

Bed of Thorns

Abigayle Nguyen gasped as her mother's piercing shriek filled the bedroom. A suddenly sober and flaccid Clifton O'Connor slipped out of Abigayle's body. Rose Nguyen stood motionless in the doorway, screaming at the top of her lungs.

But Rose didn't stand still for long. With a burst of unintelligible Vietnamese, she lunged for the lamp atop Abigayle's dresser and ripped it from the wall socket.

Abigayle stared in surprise as Clifton jumped out of bed and began hastily backing away from Rose, toward the window through which he'd entered. As Rose, still screaming, ran toward Clifton, brandishing the lamp as a weapon, Abigayle found her voice. "No!" she screamed. "Leave us alone!"

Rose screamed in uncontrollable rage as she swung the lamp at Clifton, who awkwardly tried both to cover his nakedness and ward off her attack, and succeeded at neither.

"Mama, stop!" Abigayle yelled as she climbed out of bed to help Clifton. Suddenly, the room was filled with light.

Through squinted eyes, Abigayle saw her father, John, standing in the doorway, one hand on the light switch, the other holding a Louisville Slugger. At the same time, Abigayle saw her mother shrink away from Clifton and fall back onto the floor. Seeing Clifton standing naked in front of the silent Rose, John raised the bat and entered the room.

"No, Papa!" Abigayle screamed.

John Nguyen's eyes turned to his daughter, and he paused. With a sudden rush of shame, Abigayle remembered her nakedness and reached for the sheet. "Don't hurt him," she begged.

Disbelief fell over John's face like a shroud. He dropped the bat and reached for his wife, who was sitting in the floor, repeatedly muttering a phrase in Vietnamese.

Clifton hurriedly stepped into his clothes. "See ya," he said to Abigayle as he opened the window.

"Wait—" Abigayle began, but Clifton slipped out the window and disappeared into the darkness.

Turning back to her parents, Abigayle realized her mother was still jabbering in Vietnamese. Not speaking her parents' native language, Abigayle could only surmise the meaning of the phrase repeatedly uttered by her mother. *Probably means "Holy Shit! My daughter fucked a white man!"* Abigayle thought, then dissolved the smile provoked by the thought when her father's gaze fell on her.

"Papa, I can explain," Abigayle said.

John Nguyen shook his head. "You owe me no explanation, Abigayle. You are an adult." He turned to look at his wife. "My only concern at the moment is getting your mother back to her room. Can you help me?"

Abigayle looked at her mother, who seemed unconscious of her surroundings. "Sure. Let me get dressed." She wrapped herself in the sheet, then picked up some clothes and went to the bathroom to get dressed. As Abigayle left the room, she wasn't sure if she was more disturbed that her mother couldn't seem to see her, or that her father seemed to wish he couldn't.



Kris Hollingsworth slammed her door and ran to her bed, jumping on it violently, her hands over her face, buried in a nest of pillows. A few minutes, or perhaps more than that, a gentle knock sounded. She didn't know who it was, but she was certain it wasn't Edward.

Kyle Curtis poked his head through without her saying anything. "Kris, are you okay?"

She didn't respond, still doing her best to control the sobs that wanted to emerge from her throat. His soft footsteps crossed the room, and his masculine weight settled on the bed beside her.

"Kris, honey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she rasped. "Everything." Kyle sighed deeply and she could tell he wasn't pleased. She knew he still believed she could work out things with Edward, but it was far too late for that.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked gently.

"I don't know. I don't—know."

The light-haired man looked away. "I guess this is about you and Edward, right?"

His sister shook her head in frustration. "What else would it be about, Kyle? He's hurt me for the last time."

"What did he do now?" Kyle asked, contempt in his voice.

"Well," Kris sat up and cleared her throat, rubbing tears from her eyes. With her brother here, she felt composed enough to speak, despite her raging emotions. "The first thing he did was become a daddy, or at least he will be in a few months."

Kyle's eyes grew comically huge. "*What?* You're pregnant? Oh my God, that's great! Isn't it?"

The blonde shrugged. "It would be in any other situation, but not today. Not here. And not with him," she said in a strained tone. Her sad green eyes filled with tears.

"Kris, come on, you know you'd like to have a baby. Edward would love that too, especially if it's a boy."

She nodded, her anger rising once again. "Yeah, I know he would, and I tried to tell him. That's when I found him screwing Heather in our bedroom."

Kyle's expression widened again, his eyebrows arching to his hairline. "Mother fucker!"

"You got that right. That man will never touch me, not ever again."

"What are you going to do?"

"I wish I knew."

Kyle looked completely stunned. "Will you divorce him?"

"I think I have to. It was one thing when I thought he was miserable too, but now I see that nothing fazes Edward. Even if I have to share my child with him from a distance, I'll do it, because I can't stand to be in a house with him."

"Where will you go?"

She laughed, a hollow, desperate sound. "I have no idea. I don't have any money. Oh God, I don't know." She put her head in her hands again, fully feeling the gravity of her situation.

"Well, I don't think you should go to Bruce Dooley," he said with a strange resolve.

Kris looked up at him, surprised, wondering what had provoked the comment. "What do you mean by that? And why not?"

"For one thing, you've been seen with him, and that's not good. In a divorce, things like that can kill your case. If you expect to get custody of this baby, you can't go live with a bartender."

She wanted to slap him on general principle, and because she wanted to hit something or somebody. He was right, however, and she knew it. Kris wouldn't do that to Bruce anyway, but she'd recently developed a distaste for being told what to do. "I wouldn't do that, but if I wanted to, I would. I don't give a damn what Edward thinks."

Pleased, Kyle rearranged himself on the bed. "Good. You don't need to mix yourself up with a character like that."

Kris snorted. "I care too much for Bruce to let him get mixed up with a family like the Hollingsworths."

