

The Big Day

Stuart Hollingsworth missed the spirit of Christmas. Not only had the spirit passed him by for the year, it had actually been kidnapped, tortured, and beheaded. Standing beside one of the rent-a-church's pews in the back of the chapel with his best man, Harris Hollingsworth, and his unlikely best-friend, Bruce Dooley, he didn't think there was any chance Father Christmas could be revived. Possibly not even for next year, or the following years of what promised to be a long and dreary lifetime. And to blame for this injustice was his diabolical bride-to-be, Abigayle Nguyen.

The men watched as the final guests settled into the seats at the front of the chapel. The only people attending were the Hollingsworths and the Nguyens. They sat divided unevenly like two sides of a family feud. Abigayle had chosen the church, which had no fine decorations or lavish stained glass windows, only because its caretakers were willing to keep it open for the wedding after the morning Christmas service. Had the ceremony been the spectacle that Abigayle originally envisioned, there would have been no way the entire guest list would have fit into the building.

"Stuart, are you okay?" Harris asked.

Stuart found it touching that his little brother had such concern in his puppy dog eyes. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You look green," Bruce offered.

Stuart tried to laugh, but nothing came out. "Aren't all grooms nervous?"

Harris shrugged his shoulders. The normally round man looked out of place in a straight black tuxedo and matching top hat. Harris always looked odd when he wasn't wearing flannel and khakis. Abigayle had hated the hats, but Stuart insisted on them as his one contribution to the wedding planning. He told her that he thought they looked debonair. Secretly, he thought it made the men look like they should be dancing around on a jar of peanuts.

"They're usually nervous, but not always the color of pea soup," Harris said.

"Well, I don't get married every day. This will be my one and only, as a matter of fact, so give me a little bit of a break if I've got some slightly chilly feet."

Harris did not look convinced. "You look like you're more of a block of ice, is all I'm saying."

Feeling the rate of his breathing increase, as well as the beating of his heart, Stuart tried to block the thoughts screaming through his head. *This is the biggest mistake of your life*, he thought, over and over. It was a notion he'd had a million times recently. He closed his blue eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to push it away.

"It's not too late," Bruce said.

Stuart couldn't tell if his friend was whispering, or if he was just passing out.

"Are you alright?" Harris asked, also from a tunnel.

"I need to sit down," Stuart said. He felt big hands grasp his arms, guiding him into a nearby pew.

No matter how big a mistake this marriage to Abigayle turned out to be, Stuart felt proud of himself for withstanding the pressure of it. It wasn't everyday that a person willingly took part in ruining their own lives. The fact that he'd made it this far without self-imploding was a testament to his resolve to make his own life hell. He surmised that his life was ruined if he married her, or if he didn't, so he might as well guide the destruction as best as possible.

Bruce and Harris settled on either side of him on the bench. Neither said anything else. They'd both in their own gentle ways tried to get him to reconsider the decision. Having been rebuffed, the men must have been resigned to letting Stuart progress down his own path. Stuart appreciated both that they tried to help him, and that they respected him enough to let him make his own decisions.

After a few moments of deep breathing, Stuart let out a big sigh. "I almost passed out, I think. If I do that during the vows, somebody push me in Abigayle's direction."



Respect for elders had been drilled into Abigayle all of her life. As a girl, her grandmother had lived with her parents, and she'd told stories about Vietnam and the struggles the family had faced. The gray old woman had given Abigayle pearls of wisdom and secret stashes of candy. Grandmother had taught the growing little girl that her parents were wiser, more experienced, and more in touch with the world than Abigayle, and that she should also show them the respect they deserved.

But sometimes, Abigayle hated her mother. The woman had the focus of a hunting lion. When she was on the trail of something, there was little that could be done to get her off a scent.

“Mother, for the last time, drop it,” Abigayle said. She could feel the blood rushing to her face. If she looked like a tomato in her wedding pictures, someone would pay.

The mother and daughter stood side by side in their reflection of the full length mirror in the church’s small dressing room. The older woman pursed her lips, crunching the face of a sixty year-old into one much older. The strict bun on top of her head bunched her salt-and-pepper hair into a tight knot. Rose Nguyen wore a high collared, navy blue dress that would have been perfectly acceptable for the pastor’s wife. She could have been more conservative only if she had Rush Limbaugh strapped to her back.

