heart attack."

"Yes but..." he handed Colton the death certificate.

Colton looked at the certificate and shook his head. "Myocardial infarction due to cocaine intoxication." He set the paper on the desk. "I'm not surprised. Let me guess. He was partying with the woman who wanted more money."

"Exactly."

"I assume you have the power of attorney paperwork."

"I do. Your mother will have to sign as well."

"I assumed as much. Bill, she's doing this so she won't have to deal with any of the details like his actual cause of death. We all know what an unmitigated bastard he was but my mother wants to keep her reputation in this town and I aim to see to it. You prepare all the paperwork we need to file and I'll sign when your ready."

"Am I working on a time frame? Are you going back to...I'm sorry I don't know where you've been or what you've been doing."

"I teach high school physics in upstate New York." Colton took some pleasure in Bill's mouth dropping open. "Not what you expected from the old man's no good son." Bill shook his head.

"Oh, I'm sorry sir. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay, Bill. And call me Colton. I'm on semester break so I have at minimum a few weeks to sort through things for my mother. I may stay. I haven't decided yet."

Bill gave him a genuine smile. "I'm sure that would please your mother."

Colton pressed the intercom button to the kitchen. "Hannah, could you see if my mother is ready to speak with Bill?"

"Of course, Colton."

Bill looked at him with surprise, knowing Hannah would never call him by his first name when his father was alive. “Things are a bit more casual around here now.” A few minutes later Mary joined them. She looked the image of the perfect widow, a black sheath dress covered by a short black jacket. She hadn’t bothered with makeup and she looked as tired as she must have felt. No one would look at her and know she was grateful this day had finally come. Bill stood to greet her and took her hand.

“Hello, Bill. Thank you for coming.”

“Anything you need, Mary, anything at all, I’ll be here for you.”

“Thank you, Bill. That’s very kind of you. Have you and Colton sorted out what you needed?”

“Yes, he seems to have a firm grasp on what needs to be done.”

Mary smiled at her son. “Of course he does. Did you know he teaches physics?”

“Yes, he mentioned it. You must be very proud.”

Mary’s eyes got misty. “So proud,” she whispered. “Well, you have something for me to sign?”

“Yes. It’s a power of attorney that...”

“Oh I don’t need to hear the whole menu,” Mary said as she picked up a pen off the desk.

Colton put his hand on his mother’s arm. “Please, Mom. Let Bill explain what signing entails. I want you to know everything.”

“Okay dear.”

Bill looked back and forth between the two. It was obvious nothing like this had ever occurred when the old man was alive. “By signing this power of attorney you are giving Colton the right to act on your behalf. He can write checks on all accounts and make decisions about the business. You still own it, but Colton will be in charge.”

“Wait, what? I own the company?” asked Mary.

“Yes. Since your husband died without a will all his interests, the business, real estate, everything belongs to you. Of course Colton has the right to make claim on the estate and we can sort that out...”

“No,” said Colton. “I will not be taking anything from the estate. I will be reviewing the business. I will submit receipts for any business related expenses. Being a teacher, I don’t have unlimited resources.” Bill was staring at Colton in shock when they both noticed Mary had paled. “Mom, what’s wrong?” He took her by the hand and sat her down on the small couch. “I own the business?”

Bill smiled. “Mary, you own everything. I haven’t done a complete accounting of the estate yet but I would say it’s worth in the neighborhood of twenty five million dollars.”

Mary looked at Bill, then at Colton. “Mom, I told you that you owned everything.” Then Colton’s mother did something no one expected. She started to chuckle, then a laugh, then full on tears down the face uncontrolled laughter. “Mom, are you okay?”

“Oh Colton, I can’t help but thinking your father will be a whirling dervish in his grave knowing that I have everything he kept from me.” Bill offered her a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. “He was such a skinflint. He kept the house on a tight budget and he never let me near the business.”

“All that’s changed now, Mom.”

“Okay, where do I sign?”

“Mom, are you sure?”

She put her hand to her son’s face. “There is no one in this world I trust more.” Mary looked at the paper and signed where Bill indicated. “Do you need me for anything else?”

“Not at this time,” said Bill.

“Then I am going to tell Hannah after all this is done, we’re going to Paris.” Colton smiled at his mother as she closed the door behind her.

“Paris?” asked Bill.

“I suggested that she take a trip when all this is over but she didn’t think she could afford it.”

Bill snickered. “She could travel around the world if she wants.” He showed Colton where he needed to sign and then put the paperwork in his briefcase. “I’ll get the insurance paperwork together and call you when it’s ready for you.”

Colton extended his hand. “Thank you, Bill.” He was surprised when Bill didn’t release his hand. “You’re nothing like him.”

“Thank you.”

Colton had changed into his black suit and tie and left to get Kelly. It seemed Kelly was right about Bill Sampson. He seemed more than willing to work with Colton. He pulled into the apartment driveway and walked up to her front door. He knocked and heard “Just a minute” through the door. She opened the door and Colton smiled. He gave her a quick kiss.

“Do I look okay?”

“You look perfect.”

She brushed at her dress. It was a simple black dress with short sleeves. She had her hair in a ponytail and was wearing a simple gold cross. “It’s what I wore to my mother’s funeral. I don’t own a lot of dresses.”

He gave her a kiss. “You’re perfect. If you’re ready we should get back to the house. We’ll be riding to the service together with Mom and Hannah in the limo.”

“Limo?”

“I promised Mom we’d put on a good show.” She gave him a quick kiss.

“You’re a good man, Colton Jones.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

They got to the house just as Hannah and Mary were coming downstairs. “Oh, Kelly dear, you look lovely. I’m so glad you’re here,” said Mary as she pulled her into a hug.

“How are you feeling today?” she asked.

“I surprisingly okay. Shall we get going?”

The chauffeur held the door for them as they got in the car. Hannah sat next to Mary and Colton sat next to Kelly. “Are you doing okay?” Kelly whispered.

Colton took her hand and kissed it. "I'm okay, sweetheart." He glanced at his mother who was smiling at him. "The receiving line will only be for thirty minutes. It's at the back of the church. Then we'll start the service."

He and Kelly followed his mother and Hannah in to the back of the church and Colton froze. The old man was laying in his coffin. He hadn't laid eyes on him in fifteen years and now here he was. He fought the urge to turn around and walk out.

"Are you okay?" Kelly whispered.

"No."

Kelly squeezed his hand. "I'm here, babe. He can't hurt you anymore."

"Please stay with me."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Mary was talking with Hannah when she noticed Colton had gone pale. "Sweetheart, are you okay."

"I'll be fine, Mom. Is it okay if Kelly stands with me in the line?"

"Of course, dear. Hannah is going to stand with me."

They stood in front of the casket and greeted the mourners. When it got too much for him, he closed his eyes and inhaled Kelly's light scent of lavender. She placed her hand on his back and whispered to him.

"I'm right here, babe."

Most people paid their respects quickly and moved on. Bill Sampson came in the church with his wife, Carol. "Hello, Bill," said Colton. "Thank you for being here. This is my girlfriend, Kelly."

Bill was obviously surprised when Colton introduced the diner waitress as his girlfriend but to his credit he recovered quickly. He extend his hand to Kelly. "It's very nice to officially meet. This is my wife Carol."

Colton and Kelly each shook their hands then moved on to Mary and Hannah. "Well, that could have been awkward," said Colton.

"No, awkward is walking through the door," said Kelly.

Colton was not surprised to see Paul Olson come through the door. He was the mayor of Boyertown and his father was a prominent citizen. But why did he have to bring Lisa? Colton extended his hand. Mayor Olsen, thank you for coming.

"Your father was a leading citizen. Of course I'd be here."

Colton looked at the man and thought, "God, what an ass." Olson moved on to Mary and ignored Hannah as he'd ignored Kelly. He looked at Lisa and thought she'd been living way to hard and it was starting to show. "Hello Lisa. Thank you for coming."

She leaned close and said. "Really Colton? You brought the Mouse? How could you?"

He held her hand tight to the point of pain. "You behave yourself and leave my girlfriend alone."

Lisa gasped. "You must be joking." Olson grabbed his wife's other hand and pulled her over to Mary.

Colton leaned into Kelly and whispered. "You were right. Awkward."

She whispered in his ear. "I've reconsidered. Not awkward. Bitch."

Colton had to suppress a laugh. He was so glad Kelly was here.

The funeral director came into the vestibule and indicated that the reverend was ready to start. As was normal procedure, he closed the doors to give the grieving family a few private moments with the deceased. Colton hugged his mother. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay, sweetheart. How are you?"

"I'm fine."