"What are you going to tell Dad?" Kyle asked, his voice concerned.

She knew they both had strained relationships with their father, though Kyle pandered to the man more than she did, or at least she saw it that way. "I don't plan on telling him anything right now, and I don't want you to either. Just let me figure out what I'm going to do and how I'm going to do it. Then I'll send him into a cussing, screaming rage all on my own. I wouldn't wish that on you, either."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Kris was tired of talking and tired of thinking. She just wanted it all to go away.

Kyle finally patted her on the shoulder and said, "I wish I knew what to say, Kris. I'll do whatever I can for you."

"I know you will, Kyle. I'm glad you're here. This is something I've just got to go through and figure out by myself. I've relied on other people too long." She sighed, hating the truth. "I don't know what's going to happen, but whatever does, I'm going to go down swinging."



6:30 a.m. Edward Hollingsworth could not recall the last time he'd slept so late, even on a Saturday. After spending the night with Heather, though, he found that his body was still not quite recovered. She'd been glorious.

His mind drifted over the significant moments of the night as he stepped into the steaming shower, the burning water a comfort on his skin. Heather had done things to him that he hadn't felt in years, or perhaps never. The complete opposite of Kris, she seemed to know all the right points to press and positions to conquer. His wife was too passive in his bed, almost always allowing herself to be led by his desires. Heather, though, took what she wanted, how she wanted it, making Edward desire her all the more.

Thinking of Kris and how mortified she'd be if she knew of his nocturnal activities with the maid, Edward smiled. His tryst had an unexpected perk other than just pleasing him. He'd broken Kris, whether she knew it or not, which was what she'd needed. It had been clear to him as he stared into Heather's deep, sensuous eyes.

It was time Kris knew who the boss was and that she bend to his will. If she wasn't prepared to do that, then she needed to step aside. The publisher was quite sure he could think of a suitable replacement.

Mother would probably not approve if she got word of recent developments, as she'd warned him after his last divorce that he needed to set a better example. In a way, though, Edward knew she understood him. Having so much power and influence was not always easy, often ravaging any relationship that tried to compete. His father had known it, then his mother, and now him. It was simply a reality of their position, having to play with people's hearts. Mother would scold him once again, but in her beautiful emerald eyes, a message of acceptance would shine through.

If she knew the wondrous things Heather could do, Mother would understand his need to have her. Where she could have learned such things with her shy nature, Edward had no idea, and he didn't really care. The fact that she could make him want to cry with pleasure was the only fact he needed to know.

He'd never been with a woman who had a sexual appetite to match his own. Despite her deceiving exterior, Heather had a base rawness about her, a need for primal exertion, that shocked and excited him all at once. Her eyes had taken on a golden hue as she'd devoured him in every way, taking everything he could give and returning more. The thought of her over him again, writhing with abandon, made him shiver.

Stepping from the shower, Edward began plotting a scenario to get her in his

bed for a repeat performance. Perhaps he would simply rent a room in town to avoid a nasty run-in with Kris, or a cottage by the lake. Women liked that sort of thing, and they would have all the privacy and room they needed. He had an idea that if Heather were completely uninhibited, she could treat him to a night of pleasure he would never forget.



"I wish Dominique was up to watch," Morgan Pritchard said as she carefully rolled the pastry dough to Molly Crenshaw's specifications.

Molly laughed. "I don't think Miss Dominique has ever seen this side of seven a.m. on a weekend."

Morgan shook her head. "Back on the farm, the day would already be half over."

"While ours has just begun," Heather Patterson groaned, then yawned.

"Yup," Morgan agreed, then glanced over her shoulder. "I'm surprised Constance isn't up yet."

"She'd likely not be in the kitchen if she was," Molly said. "Miss Constance has never been keen on cookin'."

"I've always loved to cook," Morgan said.

Molly nodded approvingly. "I can tell ye've spent a fair amount of time in front of a stove."

"So can I," Heather agreed. "Molly's been trying forever to teach me how to make her cinnamon rolls, and I still haven't mastered it. Looks like you're getting the hang of it, though."

"Let's see how they turn out before we go so far as to say that," Morgan said.

The ringing telephone interrupted them, and Molly reached to pick it up. "Hello."

"Hi, Molly."

"Hello, Leyland." Molly hoped the sudden rush of heat she felt rush to her face wasn't visible to either Heather or Morgan.

"I was hoping you'd answer the phone. I assumed you'd be in the kitchen at this

hour." Leyland Cross' voice sounded tense, strained. "Molly, I need to talk to you," he blurted.

"Yeah, the ladies told me ya were askin' after me at the market yesterday." Molly blushed when Heather turned an inquisitive eye her way. Morgan said nothing, but smiled wryly as she began slicing the pastry dough into strips.

Molly recalled her reaction when Dominique had told her about Leyland's inquiry the previous day. She'd trembled inside at the mention of Leyland's name, then trembled with fear of discovery when Dominique and Morgan had pressed her about her whereabouts. Molly had deflected their questions as best she could, leaving them to believe whatever they wished.

"Molly, I have to talk to you, and I don't know the proper protocol for something like this, so I'm just going to say it all at one time." Leyland paused to catch his breath. "I'm worried about you and I have to know what's going on. I mean—I'd like for you to tell me what's going on. With you, I mean. And with us."

At the sound of "us," Molly walked out of the kitchen, clutching the cordless phone to her ear. "I—I'm not sure what ya mean," Molly said as she reached the sanctuary of her bedroom.

"I mean that I think I'm falling in love with you, and I hope you feel the same way about me. Because if you're not—" Leyland choked and sounded as if he was about to cry. "If you're not, I need for you to let me know before I get too deep into this relationship."

Molly paused, speechless. She couldn't believe what Leyland had just said.