“Daughter, I am only worried about you. Stuart does not seem very happy,” Rose said. She fluffed the translucent veil in her hands for the tenth time.

“Stuart’s nervous, I’m nervous. Let’s leave it at that,” Abigayle said.

The older woman shook her head. “He should not be nervous. You must make it clear to him that there is nothing to worry about. You will serve him.”

Abigayle’s almond eyes narrowed at her mother and yet another antiquated idea the woman carried over from the old world. “I serve no one.”

“You serve your husband and you serve your family. If you do not, you will not be happy,” Rose said.

“I know what it takes to be happy, and it won’t involve being a servant. You may not realize this, but there is more to life than being a slave,” Abigayle said.

Rose’s dour face froze for several long moments. “Not a slave, Abigayle. Being obedient to your husband and your family is an honor to yourself.”

Abigayle knew her mother was limited to her upbringing and the strictures of their culture. Rose took her principles to the extreme, and had been a dutiful servant to her parents and her husband for her entire life. While Abigayle recognized that this had been mostly a cognizant choice for Rose, it wasn’t one that she’d make for herself. As Abigayle had always envisioned it, she was in the driver’s seat for her life.

The former reporter straightened her dress and took one last look at her hair. Not that anyone would tell her, but she looked beautiful.

“Stuart will be happy if Stuart wants to be happy. He doesn’t want me to be a bowl of jello. He appreciates a quick wit. Just don’t worry about it, okay?”

Though she still looked like she wanted to argue, Rose gave a short nod of her head.

Following a light knock, the door to the small dressing room crept open. Kris Hollingsworth's blonde head popped in. "Are you about ready, Abigayle?"

Abigayle stepped toward the door and nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be," she said.

Kris smiled half-heartedly. "Good. It's time."



With the wedding march playing through the overhead speaker system, Stuart clinched his jaw and prepared for the inevitable. He'd manage to get his thoughts in complete order and his bearing back beneath him. There was no use trying to lie to himself—Stuart hated everything about what was going to happen—but there was also no use in letting the negative ramifications consume him any further.

In many ways, he was glad Abigayle had moved up the wedding and that the day was finally here. The waiting had been serious torture for him, and Stuart was sure that his over active mind made it much worse. Putting finality to this episode in his life would bring some needed relief.

Abigayle stepped into the isle at the back of the church on her father's arm. John Nguyen wore an elegant black suit with a slick looking blue tie. His graying hair was cut short and brushed back, the same length as his thick mustache. Abigayle had her hair pulled back, and pinned at the top with a veil that flowed down around her face and shoulders. Her white dress—a million dirty jokes in itself—brushed across the floor as she marched toward the front of the chapel. The front of the dress had been cut away to reveal a healthy helping of Abigayle's cleavage. Over all, and slightly to his surprise, she looked stunning—at least for a crazy bitch from hell sent to ruin his life.

Letting a sigh escape his lips, Stuart felt a nudge from Bruce beside him. Stuart had gathered enough to know that Bruce had been down this road before. Stuart didn't know if his friend had been happily married, or his wife too had been some kind of nightmare. Having someone to commiserate with and to stand beside was a nice feeling. Stuart was glad that he'd asked Bruce to stand up with him and Harris for the ceremony.

The Wedding March seemed to last forever, as if the church were filled with thousands trying to catch a glimpse of the bride and she needed to move in slow motion down the isle. Stuart took deep breaths and worked on calming his mind enough to make it through the last few minutes.

When Abigayle finally made her way to stand in front of the podium, she graced Stuart with a brilliant smile. He caught himself wondering momentarily if there really was a human being in there somewhere that might be capable of joyful happiness. Her father guided Abigayle's hand to Stuart's and he took it without thought.

The pastor grinned wildly at the bride and groom, then cast his eyes toward the small audience. "Greetings everyone and God bless. We're here today on the birthday of our savior to bring more joy to the world by joining the lives of these two wonderful young people."

