

Over The Thin, Blue Line

Standing at the kitchen island, Molly Crenshaw gave no thought to the chicken she was chopping, her hands guiding the knife with a precision built from years of repetition. Though she'd been trying not to let herself obsess about it, she was once again wondering why she hadn't heard from her doctor. She was sure the results from her gynecological exam should be ready by now.

Her whole life had been spent without giving a second thought to having such an examination. She'd gone to the doctor when she had to, and hadn't worried about it otherwise. Waiting for a call now, she was positive that had been the best policy. Molly was too old to take the kind of stress the doctor visit was causing.

"Mol-ly?" a singsong voice called from the dining room.

Frowning, Molly wondered what this was going to be. It sounded like Kris, and oddly, at least of late, she sounded particularly happy. "I'm in the kitchen, dear. My hands are a mess, so you'd best come in here."

Kris entered the open room decked out in the latest Nike gear, dark blue windpants and a matching top. Over the last few days, the blonde looked ten years younger than she had the previous week. "Hi, Molly. I have something for you." She held her hands behind her back.

Smiling, Molly's mood brightened in proportion to her visitor's. She suddenly realized she had missed this side of Kris. "What do ya have? A new dustpan for yer old maid?"

"Ha!" the young woman exclaimed, proudly pulling her hand around to show Molly the gift. In her outstretched palm was a small black box. "This is a lot more useful than a dustpan. Especially if you're cleaning up for your Leyland."

The box looked like it contained jewelry, but Molly could not imagine that Kris had bought her something that expensive. "What's the occasion?" she asked, gingerly taking the box.

Green eyes sparkled as Kris smiled. "No occasion. I just wanted you to know that I love you and appreciate all you've done for me."

Her eyes filling with unexpected tears, Molly propped open the small lid. Inside were two gorgeous earrings, big, wide loops littered with red stones and what appeared to be diamonds. "Oh, my," she whispered.

Kris moved closer, examining the bauble with her friend. "I saw them and I knew they would look great on you."

"I—I don't know what ta say."

A small arm slipped around her shoulders and squeezed. "Just say thank you and that you'll wear them often."

"Oh, honey, I will. Are these diamonds?" Molly asked, still in shock.

"Yeah." Kris pointed to the red sparkles. "And these are rubies."

"Kris," the maid said, "this must have cost a fortune. Ya really shouldn't have."

The young blonde shrugged. "It was expensive, but you're worth every penny. And it's about time we start recognizing that around here."

Molly engulfed Kris in a hug, squeezing for all she was worth. She heard such praise so rarely, the maid had no idea what the proper reaction should be. "Thank you, and I have an outfit these will be perfect with."

Kris giggled. A few minutes later she left the room, leaving Molly still holding her new jewelry, her eyes locked on their shine. As her mind whirled with joyful thoughts, she barely noticed the ringing phone. Her greeting to the caller was enthusiastic.


"This is Dr. Rahall. Your test results are in. I'd like you to come into my office tomorrow," the woman said, her voice emotionless.

Molly's stomach lurched painfully. "Couldn't you just tell me now?"

"I'd really like you to come in, Miss Crenshaw. Knowing that you are inexperienced in the type of exam you had, I want to discuss a few things with you," Dr. Rahall explained.

Something about the physician's voice didn't sound right. Molly was sure something was wrong. It was obvious, however, that the doctor was not going to tell her over the phone. The maid agreed to a time for her appointment the next day. She wished it wasn't so close to five p.m., so she wouldn't have to wait another day.

Hanging up the phone, Molly's world was again turned upside down. "Oh, my," she whispered.



Edward Hollingsworth stood in the sunroom. Kris loved the room. She sometimes spent hours there, reading books or writing in her little diary. Edward knew she would be surprised if she realized he thought about something like that. She probably didn't think he paid any attention to her at all, but he did.

She wants to be my every thought, he told himself, shaking his head. Did she not realize what he did? How important he was? Edward could not be bothered with her each moment of the day. When they'd married, he was certain she'd understood that. *Apparently, I was wrong.*

A low moon hung in the western sky, merely a shade of itself, providing little light to the darkening night. The dim illumination provided by the stylish lamp on the nightstand served to accentuate his turbulent mood, letting all his negative thoughts from the day flood into his mind.

As if his problems with Kris weren't enough, Edward was still trying to come to grips with the fact that Dominique Carpenter was living in the manor. Worse than the actual fact was that his mother hadn't seemed to bat an eye about the situation, acting as if it were perfectly normal and acceptable to welcome a stranger into their house. None of the people in his life seemed to be acting rationally.

His only source of celebration of late was his victory over Bruce Dooley. The insignificant fool had caved earlier than expected, but the result was just as effective. Soon the buff bartender would be packing up and leaving Gossamer Falls, which was exactly what Edward wanted and what Bruce deserved.