"I'm sorry," Leyland rushed, "but I'm not accustomed to such feelings and I don't know what to do. If there's something wrong, if you don't want to see me again, all you have to do is say something."

"Yes," Molly blurted. "There's something wrong." She felt an immense weight fall off her shoulders when she spoke the words.

"Oh. Well, I was afraid of that. I'll let you go, then."

"No!" Molly cried, realizing he'd misunderstood her words. "Leyland, don't hang up!"

Silence filled the line.

"Leyland, are ya still there?"

"I'm here," he said softly, his voice sounding broken.

"I think ya misunderstood me. I didn't mean there's something wrong with *us*." Molly felt a little thrill at saying the word. "I meant that there's something wrong with me."

"Are you—ill?"

"Yes." The word came out as a sob, and once released, Molly couldn't prevent the torrent of tears that followed. As she tried to regain control of herself, she heard Leyland's patient but worried voice speaking softly to her, trying to reassure her. At that moment, she became aware of exactly how much more her silence had been hurting him, hurting *them*, than the truth ever could.

"Just take deep breaths and talk to me when you can," Leyland said. "I'm right here, Molly. I'm right here."

When she'd finally regained a semblance of composure, Molly gathered the courage to say, "I have a lump." It felt somehow awkward to tell Leyland exactly where the lump was located.

Leyland's voice was quiet, and he mused aloud. "That's the reason you saw a doctor yesterday."

"Yes," Molly said quietly.

"Have they ordered tests?"

"I had a biopsy yesterday."

"Who went with you?" Leyland asked.

"I went by myself," Molly admitted.

"Molly, you shouldn't have," Leyland said in a breathless rush. "You should have had someone go with you."

"No one knows," Molly blurted.

"You haven't told anyone?" Leyland asked incredulously.

"Just you."

Leyland's voice assumed a deeper, yet tender tone. "I don't know whether to be awed by your bravery or angered by your stubbornness, but I'm glad you've told me," he said. "And now is there anything I can do for you? Would you like to go out? Could I pick you up and get you away from the house for awhile?"

Molly's heart leapt at the prospect. "I think I'd like that a whole lot," she said, smiling.

"Then we have a date."



Rahne O'Connor steeled her spine as she stood on the porch and knocked on her father's front door. It was absurd, she thought, that she had had no qualms about arguing cases before strict trial judges, going toe-to-toe with irate defense counsel, and staring down numerous murderers, yet the thought of having an honest conversation with her father was enough to strike terror into her heart. Trent had offered to accompany her, to offer moral support and perhaps even serve as mediator in case things became heated, but Rahne had felt that visiting her father was something she had to do alone.

Clifton O'Connor opened the door and Rahne's lungs constricted, cutting off her air. "Can I come in?" she said weakly.

"Do ya have ta ask that question?" Clifton replied, standing aside so Rahne could enter.

"I wasn't sure," Rahne said honestly.

Clifton shrugged as she entered the house.

Rahne swallowed hard. "We need to talk," she said.

Clifton ran a hand down the back of his head as he used the other to pull out a chair from the dining table. "Start talkin'," he said.

Rahne took a deep breath as she sank into her chair. "I guess I haven't been totally honest with you for a long time now, and I'm hoping that will change today. I just need to tell you how I feel, and I need you to listen.

"I guess first I should apologize for what I did to you on the witness stand during the Griffith trial."

Clifton's mouth set in a grim line.

Rahne's hair spilled around her shoulders as she leaned forward. "I was so angry that things weren't going well. I'm not used to losing, Papa. It doesn't sit well with me. I guess I got that stubborn streak from you."

Clifton's jaw loosened, and his mouth softened into something remotely resembling a smile.

"I was so angry at the prospect of losing to Reed Monroe that I was willing to do anything to try to win at that point." Rahne swallowed hard, then spoke softly, "Even if it meant revealing a tiny portion of my soul in open court."

Clifton stared at her a long moment, then said, "Do ya really hate me, Rahne?"

"I don't hate you, Papa, I just hate the—"

"Ya hate what?"

"I hate the alcohol and how it makes you act," Rahne blurted, feeling, as the words came, that a dam within her had broken. "I hate the fact that a man as strong as you could be so weak as to be slave to a bottle. I hate that your alcoholism made me the butt of every joke imaginable when I was a kid. I hate that your alcoholism has directly affected every negative aspect of my life, from my mother leaving up until this very moment."

Rahne's face twisted painfully as she recalled the emptiness she'd felt growing up without her mother's presence, knowing her father was to blame for her absence. "You know," she said bitterly, "I don't remember you drinking that much when I was little, but I guess that's just because I was too young to be aware of it. I can only imagine how bad it must've been to drive away my mother."

Clifton slammed his fist onto the table, causing Rahne to sit back. "Now wait just a minute," Clifton said, and Rahne realized his eyes were glistening with tears. "I can't believe ya think such a thing. My drinkin' didn't drive yer mother away. It was her leavin' that made me pick up the bottle in the first place."

Rahne's mouth fell open at her father's statement.

Clifton shook his finger at Rahne. "I've never said one cross word against yer mother, but I'll be damned if I'll let ya blame me for what she did.

"Didn't ya ever wonder what kind of woman would leave her baby in the care of a man possessed by alcohol?"

The room seemed devoid of oxygen. Rahne's head spun as she tried to make sense of what her father was saying. "I—" she muttered helplessly, but could manage no more.

"Since ya seem ta want there ta be honest communication between us, maybe it's time I told ya the truth." Clifton's voice was bitter. "When ya were six months old, I came home from work one day ta find ya screamin' in the living room with yer mum nowhere around. I lifted ya from the crib and ya quieted, then I went to find yer mum. I walked to the bedroom because I thought she might be in the shower. It was the only reason I could think that she wouldn't be answerin' yer cries."

