

Below The Belt

Dominique Carpenter remained unaccustomed to the Hollingsworth tradition of having breakfast together. Following Tessa's death, Dominique had preferred to sleep late, or at least remain in bed long enough for Ellis to leave so she wouldn't have to face him across the breakfast table that seemed so empty in Tessa's absence. Getting out of bed early and pretending to be conscious and in a good mood while having idle conversation with her newfound family members was a challenge, but if it enabled her to fit in, to be accepted as part of the family instead of viewed as an outsider, Dominique was willing to do it.

Since moving into Hollingsworth Manor, Dominique had quietly settled into a place between her mother and youngest brother at the table. It felt right considering that she felt closest to Constance and Harris among her blood relatives. She liked her nephews, but Mark's mood about what had happened to his girlfriend had not made him the most approachable or conversational kid since her return and Nathan's interests revolved around playing with Hot Wheels cars and other behavior typical of six-year-olds. Edward's behavior toward Kris and continued refusal to acknowledge Dominique's presence had reinforced Dominique's opinion that she did not and would never like the man. Stuart, on the other hand, remained an enigma. Though he didn't exude tacit disapproval like Edward and he remained pleasant to her, Dominique had the feeling that there was something going on inside Stuart's head that he was unwilling to demonstrate.

Dominique sipped her coffee and tried to focus on saying something worthy of conversation, but nothing immediately sprang to mind. Instead she asked a passing Heather, "Could I have another blueberry muffin?"

"I'll bring a tray right away," Heather said as she refilled Constance's teacup. "Would anyone else like another?"

"I do!" said Nathan.

"A third muffin?" Lisa asked her son. "Where in the world are you going to put it?"

"In my mouth," Nathan replied in a tone that indicated he thought the answer should have been apparent.

Dominique hid a smile behind her cup and noticed Stuart struggling to simultaneously stifle his mirth and swallow a mouthful of orange juice.

"I'll take a muffin," Kris said quietly.

Dominique's smile faded as she saw the drawn, weary expression on Kris' face. The young woman's marital problems were taking a toll on her well-being. Dominique hoped that Kyle's arrival in Gossamer Falls would be just what his sister needed to recover.

Heather returned with the promised serving tray and began dispensing muffins. As the young auburn-haired woman stood behind the empty chair that separated Kris and Edward, Nathan spoke, "Kris, why don't you sit beside Uncle Edward anymore?"

Kris looked woefully across the table at Nathan, and Dominique felt pity for her. Hurriedly clearing her throat, Dominique leaned forward and looked past Harris to Nathan. "That's probably because when I came here we had to add a leaf to the table so I'd have a place to sit. That left an empty seat on the other side of the table."

Nathan shook his head. "No, 'cause Kris sat beside him when you and Grandmother were gone."

Dominique sat back, uncertain as to what to say.

Stuart's voice quickly filled the void. "Maybe she decided she's safer sitting next to me," he grinned. "I don't spew coffee all over the place during meals." He glanced at Dominique, and she thought she saw mute appreciation in his eyes for what she'd tried to do.

Nathan laughed and Harris chuckled, but Edward's expression remained emotionless.

"Or maybe I just want to sit beside someone who'll save me if a chandelier decides to fall," Kris said quietly, then pushed back her chair. "Excuse me," she said, walking out of the room, leaving behind the untouched muffin.



Mark Hollingsworth, flanked by his parents, walked through the stark white corridors of Pierce Hall, the building where justice was administered in Calumet County's Juvenile Court.

"There's Rahne," Lisa said, catching sight of a familiar face.

"Rahne!" Harris said, waving to catch his friend's attention.

Rahne O'Connor stood and waited for the Hollingsworths to near. The D.A. carried a brown leather briefcase and wore a dark blue dress with matching heels. "Harris, Lisa, Mark," she acknowledged each of them with a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Isn't today the hearing about the Stevens case?" Harris asked.

Rahne pressed a finger to her lips in a quieting gesture, then motioned the Hollingsworths to a relatively empty area of the hallway. "Listen, Harris, yeah, today is the day, but are you sure you should be here?"

"Is there a reason we shouldn't be?" Harris asked.

