

# Bone-Deep Scars

Seventeen floors seemed like a long way to fall. Kris Hollingsworth wondered when she would hit bottom, because her downward spiral didn't seem to be abating. Standing on the balcony of her hotel room, she watched the birds float around her, and the pedestrians scurry like rats so far below. Their plight appeared completely futile, going nowhere, much like her own life.

Kris ran a hand across her face and leaned on the rail. She listened to the shower behind her, where Dominique was preparing for their return trip to Gossamer Falls later in the day, and almost wished it would rain that hard on her. At least she'd have something else to think about. As it was, her mind couldn't stop spinning the possibility that she might be pregnant.

*That is so typical*, she thought. The last time she'd come to New York it had been with the express purpose to get pregnant. Now, the idea of having Edward's baby was the most repulsive notion of which she could think. She wasn't opposed to having a child, but she was adverse to being tied to Edward for the rest of her life. His behavior the previous day had served only to strengthen her hatred toward him. Being forced to deal with him for the rest of her life would be as good as a death sentence.

*I'm being melodramatic again. It's not far from the truth, though.* Images of a life wanting for little but needing for much as the mother of Edward's child flitted through her mind. All the wealth, prestige, and power in the world would not be payment enough for being subjected to his cruel ego and hateful attitude. She had it all right now, everything a person could possibly want in material things, but she'd never been so unhappy in all her years.

She thought about living in her father's house, when she'd *thought* she had it bad. Robert Curtis was as unkind as Edward, if not purposefully malicious. He simply had values which neither Kris, nor a decent portion of the world, shared. Money was important, Kris knew, but not as vital as her father believed. He'd made match after match for her, getting a young Kris introduced to boys he thought suitable and wealthy enough for her to marry. Some had been fine young men, while others had been the spoiled brats one might expect.

The best date he'd ever finagled for her had been with the aspiring starting quarterback at Stanford University. The young man, Tim Hill, had actually been a gentleman, and seemed particularly interested in Kris. They went on several dates and the future Mrs. Hollingsworth had found herself falling for the dashing athlete.

*Would have been nice to know he was gay,* Kris thought, laughing. They'd ended up great friends, and she'd always kept his secret, but a word from the beginning might have saved her a lot of worry. For a semester she'd wondered if her womanly charms had expired.

Unfortunately, the story which they'd devised had Kris breaking up with the quarterback, which her father had found extremely disturbing. Robert had threatened to stop funding her college tuition unless she again began dating the boy. It took her father seeing Tim at a public function with another girl to get him off his daughter's back. Kris was sure he hadn't forgiven her until she'd landed Edward, however.

If Robert Curtis knew she was pregnant, or might be, he would be in seventh heaven. Sometimes Kris asked herself if hating her father was natural, and other times she just didn't care. She knew a lot of people had it worse than she did, but some had it better. Some had love.

Wiping away a tear, the blonde told herself to grow up. She was tired of feeling sorry for herself, yet doing nothing to remedy her situation. Letting things hang in the air was simply not working. A depression was slowly settling over her that couldn't be raised with a forklift. Resolution needed to come, and come soon.

If she did turn out to be pregnant, she'd have a hard decision to make. Taking a deep breath, she hoped she would have enough strength to do what needed to be done. Peering down into the abyss over the balcony railing, Kris began considering alternatives.



Stuart Hollingsworth knocked on the apartment door without hesitation. If he was to return to the hotel before it was time to leave for Gossamer Falls, he had to make the visit a short one.

"Just a minute," a raspy masculine voice said from inside the apartment. Stuart imagined a familiar face pressed against the other side of the door, checking him out through the peephole.

The door suddenly opened, and a wide smile greeted Stuart. "Stuart! Come on in!"

"How are you?" Stuart asked as he shook William Devlin's hand.

"Pretty good, I guess. Gettin' used to payin' too much for everything." Devlin smiled and ran a hand back through his shock of white hair.

"Welcome to life in the big city," Stuart grinned.

Devlin closed the door behind them. "I was surprised when you called."

Stuart shrugged. "I told you I'd keep in touch."

"Yeah, but I didn't expect you to call from in town."

Stuart smiled. "Just thought I'd see for myself how you're doing."

"So what's the verdict?" Devlin asked.