Clifton stopped talking and licked his lips. His eyes were focused on something far away, and Rahne was shocked when tears spilled down his face. "She was in our bed," he said in monotone, "havin' sex with a man I'd never seen before."

Seeing the pain revealed in her father's distant expression, Rahne, too, began to cry.

"I don't know how I managed not to drop ya," Clifton said. "But it seemed to me at that moment that ya were all I had ta hold onto. Yer mother, she pushed her lover off her and looked me in the face and told me she was leavin'. She told me—" Clifton's gaze returned to the present and he focused on Rahne.

Impulsively, Rahne reached across the table and grabbed her father's hand. He held it tightly as their tears flowed freely.

"She told me I could have ya, that she never wanted to see ya again. And then I guess they got dressed and left. I don't really remember what happened after that. I just remember holdin' ya and gettin' a bottle for ya while the world kept spinnin' and left me behind."

Rahne's head throbbed. She'd thought their meeting would allow her to rid herself of the demons that plagued her. She'd never expected to find more doubts and questions. "Why?"

Clifton shrugged. "She never gave me a reason. At least, not so far as I remember. And devil take me, but I spent months goin' over everything that had happened between us, but I couldn't figure out where things went wrong."

Rahne tightened her grip on his hand. "And you weren't drinking at the time?"

"Not when she left, no." Clifton heaved a deep sigh. "The better part of a year

had passed before I touched a bottle.”

“Why?”

“Hopin’ to find answers at the bottom, I guess.” Clifton shrugged. “I didn’t drink much at first, Rahne. I—” Clifton swallowed hard. “Yer grandfather was a heavy drinker. He was okay when he’d had a few, but after that, well, let’s just say the bottle wasn’t the only thing he liked ta hit in the afternoons.”

Rahne squeezed his hand.

“I didn’t wanna be like him. I just wanted enough alcohol ta dull the pain a little. I thought I could control it the way Pop hadn’t. I couldn’t ever imagine hurtin’ ya the way he’d hurt me. I love ya so much, Rahne.” Clifton tightly closed his eyes, squeezing tears out at the corners. “And I hurt ya anyway.”

“You didn’t mean to,” Rahne said, and knew it for the truth. She felt a warm surge of emotion—was it forgiveness?—and tightened her grip on Clifton’s hand.

Clifton opened his eyes, stared at her, then placed his other hand on top of hers. “Right after yer mum left, I knew I had ta take care of ya, so I started pressin’ my lips ta Constance Hollingsworth’s moneyed bum, figurin’ that gettin’ in good with her would lead ta job security. Then came the drinkin’ and the women, which, I guess, were another way of tryin’ to figure out where things went wrong with yer mum. I thought if I could please them, it meant that there was nothing wrong with me. It had ta have been something wrong with her, and I guess that made it all a little easier to believe.

“There were people during those first years that told me I should give you up, that a man had no business tryin’ ta raise a little girl on his own, and part of me would believe they were right. But then I’d watch ya playin’, or step inside yer room at night and watch ya sleep, and I knew I could never abandon ya the way yer mum did. And now I wonder if maybe they weren’t right after all.”

“Don’t say that.”

Clifton licked his lips. “I know I wasn’t the best father I could’ve been, Rahne, and I’m sorry that my failings hurt ya, but I want ya ta know that things are gonna change.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that on Monday, I’m leavin’ Gossamer Falls.”



"Rahne?"

"Yes?"

"Did you sleep?"

Rahne rolled over in bed to face her lover. In the early-morning light, Trent Beckham's eyes bored into her own. "Not much and not well," she admitted.

Trent gently touched her face. "You want to talk about it?"

Rahne nodded. "After breakfast."

They got out of bed and dressed hurriedly. The apartment held a slight chill, so Rahne adjusted the thermostat as they moved toward the kitchen and began preparing breakfast.

Rahne's thoughts returned to the previous day's confrontation with her father. She'd been stunned not only by the things he'd revealed about her mother, but also by him telling her that he'd realized he needed help and was leaving Gossamer Falls to check himself into a private clinic that would assist him in battling his alcoholism.

When they'd finished their meal and Rahne felt almost human again, Trent asked, "So, you want to tell me what's on your mind?"

Rahne shook her head as if the action might ring some sort of clarity to her jumbled thoughts. "I just don't know what to think anymore. I mean, I spent years thinking my father's drinking led to my mother leaving, and I learn that all my anger and resentment was wasted on him while the mother I'd formed an idealized view of turned out to be nothing like I'd imagined." She laughed and shrugged. "I don't know what to do."

"About what? Your feelings? Your mother?"

"All of it, I guess. I never seriously considered looking for her before because I believed she would somehow resent me for being reminded of my father."

"And you've changed your mind?"

"I don't know. Now I just have a lot more unanswered questions. I want to know how she could leave me. I want to know why she didn't love me."

Trent looked down at the glass-topped table, and Rahne had a sudden flash of insight.

"I guess I finally have a solid idea of how you must feel about your mother," she said softly.

Trent nodded. "So it would seem." He reached for her hand. "I'm sorry you have to know it firsthand." He stood from the table, and Rahne rose to meet his welcome embrace.



Pictures on Dominique Carpenter's walls, many of a beautiful, young woman and others of her majestic, native Georgia, distinguished her room from any other in the house. She'd only lived there a short time, but she'd already given it more character, and made it more of a home, than had most of the manor's long-time residents.

Dominique wasn't looking at the photos, though. She was staring wide-eyed at Kris Hollingsworth, who sat on the end of the bed beside her, tears streaming down her soft white cheeks.

"My goodness, Kris. That's terrible." The younger woman nodded sadly and Dominique felt a deep pang of sorrow for her. Kris cared too much for her own good. "Does he know?"