Glancing at Mark, Rahne turned back to Harris and said, "Do you think you can be quiet during the proceedings?"

Mark felt his father's strong hand weighing heavily on his shoulder. "I'm sure we'll manage," Harris said.

Indecision flickered across Rahne's face, then she said, "Okay. I guess I'll see you inside."

Mark tried to hide his irritation at Rahne's condescending attitude. What the hell did she think he was? A baby? He quietly accompanied his parents into the courtroom and found a seat.

Moments later, Mark felt a surge of anger as Jerome Taylor, Adam Cunningham, and the four other boys were brought into the room. The only thing that kept him from rising from his chair and going after them was the thought that doing so would only prove Rahne had been right to not want him in the courtroom.

Along with his parents, Mark stood for the judge's entry into the room. As the room's occupants returned to their seats, Mark's gaze and attention focused entirely on the six boys who'd raped Tiffany. It wasn't until one by one the boys stood and entered their pleas that Mark became aware of the words being spoken in the courtroom. When the realization of what they were saying finally struck him, Mark had to squeeze his parents' hands in order to remain silent and in his seat.

All six boys entered a plea of "not guilty."



The attorney's office wasn't very impressive. Then again, a punk like Kirk Griffith couldn't necessarily get the best lawyer in town for a bogus case. Still, it was a lawsuit that Bruce Dooley desperately wanted to go away. He stepped forward and rang the small bell on the empty front desk, which wobbled when he exerted pressure.

He heard a shuffle in the back room and Reed Monroe appeared a moment later, his hair mussed and one shirttail out. The fat man was straightening his tie, but there was nothing he could do to make the sleep lines on the side of his face disappear. Bruce would have laughed if the situation weren't so serious.

"How can I help you?" Monroe asked, rubbing his eyes.

"My name is Bruce Dooley, and I do believe you've sued me."

The attorney squinted and laughed. "Oh, yes. I'm sorry, I don't have my contacts in. I am suing you, on behalf of my client, of course. What do you need?"

"I'd like to see if we can work this out," Bruce said. He'd done nothing wrong and would not admit to what Griffith accused him of, but losing a little money would be the worst of his problems if the trial proceeded.

Monroe ran his hand through his disheveled hair. "I see. Great. Why don't we go sit down in my office." He pointed to the back.

Bruce agreed and followed the man. "What will it take to satisfy you guys?" he asked, sitting in a stained chair across from Monroe.

The sloppy attorney put both elbows on his cluttered desk and rested his chin on plump hands. "Well, Mr. Griffith received grave injuries in your altercation, Mr. Dooley. He is now totally and permanently disabled, so he will need a considerable sum to live out the rest of his life comfortably."

Gritting his teeth, the bartender tried not to lose his temper, but he was close to the edge. "Bullshit," he said calmly. "I don't want to hear about Mr. Griffith and his injuries. I want to know how much money I have to pay you bloodsucking bastards to make you happy. Don't think I'm admitting to anything here."

An impressed look on his face, Monroe smiled. "Make us an offer."

Reaching in his back pocket, Bruce pulled a small envelope out and handed it across to the attorney. "This is all you're getting and only on the condition that the case doesn't go past this point. No court. Griffith can't sue me again, and

no one finds out how much I paid you.”

Bruce knew that things rarely went as planned in court. He knew he could most likely get out of a trial with little damage done, but there was always the chance that things could go wrong, that he'd not buried his life deeply enough. He watched as the shyster opened the envelope and pulled out the slip of paper revealing how much he was willing to pay. The bartender almost wanted to laugh again as Monroe's eyes turned into little round saucers.

“You have this available right now?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“I can get it,” Bruce answered. It was a lot of money, but finding a way to come up with it fast was much better than the alternative.

Monroe swallowed hard, dragging his eyes away from the number with a smile. “I'll have to talk to my client and then get back with you.”

“That's fine,” Bruce said, standing. “I'll be at the bar.”

Leaving the building and cranking his bike, the big man knew he was doing the right thing. He didn't want to give in to what amounted to extortion, but there was no other way. The cold wind whipped against him as he rode back to The Blue Streak, but it still didn't numb the pain.