Stuart had immediately noticed the apartment's sparse furnishings and imagined they were from a rental company or included in Devlin's rent. He'd also noticed the older man's tired eyes. And Devlin seemed to have added a few pounds to his already considerable frame. "You look great," Stuart said. "Lost weight?"

Devlin laughed. "You're a good friend, Stuart. You're a shitty liar, but a good friend."

Stuart clasped his chest as if offended. "A liar?"

"I've gained a few pounds, and you know it," Devlin said. "Can't seem to stop eating ever since I quit smoking. Tiffany was always after me to stop—" Devlin's expression grew severe.

"How is Tiffany?" Stuart asked softly.

Devlin shook his head. "Can't really tell a difference. The doctors seem to think she's making progress, but I'll be damned if I can see it. I go there every day, hoping that she'll recognize me or grab my hand." Again, Devlin shook his head. "I can't see that she's getting better."

Stuart frowned. He'd hoped to bring better news home to Mark. "I guess maybe these things take time."

Devlin nodded. "I suppose."

Stuart nodded sagely. An unpleasant silence threatened to overwhelm the room, spurring Stuart to blurt, "And how's Joyce?"

Devlin's face clouded. "I finally got her to admit that she had a gambling problem and got her admitted into a program to help her get over it."

"That's great! How's she doing?"

Devlin shrugged. "Don't know. She can't have contact with the outside while she's at the clinic."

"I'll bet that's tough."

Devlin nodded. "It's hard. I feel like I'm in limbo, just waiting for the two of them to get well. The only thing that makes being here bearable is knowing that it's for the best."

"Someday, they'll appreciate you being there for them," Stuart said.

Devlin smiled. "I hope so."

"Of course they will," Stuart reassured. "And how's your boy? Have you been able to see him since you've been here?"

"Oh, yeah. Garrett is doin' great. We go do stuff together on weekends or when he doesn't have classes."

"That's great," Stuart said sincerely. "You know, Devlin, I hope something positive comes out of this for all of you."

Devlin nodded. "So do I."

"I should be going," Stuart said. "I'm going back to Gossamer Falls today."

"All right. Be careful. And don't think I've forgotten everything you did for us. If there's ever anything I can do for you, all you have to do is ask."

Stuart returned Devlin's strong handshake. Though he neither expected nor wanted repayment for the money he'd given Devlin, he knew the man's pride insisted otherwise. "Should I ever need the services of a private investigator, you'll be the man I call," Stuart promised.



"No cabbage!" Abigayle Nguyen screamed as she stomped into the kitchen.

Her mother turned around, startled, holding a set of tongs in a defensive position. "What?"

Drying her soaking hair, the reporter looked in the pot heating on the stove. "I don't want to smell that crap in my house. Cook anything else but that."

"Don't be silly, Abigayle. You like this."

She took the utensil out of her mother's hand and threw it in the sink. "I said I liked it when I was ten because I got grounded otherwise. I'm not ten anymore, though, and I don't want my place to smell like dirty socks for the rest of the year."

A stern look came over Rose Nguyen's face. "I am cooking for you. Don't be so picky."

Abigayle picked up the stainless steel gallon-sized pot and walked to the trash can, popping the lid with the foot pedal. "I didn't ask you to cook for me, Mama. And you're under my roof now. No cabbage."

While the younger woman poured the food into the trash, Rose strode from the room. Abigayle knew what was coming, but she'd had to draw a line somewhere. She knew her fights had to be chosen carefully, and this was one she planned on winning. For too many years she'd smelled the stench of her mother's cooking; a child's failures put to scent. As an adult, she'd moved past it, and she planned to remain there.

Abigayle followed her mother's path into the living room, seeing the older woman and her father speaking quietly on the couch. The reporter held up a finger and addressed them. "Listen, this isn't a democracy here. I'm not complaining about much, but I think I have a right to set some rules here."

John Nguyen stroked his thin mustache. "I can understand that, Abigayle."

Shocked, the normally acid-tongued reporter didn't know how to respond. She'd expected a united defense from her parents. "I—I just don't like the smell," she said weakly.

"Then we will not eat cabbage." John returned his attention to the newspaper in his hands.

Rose, arms crossed against her chest, walked briskly past her daughter back to the kitchen. Abigayle stared at her father for several more moments, pondering how he'd managed to steal her thunder and effectively turn her win into a non-event. Losing valiantly in battle would have been more satisfying.