Mary smiled. “No you’re not, but you’ve got Kelly to help you.” She turned and looked at the body of her husband. “Well, you old buzzard, you’ve got only yourself to blame for this.”

“Mom?”

“I know he died with one of his girlfriends. I stopped caring about that years ago. The more time he spent with them the less he spent at home.”

“Mom, how did you know?”

“He died on Tuesday and he wasn’t at work. If he wasn’t at work or at home there was only one other place he’d have been.”

Colton didn’t know what to do so he hugged his mother and kissed the top of her head. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“It’s over now.”

He smiled. “Yes, it is.” He looked at the body of his father. “You didn’t deserve her or me. I hope God forgives you because I don’t.” He walked to the vestibule door and opened it. “We’re ready,” he said to the funeral director. He escorted his mother up the aisle to the row that had been saved for them. Hannah walked around the other side of the pew so she could sit to Mary’s right. Colton took the spot to her right and Kelly sat next to him. He reached for her hand as the funeral director and several company executives pushed the casket up the aisle.

Kelly leaned in and whispered, “You’ll get through this.”

He whispered back, “I will with you at my side.” Then he kissed her cheek.



Colton opened the front door for his mother and saw the caterers had everything well in hand. The old man was planted and he wanted a drink. "Mom, can I get you a drink?"

"Yes please. A glass of white wine."

He walked up to the bar and ordered the wine and a scotch rocks for himself. Kelly came up from behind him. "How are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm okay. Would you like a drink?"

"Just a club soda."

He got the drinks and handed the wine to his mother. Mary smiled and took a big sip. "I'm going to check on Hannah. I want to make sure she's not driving the caterer nuts."

"Excellent idea, Mom."

Kelly took a sip of her soda. "Okay, talk to me. What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You seem like six feet of raw nerve. Tell me what you need."

"I need this." He pulled her into a tight hug. "I wouldn't have made it through today without you."

"Yes you would. You're stronger than you think. You'd have done it for your Mom."

He kissed her forehead. "I'm glad I didn't have to do it alone."

Colton watched as Kelly greeted the guests with ease. Most of the guest thought they recognized her but didn't realize she was a waitress from the diner. She directed people to the bar and made sure the caterers circulated. The only time she backed off was when Paul Olson came in with Lisa. He didn't blame her. He sipped on his drink as he talked with a few of the guests. He met the sales rep Kelly warned him about, Wayne Barlow. She was right. There was something about him. He was smarmy and Colton

wanted to shower just standing next to him. He realized he was getting a little light headed and he needed to eat something. He excused himself from Barlow and fixed himself a plate. He stole off into his office for a few minutes to eat in peace. He closed his eyes for a moment when he heard the door open.

“There you are.” Lisa was standing in the doorway wearing a dress cut way too low for a funeral. He stood and grabbed his empty plate.

“What do you want, Lisa?”

“Is that anyway to talk to an old friend?” She slinked up close to him. “Colt, baby, I’ve missed you. You can’t say you haven’t missed this.” She slid her hands up his and pulled him into a deep kiss. He dropped his plate and pushed her away. He heard a gasp and saw Kelly standing in the doorway. “Can’t you see we’re busy, Mouse.”

Colton snapped out of his frozen shock. “Get away from me, Lisa.” He grabbed Lisa roughly by the arm and pulled her out of the room. “Olson!” he called into the main group of guests. Paul Olson became red faced as he walked toward him. No one spoke to the Mayor of Boyertown in that tone.

“What do you want, Jones?”

Colton pulled Lisa into view. “Get your drunken wife out of my house.” He pushed her toward her husband. He’d tried to do it in the hallway but half the guests could see what was going on. The other half would know soon. He watched as Olson dragged his wife out of the house. He went back into the office and Kelly was still there, picking up the pieces of his broken plate. “Kelly, sweetheart, you have to know I didn’t encourage her.”

She turned to him and smiled. “I know that.”

“You do?”

“Of course. I’ve know what she’s like. I also know you. You would never do something like that.”

He sighed with relief and slipped his arms around her and gave her a quick kiss. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“I feel the same, but babe,” she backed up. “You’re going to need a shower because I can smell her awful perfume on you.”

He smiled. He took a whiff of his tie and grimaced at the cloying scent. “Oh God. I’ll be right back.”

“Babe,” said Kelly “Don’t forget mouth wash.”

“Silkwood shower it is!”

They spent the next two hours talking with the townspeople who were trying to find something good to say about the deceased. It was not easy. After a few attempts most people just commented on the lovely service and the excellent catering. In the center of it all was Colton's mother, sitting in a wing chair, receiving condolences from the guests. Kelly tugged on Colton's sleeve.

"Your mom looks exhausted."

"Yeah, she does. Let's get her out of here." They walked over to Mary and she smiled. "Mom, can we see you for a minute?"

"Of course, dear."

They walked into the back hall. "Mom, you're exhausted."

"It's almost over."

"Mary, it wouldn't seem unusual for you to go to your bedroom. It's been an exhausting day," said Kelly.

Mary looked relieved. "Do you think so?"

"Kelly's right, Mom. You go upstairs and I'll thank everyone for you. It will give me a chance to get the stragglers gone."

"I'll walk up with you," said Kelly.

"Oh, thank you dear."

Kelly walked Mary up to her bedroom. She was not surprised to find the room to be very feminine. Chances are when her husband did sleep here he slept in another room. Mary kicked off her shoes and shed her jacket. "Can I get you anything?"

"No thank you dear." Mary gave her a tight hug. "You've been a godsend today."

"I'm glad I could help."

“I know what happened with Lisa. You do know Colton would never take up with that woman.”

Kelly smiled. “I know.”

Mary sat on the edge of her bed and smiled. “You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

Kelly gasped. “Mary...I...we just...” She sighed and smiled. “I’ve been in love with your son since high school.”

Mary laid back against the pillows and pulled an afghan over her legs. “I thought so. If you two want to spend the night here, I’m fine with it.”

“Mary!”

Mary smiled as she closed her eyes. “You’re good for him. He needs you.” Kelly closed the door behind her and shook her head.

“What just happened?” she whispered. She went down the stairs to see Colton telling the remaining guests that his mother needed her rest. Everyone gratefully took the hint and started saying their goodbyes.

Colton closed the door on the last guest. Kelly put her hands around his waist and rested her head on his chest. “You must be exhausted,” he said.

“I wouldn’t mind closing my eyes.” She looked up at him and smiled. “You won’t believe what your mother said to me.”

“What?”

“She said if I wanted to spend the night, she was fine with it.”

Colton’s eyes got wide. “In a guest room or with me?”

“With you.”

“Holy crap.”

“She said I’m good for you.”

“She’s right about that.” He gave her a kiss. “I wouldn’t mind a nap. Where’s Hannah?”

“I think she’s supervising the caterer’s cleanup.”

“Of course she is. I’ll go tell her we’re going to get some rest and she should too.”

He came back a few minutes later. “She says she’ll rest when the caterers are gone.” He took Kelly’s hand and led her upstairs. He took her down the hall from his mother to his room. He opened the door to a room that looked like it hadn’t changed since high school. Kelly wandered around the room and looked at his trophies and awards.

“These are amazing.”

“No. These are hunks of metal. You are amazing.” He gave her a deep kiss. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me and my mother today.”

“You’re very welcome.” She touched his cheek. “You’re exhausted. Let’s take that nap.”

“Good plan.” He started pulling off his the polo shirt he’d changed into after his shower.

“Do you have something I can sleep in?”

He smiled and pulled her close. “You don’t need anything.”

“If your mother or Hannah walk in I don’t want them to see me naked.”

“Spoil sport.” He opened one of the drawers and pulled out one of his old high school t-shirts. He held it up to her and saw it reached to her knees. “How’s this?” Kelly could take her eyes off the shirt. It had his name across the back. “What is it?”

“Nothing, it’s just...wearing your shirt with your name, this is every high school fantasy I ever had come true.” He smiled and walked behind her. “What are you doing?”

He kissed her neck. “Trust me.”

“Always,” she whispered. He slipped off her dress and she stepped out of it. He took off her bra and then slipped his shirt over her head.

He walked around her and took her hands in his. “Kelly Johnson, will you go steady with me?”

Kelly smiled as a tear ran down her cheek. “Yes, Colton Jones, I will go steady with you.”

They both fell sound asleep as soon they laid down. Kelly was tightly curled into his chest when she felt him twitch. She opened her eyes and saw Colton was having a nightmare. She wasn't sure she should wake him.

"No, no, don't," he cried.

She sat up and touched his shoulder. "Colton," she whispered. "Wake up now."

His head moved back and forth. "Please, no."