"No, I—I don't think he saw me. And I don't care."

"I tell you, Edward Hollingsworth needs someone to string him up by the balls, because he is a bastard."

Kris couldn't help but smile at that. "I'm tired of making mistakes, Dominique. How old do you have to be before you get wise?"

The dreadlocked woman laughed softly. "Honey, there are plenty of eighty-five-year-old fools runnin' around this earth. Wisdom is not correlated with age. The key is learning from your mistakes and not repeating them."

"Well, you can bet I'll never do this again."

Believing the young woman's resolve, Dominique could see the determination in the woman's eyes, and the deep pain buried there. She knew Kris wasn't yet sure what her purpose was, but when she found it, the world had better watch

out.

"What about—?" Dominique motioned to Kris' stomach.

She blew out a breath. "I'm pregnant," she said, her voice lighter than she felt.

Dominique sighed in return. "You're sure? Have you been to a doctor yet?"

"I haven't been to a doctor, but the test was positive. It doesn't matter, though. I'm not staying with him."

The older woman remember the uncertainty that had come when she'd first learned she was pregnant, and the fear it had struck in her heart. She'd been in a perfect relationship with Ellis, and they'd wanted a baby desperately, but still, the idea of going through pregnancy and childbirth was traumatic, no matter how much she'd wanted it. And poor Kris, thrusting a child into a situation that was already bad had to put more strain on the young woman than she could bear. Or at least close to it.

"You need to go to the doctor right now. Those tests can give false positives. Maybe yours was one."

The blonde shook her head doubtfully. "I'm gonna have to pay more than that."

Dominique took her hand. "Kris, you don't owe anything to anyone except yourself, and, if you're pregnant, your baby. And what you owe yourself is happiness. Don't think you have to pay for that." She waited for the woman's teary eyes to track back to her face. "I'm sorry I've been busy with Morgan for the last couple of days. I'm here for you and I'm going to help you through this, no matter what."

Kris smiled her first genuine smile. "Thank you, Dominique. That means a lot to me. And I will make it through, because I won't let Edward defeat me. I just have a bad feeling that it's going to get worse before it gets better."

Not wanting to encourage her thoughts, Dominique silently agreed, knowing there was going to be hell to pay all around.



It was early afternoon when Abigayle Nguyen's brown Jeep pulled into Clifton O'Connor's driveway. She'd spent most of the previous day trying to get in touch with Clifton, but he'd not answered her phone calls and had left her no choice but to try to catch him at home. Abigayle got out of her car and approached the

house, though it was obvious that Clifton wasn't home. Still, she had her key and was determined to see him. She'd stay at his house for awhile, then, if he didn't show, she'd go scour the bars near the river until she found him.

The house was dark inside, so Abigayle turned on the living room lights. She went to the liquor cabinet and opened it to pour herself a drink, then paused in disbelief as her groping hand closed on empty space.

What the hell?

The cabinet was empty.

An unsettling feeling erupted in Abigayle's stomach and rapidly spread throughout her body as she checked the bedroom and the kitchen—other places Clifton kept liquor—and found them empty as well.

"What the fuck is going on?" she mumbled as she finished a frantic but fruitless search of the kitchen cabinets. It was then she saw the piece of paper on the table, and leaned in closer when she recognized Clifton's spidery scrawl.

Dear Rahne,

I hope you can forgive me for not saying goodbye, but I thought it best to leave a day earlier than planned and I didn't want to bother you. The sooner I get there, the better it'll be for everyone. When I get back, I hope I'll be more the Papa you should've had than the one you've known all these years. I love you, Rahne.

Papa

"What is this shit?" Abigayle fumed. She started to crumple the paper and throw it away, then thought better of it. Despite the fact that she had a key, if Rahne found out she'd been in the house without her father there, the little bitch wasn't against manufacturing breaking and entering or trespassing charges against her. Abigayle replaced the paper as she'd found it, turned off the lights, and locked the door behind her. She had no idea where Clifton had gone, and for that lack of consideration, she was determined to give him a world of grief when he returned.

Dreading to return to her apartment and face more of her parents' silent disapproval, Abigayle drove away slowly.



As she served dinner salads to half the members of the gathered Hollingsworth family, Heather Patterson kept hoping that Edward would meet her eyes, but he gave her no more than a cursory glance. It had been much the same every time he'd seen her since the night they'd made love.

Heather hoped Edward's reticence was due to the fact that he was afraid if he looked at her, he would become so overwhelmed with desire that he'd have to take her then and there, in front of everybody. But there was a part of Heather that whispered Edward had already received what he wanted, that all he'd been after was sex, and now she was nothing to him. She prayed the voice was a liar, because she felt what they'd shared had gone beyond sex. It had been a long time since she'd felt as loved, desired, and appreciated as she had in Edward's bed. It was a feeling she longed to regain.

Feeling eyes upon her, Heather turned to find herself the object of Kyle's intense gaze. She forced a smile which he didn't even attempt to return. Was it possible? Did he know? No, there was no way. He was probably still perplexed that she had refused his clumsy advances.

Heather spared a short glance at Kris, but the young woman wasn't looking at her. And as Heather served Kris' salad, she realized Kris recoiled just a little from her presence. Heather wondered if it was possible that Kris somehow sensed what was happening between her and Edward, then decided it probably wouldn't matter to her anyway. After all, if she had cared the least bit about Edward, she wouldn't have moved out of their bedroom and left him to fulfill his desires elsewhere, would she?

Heather glanced back to Edward. Kris was a fool for shunning such a passionate man, but she would make no such mistake. She would just have to find a way to let him know how much she wanted to be with him again.