Activity buzzed through the corridors of Gossamer Falls International Airport, people rushing from one terminal to the next, boarding and disembarking in rapid succession. Kris Hollingsworth concentrated on finding terminal C-17 without getting ran over by one of the little baggage cars that kept barreling through the crowd. The large, newly constructed airport was a point of pride in the town, connecting it to the world with its marble walls and fancy shops. Like most travelers shuffling through the building, Kris didn't have time to be impressed by the architecture.

At least not today. Kyle was arriving, and Kris couldn't have been more excited. She'd been trying not to get her hopes up because she knew her brother had no magic wand that would make her problems with Edward disappear, but it would certainly be easier to take the strife with her brother by her side. He'd always been a rock for her.

Stepping onto the carpet at C-17, Kris looked at her watch, noting she was three minutes early. The 747 was just setting up to let the passengers off, carefully connecting to the building.

Kris wondered what her brother would look like when he stepped off the plane. She hadn't been able to visit home since they'd last been together at her wedding to Edward. He probably hadn't changed a bit if she knew her brother, who'd turned thirty his last birthday. Like her husband, he'd always loved working out and keeping in top shape. He wasn't quite as obsessive about it as Edward, seeming to enjoy conversing more than exercising, but Kyle was still dedicated. She often wondered why—with his good looks, trim body, and kind heart—he'd never married.

A slow trickle of passengers began leaving the plane, but Kyle wasn't among the first. Kris was determined not to cry when he appeared, but she could already feel tears welling in her eyes.

His hair was on the sandy side of blond, cut short and stylish, with gel holding its body firmly in place. Though his green eyes, a perfect match to hers, were covered with sunglasses, Kris recognized him immediately. A sport jacket covered his body, but tight Levis indicated that he hadn't given up his workout regimen. He looked great.

Pushing her way through those waiting to board, Kris popped into the aisle in front of her brother. He smiled the moment he saw her, holding out his arms as he neared.

"Oh, Kyle," she said, burying her head in his chest. She managed to stay the sobs threatening to burst forth, but tears slowly seeped from her closed eyes.

"Hey, sis. It's great to see you." He began pushing them out of the bottleneck and into the waiting area. "Let me look at you," he said.

Reluctantly, Kris pushed away from him, looking into his face with a watery smile. "I look like hell, but you look great."

He smiled. "Thanks. And you look fine, Kris. You look more grown up every time I see you."

The younger woman smiled and took his hand, leading them toward the limo. "I feel it, too."

Kyle squeezed her hand and followed, allowing them to journey through the busy airport in silence. When they reached the limousine, he whistled and stepped into the back. "Nice ride, Kris. It must be hard to have it all."

Settling in, Kris looked out the window sadly. "I don't have it all, Kyle. You

wouldn't be here if I did. The money doesn't even matter."

He nodded, sitting down beside her on the back seat. "I know, honey. Have you talked to Edward?"

Kris laughed. "It was more like yelling, but yeah, we talked."

"I take it things didn't go well, then."

"No. He denied having an affair and ordered me to act right, basically. I'm so tired of taking his orders," Kris said. She'd never been able to say that to another person and it felt good.

The man sighed, drumming his fingers on his knee. "Why do you think he's having an affair?"

Kris fidgeted in her seat. "It's a lot of things. Part of it is just the way he treats me. It's like ninety-nine percent of the time he's uninterested in me. We hardly ever—" she paused, feeling awkward. "Hardly ever have sex anymore," she almost whispered.

Kyle pretended not to notice her trepidation. "He's getting older, Kris. Perhaps his libido is just slowing down. That happens. It doesn't mean he's having an affair."

Shaking her head, the young woman knew that wasn't the case. "Edward may be getting older, but he's not slowing down a bit. Besides, there's something else. When I went to New York, something happened."

"What do you mean?"

Not wanting to say it, Kris took a deep breath and steeled herself. "Edward called someone else's name while we were having sex," she said in a rush.

"Oh," Kyle said quietly.

"The maid."

Kyle's voice rose in disbelief. "He called the maid's name? That old woman?"

"No!" Kris exclaimed, envisioning a disturbing scene. "Not Molly! There's a new girl who helps Molly now." It was harder to say the woman's name than she'd imagined it would be. "Heather."