"Colton, baby, you're having a nightmare. Wake up." His eyes fluttered, he looked at Kelly and began to cry. She pulled him tight against her and let him weep. After a few minutes he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"It was about my father. He was being nice, throwing a ball. We were having fun and then he got in the car and left me. I don't know what the hell that was about. We never did that."

"I'm guessing since you can't mourn the father you had you need to mourn the father you never had."

"So I'm not crazy."

She hugged him tight. "Not even close."

He looked at her and smiled. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make everything okay."

Kelly smiled. "I'm just saying what you already know."

"Can you stay tonight?"

"Yes, I have tomorrow off."

"Great." He gave her a kiss. "I don't want to let you go."



She smiled. "I want to be here with you."

Colton sighed. "And my mother and Hannah." He grabbed his watch off the nightstand. "Crap, it's nearly six. We've been asleep for three hours."

"It's been a long few days."

"We should go downstairs. Mom and Hannah are probably downstairs making dinner." He got out of bed and pulled on his polo. Kelly slipped the shirt over her shoulders and put her bra back on.

"Do you have some sweatpants? I can't go downstairs like this."

He gave her a pat on the bottom. "I think you look great."

"Colton Jones, please find me some pants."

"Fine," he said, genuinely disappointed. He dug through the drawers and handed her a pair of sweatpants.

"Thank you." She stood on her toes and whispered in his ear. "If you lock the door tonight, I won't wear anything."

Colton gave her a lopsided grin. "Hot damn!"

Colton and Kelly found Mary and Hannah talking in the kitchen. "Hello you two. Did you have a good nap?" asked Mary.

He walked over and gave his mother a kiss. "Yes Mom, we did." Then he whispered, "Thank you." In her ear. She patted his hand, understanding. "What are you two up to?"

"I'm just about to put some real food on the table. I, for one, had enough of that finger food," said Hannah. She looked at Colton. "You know where the dishes are. Get going."

Colton smiled. "Yes Ma'am" He reached into the cabinet and pulled out the plates.

"Silverware?" asked Kelly. He pointed to the drawer and she set out the silver.

"We were also talking about Paris," said Mary. "You said we could do that."

"Absolutely. You and Hannah map out where you want to go and I'll set it up."

"Maybe you could go to London too," said Kelly. "Have high tea at Claridge's"

Colton looked at Kelly. "High tea?"

"Oh it's very elegant." He realized she was blushing because she had never been there.

He leaned down and whispered, "Maybe one day we'll go." He sat down next to Kelly and they had Hannah's beef stew.

"Hannah, this is delicious," said Kelly.

"Thank you, dear."

"What are you're plans for tomorrow?" asked Mary.

"Kelly has off tomorrow and I thought we could take the day and she could show me what's changed around town. I thought I'd have Sampson meet me at the office on Wednesday."

Colton and Kelly finished their dinner with Mary and Hannah. After they did the dishes, Kelly suggested a movie. Kelly found a movie on cable, "The In-Laws" with Peter Falk and Alan Arkin. He had never seen it and everyone roared with laughter. It was just what they needed after what they'd been through. They turned the movie off and Mary yawned.

"Well, everyone, it's been a very long day. I'm going to bed," said Mary.

"Me too," said Hannah.

Mary gave her son a kiss on the cheek and a hug. "Thank you, sweetheart. I couldn't have managed today without you." Then she pulled Kelly into a hug and kissed her cheek. "And you, my girl, are an angel. I'm so glad Colton found you again."

"So am I," she whispered.

Colton waited until his mother and Hannah left the room before he pulled her close and gave her a kiss. "My mom is right. We couldn't have made it through today without you."

She smiled. "Yeah, you would."

"Maybe, but I'm glad I didn't have to."

"Do you want to watch another movie?"

He slipped his hands under her shirt and ran them up his back. "No movie. I believe promises were made."

She gave him a sly smile. "Well, I am a woman of my word." He grabbed at her bottom as she turned and headed up the stairs. He closed his bedroom door and locked it and Kelly kicked off her sweatpants. He grinned as she proved she was, indeed, a woman of her word.

Colton drove Kelly back to her apartment so she could change from her funeral clothes into day clothes. He pulled into her driveway and grabbed something from out of the trunk as she opened the door to her apartment. He walked toward her with a something on a hanger wrapped in plastic.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Well, you already snagged my jersey,” he said with a smile.

She held up her hands. “I slept in it. Possession is nine tenths of the law.”

“You should probably have this to go with it.” He pulled up the plastic and revealed his varsity jacket. He smiled when she gasped. “We are going steady. You’re supposed to wear my jacket.” She reached out to touch it and then hesitated. “Before you ask me, no, I’ve never given it to anyone else.” She smiled and he put it on her. Her grin was huge despite the fact that she was swimming in it. She ran to the bedroom to look in the mirror.

“Oh Colton,” she whispered. He came up from behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it?” she turned and put her hands around his neck. “Tonight, I’m going to find a very creative way to say thank you.”

Colton grinned and gave her a deep kiss. “I can’t wait.”

“Now let me get changed.”

Colton watched as hung the jacket with an admiration he couldn’t have anticipated. All he wanted to do was to make her happy. Making Kelly happy had become very important to him. She changed into jeans and a short sleeve blouse. She turned around and smiled.

“Will this do?” she asked.

He walked over and ran his finger down the neck opening. “Very nice.” He gave her a soft kiss.

“Where do you want to go first?”

“How about our high school?”

“Really? Okay.”

It didn't take long to drive to their old school and they got out and walked around the campus. It was semester break so there were only a few cars in the parking lot. He took her hand and walked around the side of the building. He stood in silence for a moment as he looked at the playing field where he'd spent so many hours of his youth. It seemed like a lifetime ago. So many things had changed in his life.

“Colton, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I was just thinking.” He looked at her and saw her concern. He grabbed her hand. “Come with me.” He half ran to the bleachers and pulled her underneath.

“What are you doing?” she squealed.

“I'm sneaking a kiss from my girl under the bleachers.” He pulled her into a deep kiss. “Ummm, that's better.” He was kissing her again when he heard a man's voice.

“Excuse me!”

They looked over and to their surprise, standing there was Mr. Reese, their high school principal. “Mr. Reese, oh, I'm sorry,” said Colton.

“Colton Jones?”

“Yes, sir. You remember my girlfriend, Kelly Johnson.”

“Yes, of course. Hello, Kelly.”

“Hello, Mr. Reese.”

“I was sorry to hear about your father,” said Reese.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I think enough time has passed that you can call me John.”

“Thank you, John.”

“What have you been doing, other than making out with your girlfriend?”

“I teach high school physics.”

John smiled. “That’s excellent.” He glanced at Kelly and smiled. “If you are considering staying in town we are in need of a physics teacher. I’d enjoy discussing it further with you.”

“Thank you, John. I’ll consider it.”

“Now if you don’t mind, you’re busted,” he motioned them out from under the bleachers.

“Yes, Mr. Reese,” Colton grinned. He looked at Kelly who was flushed bright red. He led her back to the car.

“I’m so embarrassed,” said Kelly.

“Don’t be. We’re adults and we were just kissing.” He put his car in gear. “Let’s drive around for a bit.”

They drove around and Colton marveled at how much had changed and how much had stayed the same. His favorite running path was now the site of upscale condos. The shopping mall was twice the size of what it had been when he left. “This is a little disorienting. Somethings are exactly the same and some are so different.”

“Isn’t that life?” said Kelly.

He took her hand in his. “Yeah, it is.”

“It’s a nice day. Why don’t we get some lunch and go to the park.”

They picked a table facing the duck pond and spread their lunches out on the picnic table. “So what do you think of Boyertown now?” asked Kelly.

“It’s still a nice town, it’s just bigger. What do you think about the offer from Mr. Reese?”

“I think he’d be lucky to get you.”

“He’s probably just being nice because of who my father was in this town.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Your father was well known, but not respected. I think it’s more likely that he finds the idea of an alumni returning as a teacher appealing.”

Colton smiled. “Do you really think so?”

“Think of what kind of message it sends to high school athletes. Not everyone gets to or even wants to go professional. This says you can be a star athlete and have a career beyond sports.” She noticed he was staring at her. “What?”

“You really are going to be a great counselor.”

Colton walked into the family business for the first time in fifteen years. He tried to push his nerves down with the thoughts of waking up with Kelly in his arms. They'd had a great day and they'd spent the night at her place. He dropped her off for her shift at Paulie's before going home to change.

He walked toward his father's office and saw his long time secretary, Doris. She looked up and was obviously startled. "Oh, Mr. Jones, I didn't realize you'd be coming in today. It was a lovely service."