The impression Bruce received from Kyle Curtis, as he had the first time they'd met, was that the man was anxious. His eyes tended to dart around, and the hangdog look on his face made him look older than he actually was. The bartender supposed that Kyle was also a confidant to his sister and knew of all her problems, no doubt feeling deep sympathy for her, taking on her difficulties as his own, exactly as a good brother should.

"What can I get you to drink?"

Kyle took a deep breath and scratched his blond head. "Something major, and a lot of it. How about JD straight up?"

"Ah, the man is serious. Coming up." Bruce pulled out a shot glass and the black-labeled bottle. "Did you drive here tonight?"

"Yeah, but if I get smashed, I'll just call a cab. The way I'm feeling, I don't care."

"All right," Bruce said, "I'll keep that in mind."

Kyle's sour demeanor made the big man wonder what could be going on, and if there was need for concern for Kris. Of course, there was something up with her, he simply tried to hope it was not serious. After a couple of drinks, Kyle motioned him over.

"What makes you so special, Bruce?"

The big man's eyebrows shot up. "Um, I don't know that anything makes me special. What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about my sister," he said, a touch of anger in his voice. "She thinks you hung the moon, boy."

Bruce blushed and tried not to smile. "I don't know, Kyle, but I think a lot of your sister too."

The thinner man nodded, his eyes a little glassy. "I know you do, and that's the problem. Kris is a married woman. You need to keep your hands off her."

The bartender felt his ire rise and attempted to keep in mind that Kyle was on his way to getting drunk, and that he was Kris' brother. Beating him senseless would surely not please her. "First, I don't think it's any of your business. Second, I haven't laid a hand on Kris. *I know* she's married."

"Well, you need to quit leading her on."

"I'm not leading her on. We're friends, that's all. Everyone needs a friend sometimes."

Kyle glared at him. "Yeah, but when a woman is thinking of leaving her husband, she doesn't need friends like you."

Absorbing that bit of information with internal glee, Bruce stuffed it away for later fantasy. "Like I said, I don't think this is either your or my concern. Whatever happens between Kris and her husband is between the two of them."

"You mean the three of them," Kyle muttered, rocketing down another shot.

Bruce's forehead wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the baby ought to get a say when his mommy is about to piss away his fortune." Kyle stood from the stool and he almost got out the door as Bruce stood behind the bar in shocked silence.

Kris was pregnant. That was what had caused her odd behavior. He could hardly believe it, and certainly didn't want to.

"Let me call you a cab," he said forcefully, leaving no doubt it wasn't a request.

Sighing, Kyle moved back into the bar, barely noticed. From rote, Bruce dialed the number, feeling the tremendous pressure as his heart slowly cracked in his chest.



Molly felt her chest tighten as she entered Doctor Oswald's office a few minutes before nine a.m. on Monday morning. What could have seemed the longest weekend of her life spent waiting for her test results had passed quickly in Leyland's company. Molly turned to glance at the balding, bespectacled man beside her and smiled warmly, feeling the tightness in her chest dissipate as she did so. Leyland tightened his hand's grip on hers and returned the smile.

"I'm here for my test results," Molly told the receptionist.

"Your name?"

"Molly Crenshaw."

The receptionist pulled a folder bearing Molly's name from a mass of similar folders. She disappeared from the window and reappeared at the door that led to the examination rooms. "If you and Mr. Crenshaw will follow me, the doctor will be with you shortly," the receptionist said.

Molly felt herself flush at the mention of "Mr. Crenshaw," and turned to look at Leyland.

"I'll wait out here if you'd like," he said quietly.

Molly shook her head. "I'd like ya ta come in with me."

Leyland smiled and accompanied her down the hallway.

The exam room was small and extremely bright. Strong light reflected off shiny white surfaces, lending a sterile feel to the room. It was the perfect room in which to deliver bad news, Molly thought, then pushed away the thought and climbed up onto the exam table.

As she settled onto the table, Molly found it amazing how easily she'd managed to get there. Not only had her joint pain lessened considerably since she'd begun taking the doctor-recommended dietary supplements, but she felt as if her range of motion had also increased.

Molly looked at Leyland, standing awkwardly beside the table, then whispered, "Why don't ya sit down?"

Leyland looked at the room's sole chair, then climbed onto the table beside Molly.

She giggled as Leyland settled into place beside her, but the laughter died in her throat as she heard the sound of her file being removed from its holder on the door. *This is it*, she thought, and reached for Leyland's ready hand.

Doctor Oswald entered the room and greeted them with a smile. Molly thought she mumbled an introduction to Leyland, but was too busy searching the doctor's face for signs of her fate to be certain of anything. Despite Molly's best efforts, Oswald's blue eyes seemed hidden by his thick eyebrows and his pencil-thin mustache appeared to conceal the set of his mouth. Then the mask that concealed his face seemed to fall away, and Oswald said, "Well. Molly, you'll be relieved to know that the biopsy revealed no malignancy."

The room's whiteness became momentarily overwhelming, and Molly thought for a moment that she would pass out, then she became aware of the pressure of Leyland's hand clasping her own, and she returned the heartfelt squeeze.

"So, now I just go home?" Molly asked.

"Well, we still need to discuss treatment options."

An invisible hand clutched Molly's heart. "But I thought—Ya said—"

"That there are no cancer cells present, yes," Doctor Oswald said. "But there is no guarantee that that will be the case in the future."

Molly's hand unconsciously covered her breast. "Ya mean the tumor could turn cancerous later on?"

Oswalt nodded. "It's possible. That's why I suggest we perform a lumpectomy as soon as possible."

Molly tried to process the information, but she suddenly felt as if the doctor were speaking a foreign language. "So ya wanna do what?"

"A lumpectomy is a surgical procedure where we go into the breast, and remove the tumor and surrounding tissue. It's not nearly as radical a solution as a mastectomy."

"I—I dunno," Molly said, beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable discussing the matter in front of Leyland. "I'll need time to think about it."