The faces of both sets of families were strangely ambiguous. The pastor cast his eyes over them, then focused back on Stuart and Abigayle. "You will both remember this special day for the remainder of your lives. Today, you are peeling away your individual selves and molding your lives together into a family. You are being joined in the eyes of the Lord and are allowed to bask in his glory and praise."

Stuart swallowed hard and kept his eyes on the preacher. He had no idea what denomination the man was, and he really didn't care. It would be a miracle if he wasn't really a preacher at all. In any case, there was no way God or Jesus, if either existed, would be of a mind to bless this unholy union.

"Abigayle tells me that you've prepared your own vows," the pastor said, looking to the dark-haired woman.

Stuart knew he needed to look at his bride-to-be, but it took all his will to do so. Her bright, possibly maniacal almond eyes were on him. He could tell she had been waiting for this moment for her entire life.

"Stuart, I stand here in front of you the happiest woman on Earth. No Christmas present under the tree is better than the gifts you are giving me today," she said, and there was no doubt in Stuart's mind that her words were completely sincere. Abigayle glanced out over the audience before continuing. "I have searched for my entire life for a man who could meet all of my needs, and I never would have believed I would have found that man in you. Really, I never would have believed that you'd have me."

As Abigayle squeezed Stuart's hand and pulled it to chest level between them, he almost thought there were tears in her eyes.

"I give you this ring as a symbol of my love for the gifts from your heart. I will honor and respect you for the rest of our lives. I will be there for you anytime, and for anything you need. It's an honor to be Mrs. Stuart Hollingsworth," she finished. Slowly, she pushed a carved gold band over Stuart's ring finger.

He knew he shouldn't have been surprised that Abigayle made such an effective speech without lying. She had a mastery for manipulation and deception.

"Stuart," the pastor said.

Stuart snapped to attention, remembering that he too had a vow to say. He hoped Abigayle liked the way he changed it.

Looking at his new wife, Stuart took a deep breath and began. "Abigayle, I've never met a woman more driven and ambitious than you. I haven't been the same since you thrust your way into my life." Abigayle's smile faltered. "Somehow, when I wasn't paying attention, you stole my heart. I've never felt about anyone, the way I feel about you, and that will stand for all time," he said.

Wishing that he could do something off the wall to shock Abigayle, Stuart pulled her hand up between them. Gently, he slipped the diamond covered ring over her thin finger.

"Nooooo!" an unfamiliar voice shrieked through the chapel.

The voice came from the aisle, where Virginia Tucker, Kyle Curtis' friend, was walking toward the head of the church. Stuart tried to fathom what she could be doing, but he could not. More surprising than her sudden appearance was the disheveled way she looked. She wasn't always the best looking woman in any event, but now, she was wild. Her hair probably hadn't been brushed in days, and tendrils of it spiked from her head like snakes. She wore a white dress that might have been a modest wedding gown, but it had to be fifty years old judging by discoloration around the edges. Setting off her look were her feral blue eyes.

"He's mine," she screamed, advancing on Stuart and Abigayle.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Abigayle asked in an accusatory growl.

Stuart shrugged. He'd barely said more than two words to Virginia between all the times he'd seen her at work and the few dinners she attended at the Manor. "I have no idea. I didn't invite her," he said.

Virginia stopped ten feet from the couple, and now Stuart could see an ominous black object in her hand. "You can only marry me, Stuart," the deranged woman said.

"I think maybe you're not well," Stuart stuttered.

The entire wedding party tensed when the woman pulled up her hand and pointed a pistol in the general direction of Stuart. Kris shrank toward Abigayle,

and Harris took a step behind Bruce. Stuart and Abigayle stood their ground, frozen from fear and disbelief.

“Have you been talking to those bastards in Red Bluff?” she asked. “They don’t know anything. You’re going to marry me. I love you.”

Suddenly, Stuart wished that in all his years in school he’d taken a class on how to handle crazy. It might have saved him a lot of trouble in life. Not knowing what to do, Stuart took a step toward her. “I like you too, Virginia, but we need to talk about this later.”

“No! You will marry me now, or you won’t marry anyone at all. We’re meant to be together,” the woman said.