"Thank you, Doris. I will be reviewing the operations with Bill Sampson. He will be joining me shortly." He walked into his father's office like he owned the place, which he didn't. His mother did. He needed to make sure the right people were in place to run it. He sat down in his father's chair and started going through his desk. Organization was not his father's strong suit. He pulled open the top drawer and found the normal things you would in a desk, pens, pencils, notes. He went through the side drawer and found some files and pulled out a company directory. He open the drawer opposite and stopped. He saw a couple of small bags in the bottom drawer which he could only assume was cocaine. In the same drawer was a wooden box he opened in the and found a small handgun. "Figures." A knock on the door caused him to quickly close the drawer.

"Mr. Jones, Mr. Sampson is here."

"Thank you, Doris." She closed the door behind Sampson. "Bill, I'm glad you're here. As attorney for the business and my father does your relationship cover me."

"Yes it does, I've been your family lawyer as well as the lawyer for the business."

"Good," he waved him over to his side of the desk. "He opened the drawer and showed Bill the bags. "I assume that's cocaine. I'm not touching it. I want you to take it and get rid of it." Sampson pulled out a handkerchief and wrapped the bags up and put them in his briefcase. "Thank you. I would also like you to contact the authorities to dispose of my father's gun collection."

"They're worth a lot of money. You could easily sell them."



He remembered all the times his father brandished one of his precious guns at him. “No. I want them destroyed.”

“Very well.”

He pulled out the company directory and flipped it open. “Tell me about Wayne Barlow.” Bill’s look told him Kelly’s assessment was correct.

“There have been some issues,” said Bill.

“Like what?”

Bill shifted in his seat. “There were some harassment complaints.”

“Sexual harassment? What was done?”

“Your father protected him. He’s a good salesman.”

“Well, that’s over. I want to talk to Dean Wilkins. He looked up Wilkins extension and he picked up right away. “Mr. Wilkins, it’s Colton Jones. I’m in my father’s office with Bill Sampson. Could you join us?”

“Of course, sir.”

A few minutes later Dean Wilkins knocked on his door. Colton stood to greet him. “Thank you for coming, Dean.”

“Of course, Mr. Jones.”

“Please call me Colton.”

“I’m sorry about your loss,” he said with little conviction.

“Let’s settle something right now. My father was an unmitigated bastard. Every one in this room knows it. There is no need to pretend with me. Let me be clear about my intentions. I want to make sure the company continues but there are somethings that I will be changing. The first thing I want addressed is working environment. I understand there have been issues with Wayne Barlow.”

“Yes. Your father arranged for financial settlements with the women but they had to sign confidentiality agreements.”

“Are any of them still employed here?”

“No, they all left.”

“All? How many.”

“Five.” Dean sighed. “I didn’t want to go along with it but your father insisted.”

“Jesus.” Colton whispered. “Is he that good a salesman?”

Dean shifted in his chair. “He’s a lot like your father, that’s why they got on so well. He has the biggest expense report in the company, even though he’s the closest rep to home office.”

“So the company is paying him to party.”

“Basically.”

“Who is doing the work he should be doing?”

“Pam McIntyre, his assistant. She’s been covering him and cleaning up after him for five years.”

“Do you think she would handle the position on her own?”

“In a heartbeat.”

“Good to know. Dean, I’ve heard good things about you, that you’re a good guy. More than anyone I understand what it’s like to be under my father’s control. Once I set in place the changes I want, I intend to be hands off. I’m a physics teacher, not a business man. Dean, I want your honest opinion of changes you want to see, in personnel and procedures.” Colton thought he could see a huge weight lifting from Dean’s chest. “Put together something for me that we can review.”

“I’ll do that,” Dean smiled.

“Let me know when you’re ready to meet again.”

“Yes sir Mr...Colton.” He extended his hand and Colton took it and smiled.

“Things are going to change, Dean, for the better.”

Dean smiled. “They already have.” He closed the door behind him and Colton looked at Bill.

“I want you to figure out how we can legally get rid of Barlow.”

“It’s not going to be easy.”

“That’s why you get the big bucks.”

Bill laughed. “Yes sir. I’ll get with the head of HR and will review what needs to happen.”

“I think that’s enough for today.”

Bill stood and shook his hand. “You know, you may be a physics teacher but I think you’d make a great business man.”

Colton spent the next few days reviewing the companies books and it was surprisingly healthy despite a few glaring problems. He reviewed expense reports for his father and Wayne Barlow. They were more than three times the amount of any other employee. The problem of his father had been resolved with his death. Bill Sampson had paid off the girlfriends and each were moving out of their company financed apartments.

The real problem now was Barlow. He was about to walk into a meeting with Bill Sampson, the head of HR, Charles Hooper and Dean Wilkins. He walked into the conference room and each man stood. He'd never get used to that.

“Good morning, everyone. Please sit. Did everyone get some coffee?”

“Yes sir, thank you,” said Charles.

“Please Charles, call me Colton.” He poured himself a cup of coffee from the cart that Doris had set up. “Okay, tell me what I want to hear. What did you all find?”

“Well, we can’t terminate for the sexual harassment,” said Charles. “The complaints were all settled and he hasn’t had another since the last one.”

“How long as that been?”

“Six months.”

“I don’t know how this guy stayed employed. Or how somebody’s boyfriend or husband didn’t take a shot at him.” Charles glanced at Dean. “What?”

“There were a few threats made.”

“What was my father thinking? He was putting everything at risk for this guy.”

“He never thought what we knew was harassment was a big deal.”

Colton shook his head. “What an ass.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Okay so the harassment is a non-starter. Tell me you have something.” He thought he saw Charles suppressing a smile.

“I’ve gone over his expense reports with a fine tooth comb. With the help of Mr. Sampson we’ve discovered he’s been falsifying his reports.”

“This isn’t just expensive taste, is it?”

“No. We’ve discovered he’s been submitting false receipts going back since the beginning of his employment. It’s anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand. We’ve estimated close to one hundred thousand dollars in false claims.”

“How did someone not catch this sooner?”

“There was a hands off policy for any of Barlow’s expenses. It was your father’s orders.”

“If my father knew he’d been stealing from him he’d have killed him.”

“You could charge him with embezzlement,” said Bill. “But that would cause some serious public relations issues for the company.”

“What is your recommendation, Bill?”

“I say you fire his ass and make him sign a non-disclosure. In exchange we won’t prosecute.”

Colton sat back in his chair. “Does Barlow have a family?”

Charles glanced at Barlow’s file. “Married with two teenage children.”

“Cut Barlow a check for a year’s salary. I’m not going to make his family pay for his mistakes.”

All three men looked shocked. “Colton, you realize you don’t have to do that,” said Bill. “You have every right to have him arrested, not just fired.”

“Oh, I know I don’t have to but I’m not a fool. He signs the non-disclosure before he gets the check. He’s fired either way.”

A few hours later the men reconvened and Colton reviewed the paperwork that would get rid of Wayne Barlow. “Alright, let’s get him in here.”

Dean picked up the phone. "I told him to be available." He dialed Barlow's number. "Wayne, it's Dean. Would you please join me in the conference room?"

A few minutes later Wayne Barlow walked in the room. Colton could see what Kelly was talking about. He was tall, good looking, and a bright, capped smile. But there was something about him. The guy had a heavy creep factor. Barlow looked around the room and spotted Colton. His smile faded.

"What's he doing here?"

This guy making this easier for Colton "What I'm doing here is my family owns this business. Now please sit down." He nodded at Dean to begin.

"Wayne, you are being terminated for falsification of expense reports."

"What? This is crazy. Am I missing a few receipts?"

"Wayne, stop," said Bill. "We done a forensic accounting. You've embezzled more than one hundred thousand dollars. We could prosecute."

Barlow paled. "Prosecute?" He looked at Dean. "You know his father would never allow this."

"That is not a point in your favor," said Colton.

Barlow pounded his fist on the table. "You can't do this!"

"Actually, I can. I can also prosecute you if I want, but I'm not going to."

"I've given five years to this company. I've done huge sales."

"Enough," said Colton. "You're done here. The only question is whether you leave with severance or not. If you sign a non-disclosure, you agree to walk away and you will receive a year's salary."

"If I don't sign?"

"I have you arrested."

Dean pushed the paperwork in front of Barlow. "Sign it, Wayne. It's your only good option."

"Dean, buddy, how can you do this to me?"

"We've never been buddies."

"You know Colton Senior would never allow his no-good son screw me over like this."

Dean smirked and shook his head. "His no-good son is the only reason your getting a penny in severance. I said we should kick your ass to the curb with nothing. Sign it." He pushed the paper towards Barlow. He grabbed a pen and quickly signed it. He looked at Colton with pure hatred. Bill Sampson handed him a check.