"Okay, well, that's not so sick, then," Kyle said.

Wanting to cry, Kris couldn't help but laugh. "Kyle," she said, poking him in the ribs. "I'm trying to brood, here."

The tall man draped an arm over her shoulders. "Let's not be sad today, little sister. How about we try and have some fun? Tomorrow we'll start trying to figure this whole thing out."

Knowing that was probably a good idea, Kris nodded. She should spend some time doing something other than pondering her collapsing life. "Great idea. What do you want to do?"

"First thing I want to do is see this mansion where you live again. After that, I don't know. What is there to do in this town?"

"A million things," Kris said. Not that she did much, but there were numerous opportunities she never utilized. "There are several theaters, a hundred night clubs, theme restaurants, an amusement park. I know a nice little bar where we could go shoot pool," she said, realizing how much she wanted her brother to meet Bruce Dooley.

"Yeah, you are a pool shark. I'd have imagined that a Hollingsworth would do such things in the privacy of home, rather than a bar," Kyle said, looking speculatively at his sister.

Kris shrugged. "We don't have a pool table in the manor. Besides, a friend of mine works there. You'd really like him."

"Oh yeah? We'll have to go sometime, then."

Grinning wildly, Kris leaned her head on her brother's shoulder, feeling an emotion that had seemed lost to her for so long: hope.



Reading the latest *Publishers Weekly*, Edward Hollingsworth shook his head as several significant numbers popped off the page. International sales in a variety of key markets were up for grabs. The fact that Hollingsworth Publishing had no finger in that pie grated on him to no end. He rarely found himself disappointed in his mother, but as far her vision regarding the boundaries of the company's reaches went, she was totally misguided. She had brought the company so far, yet was unwilling to go the next step to achieve true greatness. He failed to understand her reluctance to conquer the world, which she could easily do.

The intercom buzzed loudly, the shrill sound bouncing off the crystal clear windows behind him. Edward glared at the box, but pushed the flashing red button.

"Reed Monroe on line two for you, sir."

Edward clicked over to the line, leaving it on speakerphone. "Do you have good news for me, Monroe?"

"Did you have any doubts?" Monroe's rough voice asked. "I was just paid a visit by your favorite bartender. He's begging for mercy in a big way."

A dark eyebrow went skyward. "Really. Did he make you an offer?"

"To the tune of a quarter mil."

Leaning forward sharply in his high-backed leather chair, the publisher thought he must have heard wrong. "He offered two hundred fifty thousand dollars?"

"Yes, sir," Monroe said, obviously proud. "He really wants to make this case go away. You'd think he actually did something wrong."

Edward smiled. *Perhaps he has*, he thought, intrigued. "What did your investigator find? Does Dooley have access to that kind of money without selling his business?"

"Not unless he pulls a wad of cash out of his ass."

Snorting at the attorney's lack of manners, Edward grinned, knowing he'd won. "Accept the offer. Get Griffith in to sign the papers."

The publisher ended the call, satisfied Reed Monroe had done his job. Despite his shortcomings, the lawyer had performed beyond expectations. A sizable gift was in his future.

As for the meddlesome Bruce Dooley, he had no future at all.



Kris sighed heavily as she spooned the last dollop of whipped cream into her mouth. Her appetite seemed to have returned since Kyle's arrival. Having him by her side was turning out to be a wonderful thing, and not just because his presence meant having a body seated between hers and Edward's at meals.

"That was the best strawberry shortcake I've had in a long time," Kyle said, patting his trim abdomen.

The majority of those gathered around the table of Hollingsworth Manor's formal dining room murmured agreement between mouthfuls of dessert.

"You don't like strawberry shortcake?" Constance Hollingsworth asked Mark, who was seated immediately to her right and appeared to have not touched his dessert.

"It's all right," Mark shrugged.

Constance stared at him.

"What?" Mark asked.

"You've been very quiet. What's wrong?" Constance asked.

"I'm mad," Mark said bluntly.

"About what?"

"About those scum-sucking jerks pleading not guilty."

Constance looked up at Harris.

Edward sighed, excused himself, and left the room. Kris shook her head as he walked away. It was so like him to just walk off whenever he didn't like the conversation and had no way of controlling it.

