

Running Down The Rabbit

Stuart Hollingsworth strode purposefully through the corridors of Hollingsworth Tower, toward his office. He held three manuscripts that Clarice Turner had recommended, and he was anxious to look at them. Clarice was usually a pretty good judge of talent. Stuart could definitely think of worse ways to start a Monday than receiving three prime manuscripts to be considered for publication.

As he neared Harris' office, Stuart saw his younger brother approaching from the opposite direction. Stuart nodded and smiled. "Hey, Harris. How's it hanging?"

Harris shot him a withering glare. "Why don't you tell me? You seem to know everything else." Harris vanished into his office.

Stuart froze in his tracks. *Did that just happen?* he asked himself. He stared at the closed door. *Okay. What the hell provoked that?* He turned to go to his own office, then sighed and turned back to the closed door. Without knocking, he entered his brother's outer office.

Behind the desk previously occupied by Joyce Stevens sat a young woman Stuart didn't recognize. He knew that Harris had been testing a secretary from a temp agency, but this didn't look like the same woman he'd seen before. Shrugging, he crossed the room without speaking to the woman, gently rapped on the door to Harris' office, then opened the door without waiting for a response.

Harris' blue eyes blazed when he saw Stuart. "What are you doing in here?"

"Trying to figure out what happened out there." Stuart jerked a thumb toward the hallway. "Want to tell me what's up?"

"I think you know." Harris sat in his mahogany leather chair and picked up a manuscript from his desktop.

Hurt flared in Stuart's gut as Harris pointedly avoided looking at him. He sank into the chair opposite his brother's and said, "Harris, I don't."

"Too busy playing the hero to pay attention to anything else?" Harris sneered.

Stuart shook his head. "What do you mean?"

Harris' chair creaked as he suddenly leaned forward. "I'm talking about you playing the hero for Mark."

Stuart raised his eyebrows. "What does Mark have to do with anything?"

"It's not about him. It's about you and your strange need to appear the hero in my son's eyes."

"Did you get a funny-looking mushroom on your plate last night?" Stuart asked.

Harris snorted. "You know what I'm talking about, Stuart. Why didn't you tell me you were meeting William Devlin in New York City?"

Stuart's eyes widened in amazement. "Is that the reason you're throwing a fit? You're upset because I didn't consult you about my plans?" Stuart shook his head. "That's some nerve you're developing there, little brother."

"It's not my nerve that's the problem. It's your lack of consideration. You could have mentioned that you were going to contact Devlin. Instead you go off on your own, tell me nothing whatsoever about meeting the man, then make a big production about updating Mark on Tiffany's condition!"

"I thought I was being considerate!" Stuart said, raising his voice for the first time. "You'd made it plain that you and Lisa had plans for the morning before we returned, so I decided to do my own thing and leave you to yours. Is it my fault you'd rather follow a roll in the sack with a stroll through a museum rather than a meeting with your former secretary's boyfriend? Get over it, Harris!"

Harris smirked. "I knew you'd do this."

"Do what?" Stuart tried to swallow his anger.

"Find a way to make yourself the hero. It's something you do well. You have my son thinking you walk on water."

"I never tried to give Mark that impression."

"Bullshit!" Harris spat. "It's all you've ever tried to do. And you know why?"

"I'm pretty sure you'll tell me," Stuart said sarcastically.

"Because you've been so absorbed in your quest for control of Hollingsworth Publishing that you've never allowed yourself to fall in love. You don't have a wife, you don't have kids, and you have a pretty sorry excuse for a life, so you're trying to live vicariously through mine."

Stuart stood. It took every ounce of self-control he could muster to not crumple

the manuscripts he held. "Look, Harris. I don't know what crawled up your ass, but you're overreacting about what happened. And you're completely wrong in your assumptions regarding my actions."

"Am I? Or have you just lied to yourself so many times that you've started believing it's true?"

Stuart started to reply, but hurriedly shut his mouth. Before his tongue could betray the hurt he felt, he turned and left Harris' office.



Leyland Cross sat in the comfortably overstuffed burgundy chair in his den, sipping herbal tea, and petting Scarlet. The yellow cat peered up through narrowed eyes as she sat, purring, in Leyland's lap.

"You know, Scarlet, Freud and I have more in common than I ever imagined. I don't know what women want either."

Scarlet meowed softly in response.

"Well," Leyland smiled down at the animal, "of course I didn't mean you, Scarlet. I was referring to one woman in particular." An image of Molly Crenshaw formed in Leyland's mind. He saw her clearly: wheat-blond hair framing blue eyes, perfect skin that seemed to radiate from within when she smiled, and a smile that could melt his heart.

But now Leyland's heart wasn't melted by his mental remembrance of Molly's smile. In fact, he thought it might be broken.

He'd gone over in his mind a thousand times every action he had taken toward Molly, but he had yet to determine where he'd gone wrong. He knew he must've done something for her to have had such an abrupt change of attitude toward him, but he couldn't imagine what it might have been.