Conversation buzzed around the table as the family waited for Molly and Heather to finish the settings. It was already populated with a variety of dishes, but as tradition would have it, the Hollingsworths had to have everything. Though Kris noticed that Heather seemed unusually ecstatic, while Molly looked a step below depressed, the meal looked fantastic.

The young blonde made a face at Nathan, who sat across from her, playing with his napkin, and he made a face back, using his tongue imaginatively. If he were an adult, he would've been in danger of being arrested. As a six-year-old, though, he was plain cute.

Covertly, Kris placed a hand on her stomach and wondered if she was carrying. The thought rarely left her mind, as confused and frustrated as it constantly remained. The problem was that she *did* want a baby: just not Edward's. She longed to find a man, one who would love her truly and completely for everything she was, and make the life she wanted, not the one he expected of her. If her life as a Hollingsworth had taught her nothing else, it was that there was much more to life than money and fame.

"Put that one over by Miss Constance," Molly's Irish brogue took over the room as she ushered in the last of dinner.

Kris watched as the maids arranged the dishes, starting with beef stroganoff on the far end, to duck al'orange on the other. Molly sometimes provided two main dishes if she knew one of the family members wasn't fond of her main choice. A green bean casserole, creamed asparagus, and fresh salad provided the meal's vegetable content. Kris frowned as she watched Heather float around the table, noting the special attention she paid to Edward, dishing his portions out for him, her fingers lingering suggestively on the fine china. The junior Hollingsworth wife also recognized that this evening's menu seemed geared especially for her husband, filled with all his favorite foods.

Shifting her mind in another direction, Kris got her normal healthy amounts of food and began eating. She was surprised at the comfortable banter at the head of the table, spearheaded mostly by Mother Hollingsworth. She chatted with Dominique, Harris, and Lisa about the price of gasoline, and the mystery behind its outrageous increase.

A few minutes into the meal, the phone rang, prompting Molly to emerge from the kitchen with the cordless in her hand. "It's for Miss Dominique," she said, not hiding her surprise.

After a brief flash of curiosity of her own, the long-haired woman stood from the table and took the call. She seemed genuinely excited by the message she was

getting, a fact that sent shocks of rage through Edward. Kris loved seeing him angry, especially in areas over which he had no control.

Dominique was all smiles as she returned to her seat. Her eyes sparkled as she glanced meaningfully at her mother. Miss Constance raised an eyebrow, then nodded knowingly.

Kris found the expression interesting, and wondered if whatever was in the works would be a good distraction.



Rahne O'Connor leaned back on her sofa and exhaled deeply. She knew her time would be better spent preparing for the following day's trial, but watching a repeat of *The Practice* was about all she could manage. While she had no trouble filling time during the week, the weekend had been entirely different. "Where are the serial killers when you really need them?" Rahne muttered, then felt guilty for voicing the thought. If only she could stop thinking about—

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. "Trent?" Rahne asked, knowing it was him before she ever reached the door.

"Can we talk?" he asked when she opened the door.

"Of course," she said, fully opening the door and standing aside so he could enter. Rahne noticed the dark circles beneath Trent's eyes and his strained expression as he passed her. "Have a seat," she suggested, reclaiming her spot on the sofa.

Trent sat in an armchair and leaned forward, nervously smoothing his slacks with his palms. "I—um—I guess what I really came to say is that you were right." Trent's eyes briefly met Rahne's before flitting away.

"About what?"

Trent sighed heavily. "About the fact that I always try to get you to face your issues while I try to bury mine."

Rahne tried to think of something to say, but failed. She hadn't expected such a confession from Trent. "Trent, I—"

Trent held up a hand. "There's no need to say anything, Rahne. You can just let me talk. I just want to say that I don't want your pity; that's not the purpose for my coming here. I want to try to help you understand by telling you the

truth. You deserve that much.”

Rahne swallowed hard and nervously ran her tongue across her lower lip. Dread filled her upon hearing Trent’s tone. “I’m listening,” she whispered.

Trent sat back in the chair, his eyes fastening momentarily on Rahne’s before glancing away. He cleared his throat before speaking. “I know that you were concerned when you learned I was seeing a therapist and you didn’t fully believe my explanation as to why I was seeing him.”

Rahne nodded.

Trent’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he gulped. “I’m going to tell you the truth now, Rahne, but I have to tell you I’m scared.”