"They're a bunch of liars," Mark continued.

"Who?" Nathan asked.

"Well," Stuart said as he pushed back his chair, "I'm going to go brush my teeth. Bet I can beat you, Nathan," he challenged with a wink.

"No way." Nathan grinned and ran out of the room without waiting to be excused from the table.

Kris noted the appreciative nod Lisa gave Stuart as he followed Nathan out of the room.

Harris looked after Nathan, apparently waiting until he was out of earshot before answering his mother. "All six boys pled not guilty to the charges."

Constance shook her head as she stood. "I thought one of the boys confessed and implicated the others."

"He did," Lisa said, "but apparently he had second thoughts."

Harris nodded and rose from the table. "Rahne said that the boy's parents urged him to tell the truth, but when they realized what penalties their son could be facing, they changed their minds and hired a sharp attorney. He's claiming the parents weren't acting in their son's best interests by not having him represented by legal counsel and that the prosecution took advantage of that fact to trick the kid into a confession."

Constance shook her head. "That's ridiculous. What are they saying about the DNA evidence and the fingerprints?"

"Apparently, they're not contesting that," Harris said. "The other boys' lawyers are basically claiming that they're not responsible for their crimes, that they are products of single-parent homes, live in poor neighborhoods, and have bad influences."

"That is such a load of crap!" Mark snarled.

"Mark," Lisa gently reprimanded as she walked around the table and put a hand on Mark's shoulder.

"Well, it's true!" he declared. "Look at Dad and Uncle Stuart and Edward! They all grew up without a dad, and they didn't go around raping people!"

Lisa sighed. "Mark, I know you're upset, but we just have to have faith that the courts will handle the matter appropriately."

"Oh, you mean like they did with O.J. Simpson? They did a great job with that one, huh, Mom?"

"There's no need for sarcasm, Mark," Lisa said.

"And whether or not we agree with the jury's decision in that case, we have to respect it," Harris said.

"I don't *have* to do any such thing!" Mark spat. "Jerome Taylor is just like O.J. He's nothing but a worthless, lying, nig—"

Lisa spun Mark around and slapped him hard across the face, sending echoes bouncing off the high ceiling. "Don't you *ever* let that word cross your lips, do you understand me?" she shouted.

Kris recoiled in horror, leaning back against Kyle. She'd never heard Lisa do more than slightly raise her voice to the boys. Seeing her slap and hearing her scream at Mark was almost unbelievable.

Mark, tears filling his eyes, grabbed his injured cheek, cast a hateful glance at his mother, then turned and ran out of the room.

"Mark?" Lisa cried after him. She leaned over the table, grasping it for support. "Oh my God. What have I done?" She began sobbing uncontrollably as Harris circled the table and came to her side.

Constance and Dominique seemed paralyzed by the events they'd witnessed, but Kyle clearly wasn't. He grabbed Kris' arm and stood, practically pulling her up with him. "Are all your family dinners so eventful?" he whispered in her ear.

Kris looked up at the newly rehung chandelier. "You have no idea," she whispered in return.



Dominique still felt a little awkward roaming around the house like she owned the place, but slowly, she was becoming accustomed to having the run of the manor. Going to her mother's room to chat still didn't seem quite normal, but it was something that needed to be done.

At dinner, she'd seen the stress on Constance's face when Lisa had slapped Mark. The boy certainly had some sort of disciplinary action coming, but that probably didn't stop the older woman's heart from clenching in distress at witnessing the shock of what had happened. The sudden pallor of Constance's face had told Dominique all she needed to hear. Her mother probably wouldn't like it, but Dominique felt compelled to check on her.

Knocking gently on Constance's door, Dominique waited patiently for an answer. A brief moment later her mother called for her to come in, which she did, opening the door just enough to slip in, then pushing it firmly back in place.

"Hi, Mama. How're you doing?" she asked softly, unwilling to pretend to be unconcerned. She knew Constance would appreciate her directness, if not her area of concern.

The white-haired woman straightened, sitting strangely in the middle of the bed. Though she had no way to prove it, Dominique suspected the woman had been lying down. "I'm fine. Just a bit tired."

"Are you sure that's all? That was quite a scene down there."