Granted, once Leyland had started reading and learning more about cooking, he realized that his first attempt at cooking for Molly had been laughable, but he'd assumed that if she hadn't laughed at or disparaged his feeble efforts, she would've been happy to learn he'd been studying the subject and was prepared to offer a culinary experience far superior to the first he'd given her. He'd assumed that, as the saying went, it truly was the thought that counted. He'd assumed that his caring enough to educate himself on the subject so he could provide her with a better experience would mean something to her.

Obviously, he'd been wrong. Leyland had believed that things were going so well between the two of them, but when he'd seen Molly at the supermarket, she'd acted as if she couldn't get away from him fast enough.

Perhaps I should have known better than to hope for something resembling a normal life, Leyland thought. Why is it that the dead are far better communicators than the living? Is it only in death that we find the liberation to make our true desires known? Why is it so difficult to do the same while we're alive?

Scarlet dug a claw into Leyland's leg, disturbing his thoughts. He glanced down at her wide-eyed face and gently pulled her claw out of his flesh. "Are you trying to tell me something, Scarlet?"

Scarlet narrowed her eyes to contented slits and resumed purring.

Leyland sighed as he began gently stroking Scarlet's fur. Perhaps he could keep his thoughts from drifting into such deep areas of thought, but he couldn't help but think that the absence of Molly from his life meant that he'd lost his best chance at happiness.



Ford Blankenship sat behind the wheel of his patrol car, watching the traffic pass. Though the early afternoon traffic wasn't as heavy as it would be at rush hour, the streets were still well traveled and Ford could've handed out any number of citations for speeding violations if his mind had been on his job instead of Rahne O'Connor.

An image of the sensuous district attorney formed in Ford's mind. He was pretty sure that Rahne knew of his attraction to her, but he doubted she knew the depth of his feelings. When she'd told him of the break-up with Dr. Beckham, Ford had offered his heartfelt condolences for her pain. At the same time, he'd had to hide the elation he felt over the fact that she was a free woman.

Unfortunately, his fantasies about what might one day happen between them had come to an abrupt halt earlier in the day when he'd seen Rahne sitting alone in the café near the courthouse. He'd sauntered up to the table for two and jokingly asked her if the vacant seat opposite hers was taken.

Ford winced as he recalled the joy lighting Rahne's brown eyes when she'd replied. "Actually," she'd said, "Trent should be here any moment." She'd proceeded to tell Ford that she and the good doctor had kissed and made up, and that she believed the two of them were going to be fine.

Ford had felt a tiny piece of himself die with every word she'd spoken, but he doubted Rahne had even noticed. She'd been so enraptured by her reunion with Trent that she hardly seemed to be aware of her surroundings, much less the people in them.

Ford tried to tell himself that it wasn't the end of the world. Just because Rahne was happy and in love didn't mean he couldn't find someone who'd make him feel the same way. But he knew there would be no one else like her, so he mourned not for the loss of what had been but for what could have been.

Ford shook his head, stirring himself out of his reverie. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, he thought. "Just like you for doing that in front of me," Ford said, spotting a motorist driving fifteen miles over the speed limit despite the obvious roadside presence of his patrol car. *Wonder if that idiot's daydreaming about the one who got away?* Ford thought as he turned on his lights and siren, and pulled into traffic.



Readjusting the reading lamp that loomed over her lap, Dominique Carpenter did her best to move as lightly as possible in the overstuffed, black leather chair, which was a little too noisy for a library. Every time it squeaked, Constance looked up at her with hooded, impatient eyes. Dominique had learned quickly that her mother didn't like to be interrupted, but the older woman was being a bit extreme. Perhaps she was on edge, which she had every right to be.

Kris' little episode and Edward's pigheadedness had disturbed Constance, even if she hadn't admitted it. And the fact that Morgan had phoned the previous night to say that she was coming for a visit also weighed on the stern woman's mind. Dominique didn't know if any of her brothers could read their mother as well as she could, but she doubted it.

"Are you feeling okay?" Dominique asked.

Constance didn't look up. "Just fine."

Dominique wasn't surprised by the answer. She didn't think her mother was lying, but the white-haired woman had a peculiar way of getting away with half-truths. Unfortunately for Constance, if her daughter didn't get the right answer now, she'd be sure to obtain it at some point.

"I'm glad. Looks like we'll have some entertaining to do soon."

The older woman shifted in her chair. "I suppose."

"How do you plan on explaining Morgan to the rest of the family?" she asked.

Constance looked up, her green eyes peeking over her reading glasses. She took a deep breath and sat down the manuscript. "I'm not."

Dominique's brow furrowed. "Don't you think they'll be a little curious?"

"I'm simply going to tell them that on our trip to Georgia I found out that I had a half-sister."