An intake of air sounded behind him. "Oh, I didn't know anyone was in here," Heather said, startled.

Edward smiled. "I am unwinding from work."

"I—I'll just leave you alone, then."

"Please join me," he said. He laughed internally at the quiver in the young woman's voice. The situation with the young maid and his wife was too ironic for words. He desperately wanted Heather, but had strongly fought the desire to have her. Yet Kris was convinced that he had acted on those carnal impulses. His wife knew him, but not as well as she thought.

Heather crossed the room and stood at his side. Her hands were clasped

nervously in front of her white apron. "You must have had a stressful day at work."

Chuckling lightly, Edward shifted his feet, swaying to his left, brushing shoulders with the woman. "When you are a Hollingsworth, every day has stress. It never ends."

"I've noticed that," she said, moving behind him. "Nothing a good massage won't fix." Her hands quickly, naturally grasped his shoulders.

"Ooohhh," Edward moaned lowly. He hadn't realized his shoulders were so tense, but with the beautiful young woman's hands kneading the muscles, the knots jumped to the surface.

Heather's breath tickled his ear as she talked, her height something different for the publisher. "They'll be tight again tomorrow, but there's nothing wrong with working out some of the tension tonight."

His suddenly thick tongue ran across Edward's lips. He didn't know how much the woman actually tried to tantalize him, but either way, she was a master of the art. "You do that so well," he said, noting the unsteadiness in his tone.

"My dad always said I was the best."

Fantasy wasn't something in which Edward frequently took part, but a clear picture of his and Heather's naked, sweating bodies writhing together came forward in his mind. He had to get out now, or Kris' accusations were soon to become reality.

As he turned to face her, Edward caught the woman's hands in his own and drew them to his chest, pulling her to him. The shock in her eyes was replaced with something else, deeper, more sensual. Delicately, she wet her lips, speaking more than words ever could. Bending forward, Edward let his mouth cover hers, noting how immediately her lips opened to him. He allowed himself several delicious moments to explore her mouth, immensely enjoying the exotic sounds she made as she became more excited.

Abruptly, Edward pulled away. Heather whimpered in disappointment while he ran a finger over her lips, their wetness coating his skin. He smiled arrogantly, only an ounce of willpower keeping him from ravishing the woman, then left the room.



Lisa Hollingsworth stood before the antique mirrored vanity and brushed her dark hair. Her springy tresses coiled back into shape almost as soon as the brush passed through them. As a child, she'd hated her hair and the accompanying comparisons to Shirley Temple. Lisa had learned to accept herself somewhere on the road to adulthood, but there were still occasional moments when she longed for straight hair.

At that moment, however, Lisa longed for something completely different. She smiled as she surveyed her nude reflection. *Jennifer Lopez, I'm not*, she thought wryly, pivoting to get a better look at her rear end. *Maybe a pre-diet Bette Midler....*

Oh, well. Her body's appearance didn't matter. What mattered was how she and Harris felt about each other, and Lisa had no doubt that he would love her regardless of the apparent imminent onset of cottage-cheese thighs. *But maybe we'll give you girls a workout.* Lisa gently slapped her thighs.

She slipped into a plain nightgown. One of the best things about her relationship with Harris was that neither felt the need for pretense. Each felt comfortable being who they were in the other's presence. Lisa had never had to work hard at getting Harris' attention, especially not in their bedroom. It always baffled her to hear other women tell of their struggles to keep their husbands' affections. A mild breeze seemed to be enough to arouse Harris whenever she was around.

Lisa opened the bathroom door and stepped into the bedroom. Harris was propped up in their waterbed, reading a manuscript. She crossed the room, and joined him in bed.

Harris glanced up at her, smiled, then returned to his manuscript.

Lisa stared in disbelief. She rolled onto her side, facing Harris, and lay her hand palm-down on the bed. Slowly, she began alternately applying and ceasing downward pressure, resulting in a steady series of waves that rippled throughout the bed.

Harris, blue pencil in hand, tried to scribble something on the manuscript he was attempting to keep balanced on his knees, but failed. "What are you doing?" he said irritably, glancing at Lisa.

The impish smile faded from Lisa's face. "I'm sorry. I was just—"

"No, I'm sorry," Harris hastily said. "I'm just under a lot of pressure at work, and I really need to finish this." He smiled bleakly.

"That's okay. I understand."

"Rain check?" Harris hopefully raised his eyebrows.

"Sure," Lisa smiled. "Besides, I have work to do, too. Now that the boys are back in school, I have a lot of reading to catch up on."

Harris, already lost in his manuscript, grunted acknowledgment.

Lisa sighed and resigned herself to spending the evening finishing the manuscript she'd been reading for the past several days.