Constance nodded, weariness covering her features. "Yes, it was. And I'm sure that I'm tired and nothing else is wrong."

Dominique made a mental note, accepting that she had already gotten as much of an admission from her mother as she would get. The woman looked better already, so her daughter supposed she was safe. "I'm glad," she said sincerely.

Constance shook her head and motioned to the chair beside her bed. "Why don't you sit?"

"Thanks," the younger woman answered, moving to the chair. For a woman as rich as Constance, her room was fairly simple with the exception of an antique dresser with a lovely mirror. The matching chest fit well also, contrasting perfectly with the deep red drapes.

"I'd like to apologize for Mark's behavior today, and I'll see that he does as well," Constance began.

"Why are you apologizing? Mark needs to say that to his mother."

Nodding, the elder woman crossed her legs. "I agree, but I want you to know that his actions are not ones condoned in this household."

Tiptoeing around subjects was something Dominique did not do well, and she hated it. "Mama, I've been called a nigger, a zebra, an Oreo, and more things than you can possibly imagine, but I don't let other people's labels define who I am or how I perceive myself."

"He shouldn't have said it," Constance countered, obviously not wanting to let her grandson off the hook that easily.

"I agree, and I'm sure Harris and Lisa will deal with him appropriately. They seem like great parents. And I'm sure that when deciding his punishment, they'll take into consideration the fact that Mark has had a hard time lately."

Constance swayed a little and brought a shaking hand to her forehead. Dominique had never seen her look so old. "He has." Crystal-green eyes looked

up, haunted and shadowed. "I had no idea how this kind of thing effects people. I am so sorry I ever claimed I was raped. To you, and to Edward Sr. I had no right."

She doubted her own senses, but Dominique thought she saw a tear in her mother's eyes before they closed. The dreadlocked woman stood, placing a hand on the shaken woman's shoulder. "Rape is a devastating crime," she agreed.

"Mark wasn't even the victim, and he's practically destroyed."

"I know. One of Ellis' sisters was raped shortly after he and I married. Everyone in the family was tortured by it," Dominique said, remembering the pain in her husband's face from so long ago.

The light-skinned woman looked up, her eyes brimming with tears. "Dominique, can you ever forgive me for claiming you were a child of rape?" she asked, her voice quivering.

Her daughter's heart seized. "Mama, I already have," she answered passionately.

Constance closed her eyes again, this time in relief. Smiling, Dominique took a step forward, pulling her mother's head against her bosom. She was answered with welcome arms enclosing her back in a heartfelt embrace.



"I can't believe I did that" Lisa said.

Harris stared down at his wife. Half submerged in a fragrant bubble bath, she looked more child than woman. "It's okay," he said soothingly.

"It's not," Lisa said. Tears once again began streaming down her face. "Mark went to bed without even talking to me. He hates me."

"He doesn't hate you, Lisa. He's hurt and he's upset."

"I wouldn't blame him if he hated me." She exhaled sharply. "I wouldn't blame you, either."

"I could never hate you."

"I hit our son."

"I know," Harris said softly.

"There's no excuse for it," Lisa said flatly.

"No. No there's not," Harris admitted. "But there is a reason you did it. Just like there was a reason Mark started saying that word. He was speaking out of pain and anger, and you—"

"I was doing the same thing," Lisa whispered, looking forlorn.

Harris nodded.

"God, Harris. When I heard that word coming from him, all I could think about was my brother and how he started sounding after our parents—" Lisa began sobbing. "I don't know if it was just what Mark said or if part of it was due to seeing how happy Kris is now that her brother is here, but all I could think about at that moment is how Dean is lost to me and how it all began and more than anything else I was terrified that I was going to lose Mark, too."

"Then maybe that's what you need to tell Mark," Harris said softly.

"Tell him?"

Harris nodded. "Don't you think the time is right? He's old enough to handle the truth, I think."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't know."

"Do it," Harris urged. "You can't excuse your actions, but maybe you can explain the reason behind them. If you apologize to Mark and tell him about your family, maybe you can help him understand. And maybe he can tell you how he feels about what happened with Tiffany instead of walking around the house like a time bomb waiting to go off."

"I'm scared," Lisa said.

"I know," Harris whispered.

"Hold me?"

"Always."