"You'll regret this!" He shouted as he slammed the door behind him.

Colton looked at Dean. "Will you please make sure that security gets his keys and is escorted out."

"Including his car?"

"He has a company car?"

"Yes."

"Yes, that too. He's got a fat check in his pocket. He can call a cab."

Dean stood to leave but he turned and smiled. "I'm really glad you're here, Colton."

"Thanks, Dean."

He sat back in his chair and sighed. "Well, that was difficult."

Bill took the paperwork and slipped it in his briefcase. "Honestly, Colton, for someone who says he's just a school teacher you make a hell of a CEO. I'm honored to work for you." He extended his hand.

"Thank you, Bill. I really appreciate that."

"One piece of advice."

“Okay.”

“Don’t take Barlow’s threats lightly. He’s a piece of work and he feels like this is all your fault. Please be careful.”

“Thanks Bill.”

Colton looked around the empty conference room and wondered what the hell he’d gotten himself into.



Kelly walked out of the kitchen and tied her apron. She tried to act like it was any other day but she couldn't help smiling. Waking up in Colton's arms was something she couldn't have imagined just last week. Now she was happier than she'd ever been. She tried not to think about the possibility of him leaving town again. As much as she wanted him to stay, she wouldn't let herself influence his decision. Although she allowed herself to smile thinking she might be a reason for him to stay.

"So how's the new boyfriend?" asked Dorothy.

"What?"

"Don't even pretend with me, girl. You've got it bad. You've had a goofy smile on your face for more than a week."

"No I..." Kelly sighed. "He's fine," she whispered.

"Oh, honey I know he's fine. I saw him."

Kelly giggled. "Stop."

"You and Colton Jones, Jr. Will wonders never cease?"

"Now you know how I feel."

Dorothy looked at the new customers coming in for lunch. It was Lisa Olson and her girlfriend, Jessie Cramer, a fellow country club wife. "Oh crap," she muttered. Lisa brushed passed them and sat in Kelly's section. "I'll take them," she whispered.

"It's okay. I've got it." She squared her shoulders and grabbed two menus. "Good afternoon, ladies. What can I start you with?"

"Look who it is, Jessie. Colton's side piece."

"Coffee or soda."

"I just can't believe that he had you there during his father's service. It was so disrespectful to his father and the occasion."

Kelly tried to hold her tongue. She really did. But sometimes, some people just had it coming. “You mean as opposed to getting drunk at the reception, making a fool of yourself, and being thrown out?”

Jessie stared at the stunned Lisa. No one dared speak to her like that. “Lisa, you didn’t,” she whispered.

“You bitch!” Lisa screamed. She picked up a glass of water and threw it in Kelly’s face. She jumped out of her seat and punched Kelly in the face. Paulie came barreling out of the kitchen at the noise and grabbed Lisa by the shoulders. Kelly fell back onto a stool.

“That’s it. I don’t care who you married.” He looked over at Kelly. “Do you want me to call the cops?” Kelly shook her head no. Paulie turned her around and pushed Lisa toward the front door. “You get your ass out of here and never come back.” Jessie snapped out of her shock, grabbed Lisa’s purse and followed her out of the diner.

“Let me get some ice on that,” said Dorothy. She grabbed a towel and filled it with ice. Kelly winced when she put it on her swelling eye.

“I shouldn’t have said what I did.”

“You said nothing she didn’t deserve,” said Dorothy.

Kelly started crying. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“You come sit in the back,” said Paulie. “Dorothy can you cover?”

“Sure.”

Paulie took Kelly by the arm and began to lead her back into the kitchen when he saw they had an audience. “Whatcha all lookin at? Mind your own business and eat your food.” Everyone looked at back at their plates in unison. If Kelly wasn’t in pain she would have laughed. Paulie had been running this diner forever and nobody argued with him in his place. He guided her back to the small locker room and sat her down on the bench. “Where’s your phone?”

“In my purse, why?”

“Because I’m calling your boyfriend.”

“My what?”

“Girl, do you think anything goes on in this town, let alone this diner, that I don’t know about?”

Kelly managed a small smile. “My bad.” He pulled her purse out of her locker and found her phone. “I’ll call him.”

“You keep that ice on your cheek.” Paulie paged through her contacts until he found a picture of Colton she’d taken in the park. He pushed the contact and waited for Colton to pick up.

“Hi sweetheart. What’s up?”

“No, not sweetheart. This is Paulie.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Your high school girlfriend just clocked your current girlfriend.”

“What! Is she okay?”

“She’s going to have a hell of a shiner.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Colton couldn’t believe this. How could Lisa have done this to Kelly? What was he thinking? Of course she could do this. If she could try to jump him at his father’s funeral she wasn’t above hitting Kelly. He screeched into the parking lot and threw the car into park. He bounded into the diner and saw Dorothy. “Where is she?” Dorothy pointed to the kitchen.

“Employee room next to the kitchen.”

He pushed through the kitchen doors and saw Paulie sitting with Kelly on a bench in the back room. He ran to her and sat down next to her. "Oh God, sweetheart, I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"You're here now so I'll get back to my kitchen," said Paulie.

Colton looked up at him. "Thank you for calling me." Paulie nodded. He touched her hand holding the ice to her eye. "Let me see." She pulled it away and her eye was already badly swollen and would probably swell closed. "That bitch! We should have her arrested."

"No Colton. You haven't seen her life for the last fifteen years, the way her husband treats her. It's probably how she knew how to hit me like that."

"It doesn't excuse what she did."

"No, it doesn't but she did it in a public place. Everyone in town will know what happened by dinner. She humiliated herself. That will be worse for her than being arrested, not to mention what her husband might do. She doesn't need to be arrested to pay for what she did."

Colton gave her a light kiss. "You really are amazing," he whispered.

Colton and Kelly spent the next few days hanging out at her place. Paulie had given her a few days off. Her eye was starting to heal but it she didn't want to be seen until she could cover the bruise with makeup. She didn't want to be the subject of gossip. Worse, she didn't want anyone to think Colton did it.

"How's it going at the office?" she asked.

"Good. You were right about Sampson and Wilkins. Once they figured out who I was and what I wanted for the company they were real easy to work with."

"I'm glad. It's worked out for you."

"You were right about Barlow too. The guy is a snake. My father has been paying off the women he's been harassing for years."

"Ewww. I'm not surprised."

"I fired him."

"You did? Because of the harassment?"

"No, those cases were settled so I couldn't. Turns out he was embezzling."

"Wow. Are you prosecuting him?"

"No. He's got a wife and two teenage kids. I gave him severance and cut him loose." He saw her smiling at him. "What?"

She gave him a kiss. "You're a good man, Colton Jones."

"Thank you, sweetheart." He gave her a soft kiss. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Okay." She forced a smile. She was terrified of having 'that' conversation.

He took her hand in his. "Calm down. It's not bad news, at least I'm pretty sure it's not."

"I'm calm."

Colton laughed. “No you’re not. You’re worried I’m about to tell you when I’m going back to New York.”

“Okay, maybe I’m a little nervous.”

“It turns out John Reese was serious about the offer at Boyertown. It’s a good salary and I would start in September.”

Kelly tried to keep her voice steady. “What did you tell him?”

He pushed a stray hair behind her ear. “What did you want me to tell him?”

She slapped his shoulder. “Colton stop torturing me. What did you say?”

He leaned in close. “I said yes.”

Kelly squealed and wrapped her arms around Colton’s neck. She pulled back and looked at him. “You’re not doing this for me, are you?”

“Honestly, I’m doing this for me. The business is set the way I want, but I’ll still need to make decisions. Now that I have a relationship with my mother again, I don’t want to lose it. And,” He gave her a soft kiss. “I’ve reconnected with the cutest girl in high school. Why would I want to leave all that?”

“What about your life in New York, your friends?”

“It’s true, I have friends who I’ll miss, but I can go visit.”

“I bet your mother is ecstatic.”

“I haven’t told her yet.”

“Why not?”

“I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t be thrilled that you’re staying?”

“I kind of hoped.” He gave her a deep kiss.

“Do you want to tell your mother?” she whispered.

He stood and took her by the hand. "We can tell her in the morning."

Colton drove Kelly over to his mother's. He wanted her to be with him when he told his mother he was staying. It felt right. Kelly was a part of his life. "Hey Mom, we're here."

His mother came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel. "Perfect timing. Hannah and I were just getting lunch ready." She gave him a kiss, then smiled and kissed Kelly's cheek. "Hello dear. It's so nice to see you."

"Thank you, Mary."

