
Prologue

Collette Monroe's father died in March of 1958. It was rather ironic, she thought, that he had died in the spring, when the flowers began to bloom and new lives were just beginning. But it wasn't odd, Collette thought. After all, the stomach cancer had transformed her father from a strong man to a bag of bones.

Although he had raised her as a single parent, they had only recently begun to grow closer. She had heard rumors growing up about how the pain of losing his wife so soon after the birth had damaged him. It certainly didn't help that Collette was the spitting image of her mother. Still, losing a parent was a terrible thing to go through even if Collette hadn't quite figured out how she was going to mourn him.

The funeral parlor smelled of cigarettes, daisies and cheap candles. Old friends of her father have huddled over the casket, which had been displayed at the back of the room. Collette hadn't gone to see him. She dreaded seeing dead bodies and she feared the image of her dead father would be forever implanted in her mind instead of the man he used to be.

She heard her elderly Aunt Milda let out a loud wail as she blew into her handkerchief, but Collette had no patience to comfort her. She was exhausted. The funeral preparations had taken a long time and her feet had been squeezed into painful black heels since seven am. It seemed there were a million things she still needed to do. Her purse contained only a pen, her address book and her checkbook. Those were the only things she had use for since she had been preparing for the funeral.

Collette looked around and realized she hardly knew the people who had shown up to her father's funeral. There were some distant relatives, a couple of acquaintances, and old friends of her father's who used to play baseball with him. Collette couldn't help but notice her own loneliness. She had no mother, no siblings, no close family members and very few friends. She wasn't married and she had no children. The idea of going back to an empty, dark house after today scared her. Collette wasn't used to being alone and she wasn't particularly good at it.

"Honey, I am so sorry for your loss. Is there anything we can do?"

Collette turned around and saw her best friend since childhood, Polly Carrow-Robinson, standing with her husband, Elijah. He was holding a bouquet of white lilies and Polly held a small box of butter cookies. They had married last summer, quickly, after Polly had been caught in a scandal, and although they had struggled at the beginning of their marriage, they were now happier than ever. They were a handsome couple even if they did look rather worse for wear lately.

Polly had soon gotten pregnant with twins and she was due in a couple of weeks. Collette was concerned about her friend as she looked at her carefully. The pregnancy had been hard on her and the usually vain and glamorous Polly seemed weak and frail. Her belly seemed too big for her small frame, she

had dark circles under her eyes and her blonde hair was unkempt. It was strange seeing her like this when she had been chosen for her beauty at last year's Miss Orchid Pageant.

"Thank you, but I think I've taken care of everything," Collette said quietly as she took the items, wondering where she was going to put them. "We'll be heading to the church soon and Father Michael promised a quick mass. It's been a long day for everyone."

"We are extremely sorry. Your father was a good man and you have handled your loss bravely," Elijah said warmly, but his eyes never left his wife's petite body. He looked equally exhausted and Collette doubted he slept much during the night when Polly was so close to giving birth. "If there is anything we can do, please let us know. Polly and I came to pay our respects, but I'm afraid we won't be able to stay for the church service."

"I'm so sorry, Lettie," Polly said as she squeezed Collette's hands. Her black dress was tight around her swollen belly. "Elijah and I want to stay to support you, but the babies are coming any day now and I'm so tired. The doctor and my father want me to spend most of the day in bed until the twins arrive."

Collette kissed her icy cold cheek. "Don't worry, honey. Just focus on taking care of yourself and the babies. I'll be fine."

Polly nodded, looking grateful as Elijah whispered a thank you to Collette. Elijah placed a hand on Polly's back as he led her toward the exit. Collette stared at them as they left. She couldn't help but feel jealous of her friend. She tried to avoid this feeling, since jealousy was such an ugly emotion, but sometimes she couldn't help it. Polly had found a good man without trying. Even though her parents had arranged their marriage, Polly was happy, and Elijah adored his wife. He adored her so much, he had chased her all the way to California after she had run away.

Collette, on the other hand, was alone. No husband. No boyfriend. Not even a man who was interested in her. Ever since she was a little girl, she had been "boy crazy" and had chased boys around the playground and sent them cute love letters. In high school, she had kept a list of boys she had kissed, and when she had been fifteen, she lost her virginity to Thomas Hughes after going steady for three months. He dumped her a week later.

Yes, Collette had had many loves in her short twenty-three years, but none of the men she had fallen in love with had felt the same. They always left. Sometimes, they left her for another woman, or others just simply left her. Collette had gone through heartbreak after heartbreak, but she had still believed in love.

But now looking back, she wondered if she had made a mistake when it came to her love life. She had always gone after the popular boys or the boys with the nicest cars. Those boys never seemed to appreciate all the love and attention she had to give them, and they usually left her heartbroken. Now, after endless mistakes, it seemed her chickens had come home to roost. She was alone and she hated it, not to mention the men of Roseville, Connecticut didn't seem to take her seriously anymore.

Collette realized she had depended on men to make her feel loved and to take care of her. She'd had the princess fantasy, but the only thing she had received was disappointment. Throughout the years, she had been relying heavily on her many boyfriends and crushes to make her feel special and wanted. She had even turned down a college scholarship to the local university, when her then high school boyfriend had told her he would break up with her if she left. Collette had been naïve, so she had stayed, hoping they would get married. He had left for South Dakota instead.

Collette's cheeks burned with shame. She had been such

an idiot, chasing after boys who were only using her and stringing her along. She had made sacrifices and many stupid mistakes in the hope a man would love her deeply and they would get their fairytale ending. The only thing she had received was a broken heart and loneliness. She didn't even have a family anymore. She was truly alone.

"Collette, dear," Father Michael said gently as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you ready? They are going to start taking the coffin to the church for mass."

Collette nodded. She felt numb as she stared at her father's coffin. She couldn't look at him. It was too painful. Before his death, her father had made her promise she was going to think of herself and her own happiness. He didn't want her sacrificing her own happiness for anyone else. It had been the most serious conversation they had ever had. At the time, Collette had thought he had been exaggerating and delirious, but maybe he had a point.

She suddenly made a promise to herself that she was going to give up her dreams of romance and happily ever after. She had followed it for years and had nothing to show for it. It was time to face reality. Life was no fairytale, and the love of her life was not going to magically appear. No matter how much she wished he would.