“Of what? You should know that you can tell me anything.”

“I just don’t want what I have to say to change the way you look at me. If I saw pity in your eyes—” Trent gulped. “I just couldn’t take it,” he blurted.

Rahne’s insides quivered at the emotion in Trent’s voice. Whatever he had to say must be bad. She knew that she couldn’t make any promises to him, so she assumed her attorney’s gaze, a gaze perfected through years of appearing emotionless while hearing confessions to some of the most heinous crimes imaginable. “Go ahead,” she said softly.

Trent nodded. “Okay. The whole experience with Tiffany Stevens and her mother was what sparked my need for therapy. You see, their relationship reminded me of my relationship with my mother.”

Rahne swallowed hard and tried to decide whether she was most elated by the prospect of Trent being honest with her about his past, or terrified by what he would say next.

“Like Joyce Stevens, my mother was an addict. Except her addiction was drugs, not gambling. Cocaine, heroin, crystal meth: she did them all at one time or another. Sometimes she did them at the same time.

“On top of that, she was an alcoholic. I can’t remember a time when she didn’t use drugs, yet I can’t imagine she could’ve used them while she was pregnant with me. I’ve always assumed that my father left when I was born and that’s what drove her to succumb to her addictions, but I have no way of knowing how true that is.” Misery was evident in Trent’s voice.

"Trent," Rahne said softly, but he waved away her words.

"My mother didn't work. She depended on men to provide her needs, which usually meant her next six-pack or fix. If she remembered to ask for it, we had food. A lot of times we didn't."

Rahne resisted the urge to slip off the sofa and throw her arms around Trent. How could he have kept this inside all those years?

"Some of the men she was with weren't very nice. In fact, some were cruel."

An image of Trent's naked backside flashed in Rahne's mind. "Your scars," she whispered.

Trent licked his lips, then slowly nodded. "Mom liked to hit. So did some of her boyfriends." His eyes locked on hers. "And a couple of them liked to do worse things."

Rahne momentarily lost her composure as she realized what Trent was telling her. Her jaw hung agape for a second before she closed it with an audible clack.

"Not all of my scars are visible," Trent said softly, his gaze no longer holding Rahne's but looking toward the high ceiling. "So when I saw Tiffany, whose body had been so violated, and I saw her mother, too caught up in the throes of her addictions to realize the extent of her daughter's pain—"

"It brought it all back to you," Rahne said softly.

Trent nodded. "I haven't seen her since I was twelve. I was in seventh grade when they took me away. I'd been able to get her to let me play football for the school. I never showered with the other boys because I didn't want them to see my scars and ask questions I didn't want to have to answer, but I couldn't get out of changing out of my uniform after practice. Her boyfriend at the time, a guy named Ray, had whipped me that morning for spilling his beer."

Trent's eyes again found Rahne's. "One of my coaches saw my bloodstained underwear and asked if I'd been hurt on the field. I said no, but he wanted to know what had happened. I wouldn't tell him, so he said he wanted the school nurse to take a look at it. I begged him not to make me show her, and he said it was either show him or show her. Reluctantly, I let him and another coach see my rear end. They reported it to the authorities. I hadn't even realized I was bleeding." Trent shook his head.

Rahne was mortified by what she'd just heard, but she knew that she couldn't let

Trent know. "So what happened then?"

Trent shrugged. "I bounced around the foster care system, never getting adopted. I think most of the families thought I was damaged goods. Weren't quite sure I wouldn't molest the family pets in the dark of night." Trent grinned wryly.

Rahne carefully chose her words. "It's a miracle that you turned out to be such a wonderful, caring person. Not everyone who goes through those types of experiences emerges so well adjusted."

"I owe it all to my mother," Trent said. "She's the reason I became interested in psychiatry. Once I realized that I wasn't the cause of her behavior, I wanted to understand what made her act the way she did."

Rahne nodded in understanding.

"Well," Trent sat forward in his chair and placed his hands on his knees, "that's all I wanted to say. I'd better be going." He stood.

Rahne rose from the sofa. "Please stay." Her voice was as soft as her expression. She hoped that what she was feeling, not only compassion but a deep admiration, was visible to Trent.

Trent stared into her eyes. "Are you sure?"

Rahne opened her hand and held it out to him.

He hesitated only a second before taking her hand in his and bringing it to his lips.