They followed her back into the kitchen and Hannah greeted them with an equally warm smile. "Hello you two. Grab some plates. I just finished the tuna salad."

"That's great Hannah but there are some things I want to talk to you and Mom about first."

Hannah wiped her hands. "Uh oh."

"No uh oh, just sit." He waited for Mom and Hannah to sit down and he opened a manila envelope. "I went over the household accounts and of course that means what my father was paying you. All I can say is you're a saint to put up with it and us all these years." Hannah looked down at her hands, looking very uncomfortable. "What is it?"

"I couldn't leave her alone with him."

His mother gasped. "Oh Hannah."

"You're like a sister to me. I could never abandon you."

Mary held Hannah's hand. "You're like a sister to me. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Hannah, you are family. I want you to know, and I'm sure mother will agree, that you always have a place here."

"Of course you do," said Mary.

"That being said, I want you to look at this. I will be increasing your salary and I'm putting a pension in place for you. There may be a time when you want to retire and I want you to know that would be possible."



Hannah looked at the paperwork and gasped. "Oh Mr. Colton!"

"If you want to retire, that doesn't mean you have to move," said Mary. He could see the look of panic on his mother's face.

"Of course not. Like I said, you're family. You'll always have a home here."

Hannah wiped her eyes with the towel. "Oh Mr. Colton. I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. This is nothing you don't deserve. In fact, it's long overdue."

Hannah smiled and stood to give him a hug. "Come here, young one." Colton had to control his own tears at the mention of what she'd always called him in private. He held her close remembering all the times she was the only one he could turn to. He glanced over at his mother and saw a look of pride that made him choke back his tears.

"Well," he coughed. "There is something else I want to talk to you about. Remember when I said we ran into John Reese?"

"The high school principal, yes. Lovely man," said Mary.

"He offered me a position as a physics teacher." His mother gasped. "I've accepted. I'll be staying in Boyertown."

His mother put her hand to her face in shock and then broke into a huge smile. She stood and pulled him into a tight hug. "Oh sweetheart, you've made me so happy."

"This is where I want to be, Mom." He looked at Kelly and smiled as she wiped a tear from her cheek.

His mother looked at Kelly and smiled. "I'm sure you, do, dear."

"It's not just because of Kelly, Mom. We've missed out on so much. I don't want to miss any more. This is my home. I won't let him keep me from it anymore."

Colton was working late at the office. In a rare display of pigheadedness, his mother had insisted he draw a salary from the company. Even after he said no, she'd called Bill Sampson and told him to make it happen. Bill told him with a smile he didn't have the nerve to go against his mother's wishes and recommended he not either.

He wanted to make sure all the changes were in place before he started the new semester. If she was going to make him take a salary he was going to give Mom her money's worth. The last few weeks had been the happiest he'd had in years, maybe ever. He was helping his Mom and Hannah plan their trip to Paris and he'd convinced them to add London to their itinerary. Mom had accepted Kelly as part of the family. She had a regular spot at the dinner table and he'd cleaned out some drawers for her.

He thought heard a bang outside his office. There were still people in the warehouse but no one needed to be in the office at this hour. He walked into the hallway and didn't see anyone. "Hello?" He walked toward the main entrance but didn't see anyone. He was about to go back to his office when he felt a sharp pain in his neck. He turned and saw the shadow of a man before he blacked out.

Colton thought he heard his phone. He fought to open his eyes. His head was spinning and his neck hurt. Why did his neck hurt? He sat bolt upright and instantly regretted it. He thought his head would explode. He was sitting in his chair but he didn't know how he got back there. He'd been in the hallway. The man. He smelled something. His vision cleared and he saw his father's gun sitting on the desk. "What the hell?" He stood up and nearly fell over. In front of his desk on the floor was Wayne Barlow, dead. He didn't need to check for a pulse because he'd been shot through the head. His eyes were still open in shock.

His phone rang again. He saw it was Kelly and he answered. "Hello" came out slurred.

"Colton? What's wrong? You sound awful."

“Kel, something bad happened. I got jumped. Somebody injected me with something. Knocked me out.”

“What?! I’m calling the police. I’ll have Hannah drive me over there.”

“No wait. I woke up in my office. Wayne Barlow is here.”

“What’s he doing there?”

“I don’t know but he’s dead.”

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Someone shot him with the gun my father kept in the office. Kelly this is bad. No one will believe I didn’t do this.”

“I do.”

Colton sighed. Of course she did. “Okay, I’m going to call the cops and you call Bill Sampson. I have a feeling I’m going to need him.”

Colton sat in the interrogation room at the Boyertown police. He told them what happened but he didn't blame them for not believing him. If it hadn't happened to him he might not believe it either.

"Tell me again what happened," said the detective. He'd introduced himself as Lieutenant Frank Hughes. He was portly, short man, with a look that said he assumed Colton was guilty.

"I heard a noise outside my office. I walked out toward the main entrance. That's when I felt a pinch in my neck and started blacking out. As I turned I saw the figure of a man but I couldn't see his face. When I woke up I was back in my office and Wayne Barlow was dead on the floor. My phone rang and it was my girlfriend. I told her what happened and then I called 911."

"Why was Wayne Barlow there?"

"I don't know. I fired him weeks ago."

"Then why did you send him a text saying to meet you at the office?"

"I didn't."

The detective pulled Wayne's phone out of an evidence bag. "Then why is there a text on his phone from you?" The detective started reading, "Come meet me at the office ASAP. Let's talk about you coming back to work. CJ."

"I never sent him that."

"It's from 555-215-7497."

Colton felt like he'd pass out again. "That's my number but I didn't send it."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. A uniformed officer stuck his head in the door. "Mr. Jones lawyer is here."

The detective looked Colton up and down as if he'd just confessed. "That was fast."

"My girlfriend called him."

"Show him in," said the detective.

Bill Sampson walked into the interrogation room and set his briefcase down on the table. “Colton, how are you? Kelly told me you were drugged.”

Colton noticed the detective’s doubtful expression. “My neck hurts. I think that’s where they shot me up.”

Bill stood behind him and looked at his neck. Colton flinched when he touch his neck. Bill looked at the detective. “Let me guess, Frank. You don’t believe him so you didn’t look at his neck. If you did you’d see a puncture mark and a large bruise. I want a photographer in here to document this and a nurse to draw the blood sample that should have been taken on the scene. Now I’d like a moment alone with my client.”

“Thanks for coming, Bill.”

“Kelly, your mother and Hannah are all in the waiting area.”

“Oh God.”

“That girl is very devoted to you.”

“She’s amazing. My mom must be so upset.”

“You know, your mom is stronger than either of us would have thought. I think now that your father is gone we’re seeing the real Mary Jones.”

“Do you believe me?” Bill said yes with a certainty that took him by surprise. “You do?”

“If you were your father I’d be convincing him to take a plea. I would have no doubt he could do something like this. But you? Not a chance. Getting to work with you since you’ve been back, I see the kind of man you are.”

“Thanks, Bill.”

A knock on the door interrupted them. A uniformed officer came in carrying a camera followed by a nurse with some vials. The officer came up behind him and took several pictures of his neck. He left the room and the nurse took a quick look at his neck.

“Ouch. That’s gotta hurt,” she said. “Don’t worry I’m much better than whoever harpooned you.”

Bill’s head snapped up at the woman’s statement. “That looks like a bad injection to you.”

“God yes, several of them, by someone who had no idea what they were doing.”

“Several? Show me what you mean,” said Bill.

“Sure. Please bend your head forward,” said the nurse. Colton felt like a lab rat. “See those dark purple spots in the middle? Those are the injection points. It was a small needle but it’s there.”

“Have you ever seen anyone give themselves a shot in this location?” Colton’s head snapped around at Bill. “Just covering all the bases.” He looked back at the nurse. “Have you?”

“No. There are much easier ways to give yourself a shot.”

“Thank you...?”

“Kathy. I work across the street at Dr. Phillips office. Sometimes they ask me to come over when they need me.”

“Thank you, Kathy. I’ll let you get to it.” Kathy was true to her word and Colton barely felt the needle. She took several vials and then put a bandage at the site. “You’ll see. That won’t bruise the way the other one did. Now if I were you I’d lay down before you fall down.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at his eyes. He’s still feeling whatever he was given.”

Bill smiled. “Thank you, Kathy. Thank you very much.” Kathy left and he closed the door behind her. “Well, that was informative.”

“Why several injections?” asked Colton.

“Maybe you started coming around before they were ready?”

“That nurse is right, I feel like crap. Someone better let me use the bathroom before I ralph all over the floor.”

Bill opened the door as the detective was walking towards them. “Bathroom, where?”

“He can hold it until I’m done.”