"That's it?" the younger woman asked with a snort. "Even though your sons exhibit doses of stupidity from time to time, I think they'll be able to figure this one out. Morgan makes for a stout woman."

Her mother shrugged. "If they figure it out on their own, that's fine. It will be up to them to talk to Morgan about it."

"She might have other ideas. Your brother is a pretty straightforward gal."

"If Morgan wants to tell them, that's up to her."

Dominique laughed again. "Edward is gonna have an aneurysm."

"If he didn't have one over Morgan, it would be something else."

Constance turned her attention back to her work when Dominique didn't comment further. Her daughter marveled that she could sit in silence with her mother and enjoy simply being together like this. Sometimes she didn't understand her mother's motivations and actions, especially when it came to matters involving the family.

In regard to Morgan, though, Dominique understood perfectly. Constance was fairly transparent when it came to her health, at least to her. The publisher hoped that keeping Morgan's secret from the family would serve to encourage her sibling to keep Constance's heart condition confidential. Dominique, however, wasn't so sure that the brassy Morgan would take the hint. Or if she would care.



She'd been staring at her image in the mirror for at least five minutes, trying to recall what had happened to the young woman she'd been. Lines etched the

skin at the corners of her eyes where it had been smooth before, and the apprehension apparent on her forehead looked far more permanent than she'd have liked. Then again, she had plenty to worry about.

Kris Hollingsworth couldn't remember the last time her life had been on track. In the long, long valley of the last few months, there had been few highs. Most of her time had been spent languishing in indecision, scraping the depths of her abilities to find ways to fix her broken marriage. There was only one problem with her effort: she was the only one trying.

In all this time, after repeated subtle and very clear warnings about what she was feeling, Edward had done nothing to help their problems. And after the previous night, she had finally accepted that he would never do anything. Edward acted for one person, and one person alone: himself. Kris wasn't even tops on the list of people to whom he gave elevated status. Constance possessed that position.

Leaning on the marble sink, Kris took a deep breath. One fact that would console her in the future would be that she truly had tried to mend the situation. She now realized she hadn't always acted with the proper motivation, but at least no stone had been left unturned.

She *had* loved Edward in the beginning, when she thought he'd returned the feeling and his constant attention had warranted her devotion. He'd obviously pulled an elaborate ruse on her, for what reason she couldn't comprehend. Surely there was no lack of even more beautiful and more shallow women out there who would love to be in her position. Knowing what she knew of Edward, though, he'd probably considered breaking her heart a challenge. She hoped he'd satisfied himself.

As far as Kris was concerned, her days of being the victim were over. The matters that had kept her motivated to make her marriage work were greatly devalued in her mind. Part of her had wanted her relationship with Edward to last based merely on the concept of everlasting, true love she'd had in mind when she married him. She knew fairy-tale endings existed, she'd just chosen the wrong man. The conclusion wasn't easy for her to reach.

A part of Kris didn't want to deal with the shame she associated with divorce. *My dad is gonna shit*, she thought. It didn't matter, though. Robert Curtis would just have to learn to deal, as would Edward, Mother Hollingsworth, and anyone else in the world who had a beef with her decision. If she'd discovered one thing in all this, it was that she had to follow her heart, no matter how painful a path it set her on.

Then there's the money. I won't know what to do having to earn my way again. If she were honest with herself, Kris would admit that the wealth provided to her as a Hollingsworth had been a driving force in making her work so hard to stay. She'd never be able to replace a perk like that. Curing the constant ache in her soul, however, would be worth far more than all the money she could ever spend.

Kris turned on the faucet, dipping her hands in the stream and bringing them back to her face, trying to cool its heated surface. *I can't keep avoiding it,* her mind sang, her green eyes cutting to the box sitting on the glowing white toilet lid.

"My Secret" is right, she thought, reading the product name. *It's so secret I don't even want to know.*

Squeezing her eyes shut, her arms quaking under her weight, Kris wished she had someone with her on whom to lean; someone who cared. She'd considered getting Dominique to be with her, but she wanted the older woman to respect her, and the childish fear passing through her now wouldn't impress anyone. Talking to Bruce had also crossed her mind. It had been too long since she'd seen the gentle man, and she missed him. Having him here for this, though, would have been entirely too awkward, no matter how comforting he normally was to her.

Turning off the water, Kris sidestepped in front of the bowl. The little water-filled cup sat on the porcelain top, ominous in its simplicity. It seemed like something that would direct the outcome of her life shouldn't be so easy. Taking a deep breath and wiping sweat-soaked blonde hair from her forehead, Kris reached for the stick protruding from the container.

Her eyes did not want to draw to the test results. For several more moments she stared at the handcrafted tiles lining the wall. Finally, she forced herself to focus on the colorful disaster before her. Reciting the words from the commercial in her head, her hand convulsively closed on her mouth. *Pink means pregnant.*

The test stick tumbled from her trembling fingers as she stood frozen, waves of uncertainty flowing through her every cell.