"Of course," Oswald said, "but I suggest we act quickly."

Molly swallowed hard and nodded.



Out of the corner of her eye, Kris Hollingsworth saw her brother emerging from his room, but she barely noticed as she barreled into her own. After the morning she'd had, the last thing she needed was another lecture from her big brother. Though he meant well, Kyle had not been a very good influence over her in recent weeks, as she'd hoped he'd be when she'd invited him to come.

Before the door could shut behind her, she heard it stop with a fleshy smack, followed by hesitant footsteps. Not looking at him, the determined blonde pulled an oversized, brown, leather suitcase from the closet, tossed it on the bed, and began filling it with her clothes.

"What are you doing?" Kyle asked, inching closer to the bed.

Looking up at him, Kris couldn't muster a smile. "What does it look like? I'm packing." Hurt flashed green in his eyes, momentarily turning them darker. He didn't show emotion often, which made Kris feel a pang of guilt at being so biting.

The thin man sat down on the bed, ruffling the neat comforter. "Why?" His voice was disbelieving.

She stopped what she was doing and concentrated on her brother. "I'm sorry to

leave you, Kyle, but this is something I've got to do. I just can't go on like this."

"Kris, you haven't even tried."

Clenching her jaw, Kris willed herself not to explode. "You don't know what you're talking about, Kyle. I've tried enough for two people, and even that wasn't enough. I need some time to think," she waved her arms, indicating the house, "away from all this."

Her brother stood up, defiance, or possibly fear, now in his eyes. "What do you think that's going to get you? You need to stay here and face this situation before it gets any worse."

The diminutive woman shook her head and fought back tears. "Don't you see. It can't get any worse than it is right now. I've got to get out."

He opened his mouth to speak, but a knock at the door interrupted him. Resignedly, Kris answered, allowing Dominique into the midst of the fray.

Standing just inside the door frame, the tall woman acknowledged Kyle with a nod and turned to Kris. "I overheard you two talking. What's going on?" She shifted the red overcoat she held in her arms.

Kris sighed, wishing Dominique had continued on to wherever she'd been going. She really liked the older woman, but Kris didn't need anyone to talk her out of leaving. "I've just got to go." The blonde walked back to her dresser and began gathering stacks of underwear and socks. "I went to the doctor and he confirmed I'm pregnant. I've got to go somewhere to figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life."

"Oh, honey," Dominique said, stepping toward her. "You don't need to go anywhere to do that. You should be around people who love you."

Snorting at that, Kris wished she could tell who really cared. If she had better judgment in that area, perhaps she wouldn't be in the mess she was now. Most of the Hollingsworths surely cared for her, but the one that mattered the most didn't, making the situation far too complicated for her to be able to work through while still in the middle of their home. What she needed was clarity, and she couldn't get that in Gossamer Falls.

"There's too much here that gets in the way. I can't think for all the distractions."

Dominique put a hand on Kris' shoulder, stopping her from putting the final few

items in her luggage. "You should talk to Mama. I know she's intimidating sometimes, but she might surprise you."

Her mouth open, aghast, a brief scene of Kris explaining the situation to Mother Hollingsworth flashed through her mind like a *Friday the 13th* gorefest. A shiver ran down her spine. "I don't think so. The last thing I need to do is add to my problems by bringing her into it. Different scenery is going to let me think." She moved to the bed, inserted the last wad of clothes, and shut the lid on the case.

Kyle stood and moved awkwardly next to Dominique. "You should listen to her, Kris. There's got to be a better way."

Kris closed her eyes momentarily and took a deep breath. "I really appreciate that you guys care, but my mind is made up. I've let other people's ideas influence my actions for far too long. My gut tells me I need to leave, and for once in my life I'm going to listen to it. It's time my feelings dictate my life instead of other people's."

Both members of the tag team began to protest, but Kris put out a hand to stop them. "I'm not blaming anyone but myself. But if you truly care for me, you'll understand and let me do this on my own. This is for the best."

Smiling sadly, Dominique asked, "Where will you go?"

"I have no idea," the younger woman said, shrugging her shoulders. She had a few ideas, or at least directions in mind, but her final destination was really immaterial. "As long as it's away from here, I'll be all right."

Frowning, Kyle plopped on the bed again. "How long will you be gone?"

Kris smiled, thinking back to some of her earliest memories of her big brother pouting over a toy, complaining to their mother that Kris always got everything. "Not long," she said, settling on the bed beside him. "All I know is I'm getting away from this place and I probably won't be in touch with anyone for a while."

Her arms crossed and a stern look on her features, Dominique let out a short breath. "We're just worried about you, honey. What if something happens to you?"

"I'll be fine," Kris answered, "I'm not going to do anything stupid. But I am going." Picking up the bag, Kris stood and gave Dominique a heartfelt hug.



Entering Harris' outer office, Lisa Hollingsworth smiled at the new face behind the assistant's desk. Since he'd had a number of different assistants after Joyce Stevens' unplanned departure, she wasn't surprised to see a change of guard. She planned on paying specific attention to this one, though, as her husband had been very impressed following his initial meeting with her.

The dark-haired woman moved her gaze from the computer screen and returned the smile. "Can I help you?"

Lisa held up a brown paper bag, causing a spicy Asian scent to waft around her. "I'm Lisa Hollingsworth, Harris' wife. This is lunch."

A nervous expression on her face, her blue eyes wide, the woman stood up. "Oh, I'm sorry. I should have recognized you from the pictures. My name is Virginia Tucker."

Taking her extended hand, Lisa expressed her pleasure at meeting the assistant and wished her well. She then entered Harris' office, hoping to find him in an equally happy state.

Unfortunately, he was huddled over a manuscript, looking absorbed in his work as he often was of late. "Hi, darling. You hungry?" She gently closed the door behind her.