Switching on the evening news, Bruce Dooley wondered what the hell was going on with the military. It seemed every week brought some new tragedy that extinguished many young lives. The Republicans were blaming the former administration, the Democrats were blaming the current administration, but none of it brought back one lost soul. Perhaps the media or the nature of the Internet made it seem like accidents were happening more often, or maybe activity was increasing. In any event, he hoped a solution would soon be found.

The bartender didn't watch television at work too often because The Blue Streak normally kept him busy. After ten on a Wednesday night wasn't historically slow, but tonight the place had seen so few people he wondered if the sign outside was working.

Bruce welcomed the sound of the opening door until Ford Blankenship appeared. The policeman was in his street clothes, a pair of black jeans and a heavy jacket, his hair teased and gelled. Bruce didn't like his presence, off-duty or not. If he knew one thing in life, it was that a cop was always a cop.

"Hello, Officer," the bartender greeted the man as he approached the bar.

"Hi, Bruce. And please call me Ford. I'm here to relax."

Bruce nodded, trying to give the officer the benefit of the doubt, which wasn't working very well. "Just can't get enough of the place, huh?"

Ford laughed. "No. I got so thirsty working this joint, I had to come back and get a taste of what I was missing. Give me a highball."

Fixing the drink, the bigger man wished desperately for a crowd to overrun the bar. He knew it was highly unlikely, but he did not want to entertain the

policeman for any length of time. When he handed over the drink, he tried to slip away.

"How's it been going?" Ford asked, his voice friendly.

"Oh, okay. I can't complain, anyway."

Ford nodded and smiled. "That's all you can ask for, I guess. You know, ever since that Griffith trial, I've been keeping an eye out. Something wasn't right about that case."

Bruce's stomach fell into his shoes, making him want to bolt from the building. "I agree," was all he said.

"I couldn't believe it when I found out he sued you. Thought maybe it was all about money, but I don't know. Seems like they'd go after someone a lot better off than you."

Bruce laughed nervously. "That would make sense."

"I noticed that the case has been dismissed. What's up?"

Glad to have a pat answer, Bruce said, "I'm not allowed to talk about it."

"Ah," Ford sipped his drink. "So you settled." He looked curiously around the bar.

Passing his weight from foot to foot, Bruce wondered how deep the cop's investigation had gone. He didn't know much about Ford Blankenship, but from what he could tell, the man was straight. And thorough. A bad combination as far as Bruce's situation was concerned.

Finished surveying the room, Ford rubbed his chin. "This place must do a lot better business than tonight for you to settle a half-million-dollar lawsuit."

Thinking on his feet, Bruce grabbed the nearest clean mug and held it out to the man. "Would you like to contribute to my legal defense fund?"

Cocking his head, Ford laughed. Bruce joined him, praying for something else clever to say.



Rahne O'Connor sighed as Trent Beckham's soft exhalations brushed her ear.

The post-coital spooning sessions with Trent were almost as satisfying as the sex itself. Or at least that was the case most of the time. But on this night, Rahne's sigh was born of dread rather than contentment.

"You had a call while you were in the shower," she said softly. Behind her, she felt Trent's body tense.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked.

Though Trent's voice remained calm, Rahne could feel his disapproval emanating in waves. She answered his question with a shrug.

"Was it a patient?"

Rahne swallowed hard. "No. It wasn't a patient."

"Salesperson?"

Rahne imagined she heard a desperate undertone in Trent's question. "No," she said softly. "It was your therapist."

"Oh." Trent rolled away from Rahne.

Turning toward her lover, Rahne asked, "What's this about, Trent?"

"Nothing."

"Is it about your mom?"

"I said it's nothing." There was an unfamiliar edge to Trent's voice.

"Fine," Rahne said. She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Rahne. I didn't mean to sound snippy."

"It's okay." Despite the room's darkness, Rahne waved dismissively, eager to forget the matter.

"No, it's not okay. It's just that, well, it's something I can't talk about with you."

"Well, that's a relief," Rahne said sarcastically. "I thought it was something serious. But I guess as long as you can spend an hour making love to me, it doesn't matter whether we talk."

"That's not what I meant," Trent said hurriedly. He paused briefly before continuing, "You know that I'm sworn to maintain patient confidentiality in my occupation."

"Of course."

"Well, sometimes keeping all those secrets can be a burden, so we need to find a way to release some of the pressure."

"And you do this by finding another therapist and laying the burden of confidentiality on him?" Rahne asked.

"Something like that."

Rahne inhaled deeply and considered what Trent had told her. "So it's normal for one psychiatrist or psychologist to treat another?"

"Completely."

"Okay," Rahne said quietly, turning away from Trent. She was grateful that the room was dark. It spared her the experience of looking into his eyes and knowing he was lying to her.