“No he can’t and you are done. Now where is the bathroom before my client vomits all over your interview room.” Frank took a step back and pointed. Bill took Colton’s arm and led him to the bathroom just in time for the reappearance of what little Colton had eaten today. Bill purposely held the door open a little so Frank could hear.

Colton rinsed his mouth with water and looked at Bill. “Can you get me out of here? I want to go home.”

Bill turned to Frank. “If you aren’t ready to charge him, he’s leaving now.”

Frank looked at Colton. “Stay in town.”

“Don’t worry, detective. I’m not going anywhere but home.”

Colton steadied himself on Bill as he walked toward the lobby. That’s where he saw Kelly, his mother and Hannah all sitting in the waiting room.

“Colton,” Kelly said as she threw her arms around him. She tried to kiss him but he pulled back. “Not advisable. I just threw up.”

“Oh sweetheart,” Mary said as tears ran down her face. “We were all so worried.”

“I’ll be okay, Mom. I just need to lie down.” His mother looked at Bill with a determined look he’d never seen before. Maybe Bill was right about her.

“We’re taking my son home.”

Colton managed his way to his room with the help of Kelly and the banister. “Damn, Kelly, this is a mess,” he said as he sat down on the bed. He tried to take his shirt off but his fingers were numb.

Kelly leaned over him and pulled the shirt over his head. “Don’t worry. We’ll get this cleared up.”

“Can you help me to the bathroom? I need some mouthwash.” She helped him to his bathroom and got him the mouthwash. He rinsed out and spit. He looked at Kelly in the mirror and attempted a smile. “Much better. Now I need to use the john.”

“Are you good?”

“Yeah, I can manage.”

“Okay,” she smiled at him as she closed the door. He finished up and washed his hands. Looking in the mirror he could see he looked like crap. He thought about Kelly waiting for him in his bedroom. Their bedroom. She was spending more nights here than they did at her place. He opened the door and saw she’d changed into the t-shirt and shorts she slept in.

“Okay big fella, let me get you out of your pants.”

Colton managed a chuckle. “Best offer I’ve had all day.” Kelly unzipped his slacks and pulled them over his hips. He sat down on the bed as she pulled off his shoes and socks, then his slacks.

“Do you want your shorts?”

“Yeah. T-shirt too. Mom and Hannah will probably pop in to check on me and we don’t want to startle the lady folk”. Kelly helped him get changed and then propped him up in bed. Keeping his head elevated still felt better. He watched her as she straightened up and put their clothes away. “It never occurred to you that I did it.”

She looked shocked. “Of course not.”

“Not even for a second, did it? You believe me.”



“Colton where is this coming from? Of course I believe you. I know you. I’ve known you for years. You could never do something like that,” she smiled. “Okay, if we’re clear on that do you need anything?”

He reached his hand out to her. “Yeah I do. I need you.” She took his hand and sat down next to him on the bed.

“While I could never imagine turning you down, I think you’re not in any condition right now,” she grinned.

“That’s not what I mean,” he smiled. He stroked her cheek with his hand. “I’m in love with you, Kelly.”

She looked stunned, then smiled. “This is a hell of a time to have this conversation, but I’m in love with you too. I have been since that day in the hall. I’ve loved you for years.”

He grinned. “Do you forgive me for taking so long to catch up?”

She leaned close. “I’ll let you make it up to me.” Kelly gave him a soft kiss. They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” he called. His mother opened the door and Hannah was right behind her.

“We just wanted to check on you before you went to bed,” said his mother. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay, Mom.”

“I’ve brought you some ginger ale and crackers,” said Hannah. “It will help your stomach.”

“Thanks, Hannah.” He took the glass from her, took a sip then set it on the nightstand with the crackers. He reached for his mother’s hand. “I’m so sorry this is happening. It’s the last thing you need to go through after everything that’s happened.”

“Sweetheart, this is not your fault. Someone did this to you and to Wayne. When we find out who they will regret messing with my boy.”

Colton laughed. "Mom, I've never seen you like this."

"Well, then I'd say I'm due."

Colton woke up to the sound of the ringing doorbell. Then he heard his mother yelling. "I told you people to go away and I meant it!" He got out of bed and realized he felt much better. He went to the top of the stairs just as his mother slammed the front door.

"Bastards!"

"Mom?"

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry if I woke you. How are you feeling?"

He walked down the stairs and gave her a hug. "I feel much better." He kissed his mother's cheek. "I had no idea you are such a badass."

She gave his chest a playful slap. "Oh hush," she said through her blush.

"Did Kelly go to work?"

Kelly walked out of the kitchen towards him. "No, Kelly did not. Good morning, sleepyhead." She gave him a kiss.

"You must be hungry. I'll get you some breakfast," said Mom as she left him alone with Kelly.

"What is going on out there?"

Kelly slipped her arms around his waist. "Word got out. It's a persistent couple of reporters."

"That didn't take long. I thought you were working today?"

"I called Paulie. The rest of the staff are going to cover my shifts until we get this sorted out."

"How do you have such faith it will be? The man was found dead in my office and the gun was next to me."

"How? Because I have to. I can't let myself think for a second that we won't figure this out and neither can you."

He smiled at Kelly. How did he get so lucky? He gave her a little kiss and whispered “I love you.”

They spent the day inside, avoiding the press and unplugging the house phone. Colton was pretending to watch a movie Hannah had chosen when he got a call from Bill Sampson. “Hey Bill.”

“I’m in your driveway. Frank Hughes is in a car behind me. He called and said I should meet him here.”

Colton’s heart immediately pounded in triple time. “Oh God.”

“What is it?” asked Kelly.

“Don’t panic. I’m here. Just let us in and we’ll see what he has to say.”

“Okay. I’ll be right there.” He disconnected the call and stood. He saw the panicked looks on everyone’s face.”

“What’s going on?” asked his mother.

“We’re about to find out.” He walked to the front door and opened the door to Bill. Frank Hughes followed closely behind.

“Come in.” They followed him into the living room where everyone took a seat.

“Why are we here, Frank?” asked Bill.

“We don’t get a lot of murders in Boyertown so I had them put your blood tests at the head of the line. I got the results.” He took a breath and pulled a report out of his jacket, handing it to Bill. “The results say you were in fact dosed with propofol. The doctor who reviewed the results said to have that much still in your system you were dosed with a lot. He was surprised it didn’t kill you. His medical conclusion was you would have been unable to hold a gun let alone fire it.”

“Does this mean...?” asked Kelly.

“Yes, we will not be pursuing any charges against Mr. Jones.”

Colton felt every muscle in his body relax. He looked at Kelly who smiled and took his hand in hers. He saw as Hannah comfort his mother as tears ran down her cheeks. "Mom, it's okay."

"No it's not. Someone did this to you. Why?"

"You're right, Mrs. Jones," said Hughes. "It also explains why we found a perfect set of Mr. Jones prints on the gun."

"What do you mean?" asked Bill.

"Fingerprints are never perfect. There's always a smudge or a partial. Every print was so perfect that someone must have carefully pressed your fingers on the gun. Now I have to figure out who."

"I think I can help with that."

They all turned to the voice coming from the door. It was Lisa Olson, but not the Lisa they were used to seeing. She'd been badly beaten. Her right eye was swollen shut. There was a cut on her cheek that was still bleeding.

"The door was open," she said.

"Oh my God, Lisa," said Colton "Who did this to you?"

Mary jumped to her feet. "Lisa, come here and sit." She guided the woman to her chair, ignoring the blood dripping on the carpet. "Hannah get some towels."

"I'm so sorry, Colton. I swear I didn't know."

"Know what, Mrs. Olson?" asked Hughes. Hannah came back into the room with a wet towel and one wrapped around some ice. Mary took them and began tending to Lisa's wounds.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Your husband did this, didn't he?" asked Mary.

"Yes. He said he was sick of me making a fool of him so he was going to teach me a lesson I wouldn't forget."

“Is that why he hit you?” asked Hughes.

Everyone was shocked when Mary turned on Hughes. “He didn’t hit her. He beat the crap out of her.” She turned back to Lisa, holding the ice to her face. “How is that, dear?”

“Much better, thank you.”

“This wasn’t the lesson,” said Lisa. “This he does for fun. The lesson was killing Wayne Barlow.” The only sound for a few moments was the ticking of the mantel clock.

“He confessed to you he killed Barlow?” asked Bill. “Why?”

“Yes. Paul and Barlow were drinking buddies. He knew that Colton had fired him.”

“Why would he kill his friend?” asked Hughes.