Harris started slightly, a smile crossing his lips upon recognizing his guest. "Does a bear—"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know," Lisa cut him off, grinning at her playful husband. She dragged a chair next to his and helped clear his desktop.

"Smells great," he said as they dove into the dishes.

She'd always envied Harris' devotion to the joy of food, if not always appreciated the results. Spending so much time at work had helped him accumulate a few more extra pounds, which only enhanced his precious teddy-bear appearance. And at this point, she couldn't seem to resist doing things for him that made him happy, even if she knew they weren't good for him.

"I met your new assistant. She seems nice," Lisa said as she finished the lunch.

Harris nodded around a mouthful of rice. "Yeah, she's great. The best yet, for sure."

"She looked busy out there, at least."

"I haven't had to work too hard on her. She is good on the computer and seems to know all our programs," he answered, then sipped from a glass of water.

Lisa leaned back in her black leather chair. "That's great. I don't even know them all."

Pointing to the outer office, Harris lowered his voice. "She's very competent. Asks questions when she doesn't know something and only has to be told once. That's hard to come by in an assistant. So far, she's comfortable with the work and doesn't appear to be overwhelmed by any of it."

His wife scooted closer and leaned against his shoulder. "I'm glad you like her. I hope she can help you get home a little earlier."

He shrugged. "Maybe. You know how work is here."

She did know, unfortunately. And she knew it could be better than he was making it out to be. Knowing he was going through—something, though, she didn't press him on it. "I know. The submission I'm reading right now is excellent."

"Really. Anybody famous?"

"I've found that the best biographies are of the heroes no one knows. Like this one," she said, knowing Harris had an aversion to true accounts. The one she was reading, though, was uplifting enough that she thought even he would like it. "You should read it. I'm almost ready to turn it in to Clarice."

His face took on the expression that she knew meant "yeah, right." "Maybe if it wins the National Book Award. Otherwise I'll leave that to you and Stuart."

"When are you ever going to broaden your horizons?" she asked, poking him in his padded ribs.

"When I remarry?" he responded with a playful grin.

Instead of assaulting him further, which rarely worked to promote her cause, Lisa shifted in her seat and pulled her husband into a sweet kiss.



"Learn how to drive, you sorry bastard!" Abigayle Nguyen yelled as she drove by

a black Ford F-150, courteously giving the driver a one-fingered salute. She didn't look at the man long enough to gauge his reaction, and she didn't really care. People like him deserved everything they had coming to them.

Then, there were people like her, who deserved nothing of which they were the unfortunate recipients. The reporter usually tried not to be bitter, as she'd always seen those who let themselves slip into that role as ridiculous losers. After the recent blows she'd been dealt, though, she no longer cared to make the attempt.

"Go to hell, Clifton," she muttered under her breath, her eyes fixed on the road, only peripherally seeing it. He'd only been gone a short time, and it was hard to believe, but she missed him, despite their normally rocky relationship. At least he'd been there for her, and provided some semblance of support. Now he was gone, leaving her alone in her self-pity with no one to reinforce her conclusions. Abigayle hated to admit it, but she needed someone to do that.

The scenery flashed by in a blurry whirl, the buildings warped in the vehicles' exhaust wake, much like the nuclear meltdown of her own life. If she couldn't earn the love and approval of a desperate drunk, the remainder of her existence looked quite miserable. He didn't come out and say it, but Clifton had looked on her with shame before he'd left, a cold, condescending look in his shaken brown eyes.

"As if he can cast aspersion on anyone," she said, her voice pure venom. The young woman sighed, disappointed in herself, yet not willing to admit it out loud.

If she'd ever thought attaining her parents' blessing was possible, getting caught screwing a man older than her father had blown that dream all to hell. The look on her mother's face would have been funny if it hadn't been followed by so much screaming and flying fists. For a timid, tiny woman, Rose Nguyen had certainly put on a show.

Shaking her head, Abigayle pressed the accelerator to the floor, glad to be out of the confines of the city and on an open road. She needed space to breath and get her mind off the pricks in her life that were holding her down. She needed a wide-open space where she could scream until her throat turned raw. She also needed a Glock and a bottle of Jack Daniel's, but even reporters had limits.

So did her father, unfortunately, and much smaller than hers. The hurt in his expression had been almost unbearable for her, even as she swore she didn't care. Abigayle's relationship with her father had always been tenuous: her not knowing what he expected of her, John seemingly unwilling to spell it out. And the hints he gave, like the disapproving look she'd last seen on his face, let

Abigayle know she probably didn't want his ideals expressed. He hadn't even been able to look her in the eyes.

"Fuck him, and fuck them all," she whispered, her mind spinning on ways to get back at everyone. She wouldn't stoop to resorting to violence, but she would show everyone who ever doubted her how full of crap they truly were.

If Clifton were here she'd slap him for not being around. It was just like the bastard to leave her to clean up his mess all on her own. He didn't take responsibility for anything. One day, when he was old, alone, and on his last breath, Clifton would wish he'd treated her better.

For now, Abigayle tried to take comfort in the fact that her situation could not possibly get any worse.



Things couldn't possibly get any better, Constance Hollingsworth thought as she listened to her attorney's words. She turned to look out her office's windowed wall, toward the waterfall, and saw the late-afternoon sunlight turning Gossamer Falls a brilliant orange-red as it reflected off the water's surface.

Cradling the phone to her ear, Constance interrupted Noah's droning speech. "So, you're saying you have all the paperwork in hand?"

Constance smiled as she listened to Noah's reassurance. "Fine. Get everything to me tomorrow, and Wednesday will see a new day dawn on this city." Her smile broadened as she imagined Abigayle Nguyen's response to the coming storm.

Checkmate, bitch. You lose, Constance thought.