“To set up Colton. He knew that would be the only way to really hurt me, if Colton was sent to jail.” Lisa looked at Colton as a tear cut through the blood on her cheek. “He knew Colton was the only man I ever truly loved. But I was stupid and selfish. I lost him.” She looked at Kelly. “I’m so sorry, Kelly. I’ve been horrible to you forever. I think maybe I knew even then that he could never love me the way he would love you.”

Colton felt Kelly squeeze his hand. “It’s alright, Lisa. I forgive you.”

“Did your husband have any surgery recently?” asked Hughes.

“Why?” asked Lisa.

“Mr. Jones was dosed with a medication used to knock someone out before surgery.”

“No surgery.” Lisa replied. “He does play golf with John Crane.”

Hughes leaned forward in his chair. “The oral surgeon?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Olson are you willing to make a statement?”

“What about what he did to her?” asked Mary.

“I’ll be fine,” said Lisa.

“No you won’t. It will never be fine if he doesn’t pay for this.” Colton saw the look on his mother’s face. She realized what she was doing. “I’m sorry, Lisa. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you’re right.”

“If you’re willing to press charges, I can have him arrested tonight.”

“You can? He said no one in this town could touch him. He said no one would ever believe the town drunk over the word of the mayor.”

“We believe you, dear,” said Mary.

“We do,” said Colton.

“Thank you,” she whispered. She looked at Hughes. “I’ll press charges.”

Hughes stood. “Okay, let’s get you to the hospital for treatment and I can take your statement there.”

“My car...”

“Leave the keys with me. I’ll bring it to you when you need it,” said Colton.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys. She stood on shaky legs and handed them to Colton. “Thank you, Colton.” She looked around the room. “Thank you all of you. I don’t deserve your kindness.”

Kelly walked towards her and gave her a hug. “Yes, you do.”

Colton looked at Bill. “Lisa may need some legal assistance. Would you please go with her.”

“Of course.”

“Oh, no. I don’t have any money. Paul controls everything.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Colton. “We’ll take care of you.” He walked to Lisa and put his arms around her for the first time in fifteen years. “It will be okay. I promise.”

Everything moved quickly once Lisa pressed charges. Despite her husband telling her to the contrary, everyone believed her. Paul Olson was a petty tyrant and his staff, town administration and even the police were more than happy to throw his ass in jail. An inventory of the oral surgeon's pharmacy locker found several vials of missing propofol. Once Olson realized he had no one but an overpriced, out of town lawyer on his side, he took the plea deal. He decided that life in prison was better than leaving the decision of whether he faced execution to a jury.

Once Colton had been cleared he was able to focus on getting ready for his new classes. Mary and Hannah left for their trip at Colton's insistence. That left the house for Kelly and him and they were making the most of their privacy.

"Hey there, professor. You up for a break?"

He glanced up from the desk and saw Kelly standing in the doorway. "Well what do you have in mind?" he said with a grin.

She slowly walked around the desk and sat down in his lap. She leaned in and whispered, "Lunch, you horn dog." She pushed on his chest and leaned back. "Come on, I made us some tacos."

"In a minute," he said as he nipped at her neck. He slipped his hands under her shirt and rubbed his hands over her warm skin. He placed kisses on her neck and nipped at her ear.

"Colton, your lunch will get cold," she whispered.

He turned her face to his. "I don't care." He pulled her close into a deep kiss. "I love you so much."

"I love you too."

"Let's live together."

Kelly chuckled. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

"No, I mean get a place, together." He saw the look he recognized and it worried him. "What's wrong?"



“You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Doubtful. Tell me.”

“Do you realize your bathroom is twice the size of mine?”

“This is about bathrooms?”

“Not to mention your bedroom which is huge.”

“Okay, the train is pulling in to crazy town.”

“You’re a teacher, I’m a waitress. We can’t afford anything nearly as nice.”

“I’m getting income from the business but I have the feeling square footage isn’t what this is about.” He saw the smile slip from her face. “Sweetheart, tell me. I promise it will be okay.”

“I’ve been all alone for five years. I didn’t do anything but work and go to school. Now I have you.”

Colton smiled and gave her a quick kiss. “You most certainly do.”

“And you have me, heart and soul. But now...” she paused.

“What sweetheart? Tell me.”

“Now I have your mother and Hannah. I feel like I have a family. I’m not alone anymore.”

Colton smiled. Now he understood. “You are family. They both love you almost as much as I do.”

“And I love them. They’ve both been so kind to me.”

“Are you saying you want to move in here with me?”

“I don’t know that your mother would approve.”

“Of course she approves. You stay over all the time.” He leaned in and whispered, “She knows we aren’t just sleeping.” He loved it that she blushed bright red. “I’ll tell you what. We’ll put this discussion on hold until they get back next week, okay?”

“Okay,” she smiled.

“Okay.” He nodded then picked her up and started heading toward the stairs.

“Colton!” she squealed. “What are you doing?”

“We haven’t used my jacuzzi yet.”

Kelly got a gleam in her eyes. “You have a jacuzzi?”

Colton watched as the women in his life made dinner. Kelly moved in shortly after Mom and Hannah returned from their trip. Mom more than approved, she hugged Kelly and told him to make more room in his closet. Kelly wept when Mom hung her mother's picture with the rest of the family pictures. Kelly caught him watching when she put the salad on the table.

"Hey you, get your butt up and set the table."

"Yes ma'am" He put out the dishes and the silver while they put the food on the table. They were about to start eating when there was a knock at the front door.

"Who could that be?" asked Mary. Hannah stood and went to the door. No one expected who Hannah brought back with her.

"Lisa," said Colton, even though he barely recognized her. Instead of her perfectly made up face and couture clothes she was bare faced, wearing jeans and a plain button down shirt.

"Hello everyone. I'm sorry for interrupting your dinner."

"Would you care to join us?" asked his mother.

"No thank you. I'm on my way out of town but I couldn't leave without thanking all of you, especially you, Mrs. Jones." Everyone looked at mom.

"You're welcome, dear."

"Mom?"

"You don't know?" asked Lisa. "Your mom visited me in the hospital. She made sure I was okay and safe. Then she got me into a rehab."

Colton smiled. "Mom? You did all that?" Her blush said it was true.

"Where are you going?" asked Kelly.

"It's time for me to make a fresh start. I'm moving to a town where I can do that."

His mom went to Lisa and gave her a hug. "I'm very proud of you, Lisa."

“Thank you, Mrs. Jones.”

Colton looked at Lisa and couldn't believe the person he was seeing. Maybe this Lisa could make a good life for herself. “I'm proud of you too.” He stood and gave Lisa a hug.

“Thank you, Colton.”

Once Lisa left they sat down to their dinner but no one was quite what to say. Kelly broke the silence. “Do you think she'll be okay?”

“I think so,” said his mother. “She really wants this. Bill Sampson set her up with a great divorce lawyer so she's set financially.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Colton.

His mother glanced at Hannah who shrugged and took a bite of her roast beef. “I've been helping out at the women's shelter.”

“What? Why didn't you say anything?”

“Lisa needed a safe place to go after the hospital. Bill Sampson told me about the shelter and I got her a spot. Then I helped her get into a good rehab facility. That bastard she married had all the assets locked down and the poor girl needed help.”

Colton's heart broke. “Mom, I'm sorry I wasn't here for you when you needed me.”

“Colton, sweetheart, I knew you were safe from him. That's all I ever wanted. I wasn't strong enough then to stand up to him.”

“You are now.”

Colton put on some shorts and waited for Kelly to come to bed. She came out of the bathroom wearing one of short nighties she bought since moving in. This one was his favorite, flame red and low cut. He doubted it ever stayed on her longer than a few minutes.

“That was quite an evening,” said Kelly.

“You’re not upset I gave Lisa a hug are you?”

“No, of course not.” She pulled back the covers and climbed into bed next to him. “I meant about your mother. She really is amazing.”

“Yes she is but I don’t want to talk about her now.”

She grinned and slipped her hand around his neck. “I couldn’t agree more.” She gave him a passionate kiss. He pulled back and smiled. “Hold that thought. I want to talk to you about something.”

“Really? You want to talk? Now? I’m wearing...”

“I know and it is a challenge to my concentration. I have something for you.”

“Oh, a present? How sweet.”

He reached into the nightstand and pulled out a small box. He opened it and revealed a one carat oval solitaire. Kelly gasped. “Do you think the cutest girl at Boyertown High be happy married to an ex-jock?”

She brushed her hand against his cheek. “Very happy.”

He smiled a broad smile. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes.”

He gave her a deep kiss. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too.” Kelly looked at her ring and giggled. “It’s so beautiful. Should we tell your mother?”

He slipped the thin strap off her shoulder. “We’ll tell her in the morning.”