Abigayle stepped forward beside Stuart, and he had a bad feeling about the words about to come out of her mouth. “Look, bitch. You need to step off and quit ruining my wedding.”

Virginia’s insane eyes turned on Abigayle, and her body coiled beneath her. She shifted the aim of her gun to the former reporter. “You shouldn’t call people that,” Virginia said.

The world slowed around Stuart. Virginia’s hand moved imperceptibly as she screamed something unintelligible. Her finger twitched and the end of the gun flashed, sending a deafening roar through the chapel. Stuart expected to see Abigayle fall, but nothing seemed to happen except everyone’s faces twisting in dismay.

Stuart saw Bruce move beside him, and time move into fast forward. The big man’s body flew through the air like lightning, and he was on Virginia like an avalanche. Bruce grabbed the gun in one of his huge hands and tried to pull it away. Virginia was screeching now like a captured owl, her body flailing to get away. Bruce grabbed her wrist with his free hand and began to twist. Just before the radius and ulna reached their breaking point and the gun tumbled to the floor, another shot rang out through the church.

Shrinking back as if the blood spattering across the mesmerized audience had hit him, Stuart stumbled away from the sound. Virginia crumpled to the ground, surely dead before she hit it. Her face and the left side of her head were a partial mass of ground meat, the rest gone missing into space. Her head looked as if a hamburger had exploded from it. Her body spasmed on the floor for a moment before becoming still.

As his head began to swim, Stuart pulled his eyes off of the disgusting mass of crazy dead woman. Bruce moved away from the body as quickly as he’d sprung upon it and in a blink was at Kris’s side. Stuart looked at her for the first time

since Virginia had disrupted the service. The sight of her trebled the queasy feeling in his head. Still standing, the blonde leaned against Abigayle, her face a white sheet. Her head was turned to the side, her eyes concentrating on the red stain multiplying in size on the left shoulder of her baby blue bridesmaid dress, just above the breast.

Bruce put his arms around Kris and slowly lowered her to the ground. "It's okay, Baby. It's going to be okay." Bruce's cold brown eyes looked to Stuart, drilling into him for a long moment, then turned out toward the rest of the family. "Has someone called 911?"



With his head in his hands, Bruce Dooley sat in the hospital waiting room wishing the doctor to come in and tell him Kris and her baby would be okay. She'd been in surgery for four hours and the doctor was concerned about blood loss. Kris had bled a fair amount before the ambulance arrived, but Bruce knew internal bleeding was the real risk. The bullet had entered her chest north of her heart, where there were many vessels that could be disrupted.

Bruce had never felt like more of an idiot. He'd known he was in love with Kris for months, and he'd done nothing about it. Fear of events unlikely to come to pass had held him back. Those secrets didn't matter to him now. He wanted to tell her everything, including that he couldn't live without her. He hated himself for waiting until something critical happened to realize life was too short to worry.

The waiting room door opened and Stuart walked through, carrying two cups of coffee. He came to Bruce and handed him a serving, then sat down beside him. Bruce knew that he probably looked as haggard as Stuart did. The publisher was still wearing his blood spattered white tuxedo shirt and silky black slacks. Bruce felt badly that Stuart's wedding had been interrupted in such a gruesome fashion, though he knew the publisher was somehow a less than happy groom anyway.

"Any word?" Stuart asked.

"No, the doc hasn't come in yet," Bruce responded.

Stuart put a hand on Bruce's knee. "Hang in there, big guy. She's going to be fine. I feel it."

Bruce took a deep breath and tried to feed off the positive vibes. It wouldn't do any good to fret about what might happen at this point. "I hope so," he said. Bruce looked to his friend and sighed. "Stuart, you shouldn't have married Abigayle."

“I know,” Stuart said, with a chuckle. “I suppose this was some kind of omen.”

“Don’t you want to fall in love?” Bruce asked.

The publisher nodded. “More than anything.”

“Well, I think you’ve diminished your chances of that happening,” Bruce said.

“I know, but it’s done now.” Stuart turned to Bruce, boring his crystal blue eyes into Bruce’s. “I had to do it.”

They both looked up when the door to the room opened again, and were a little disappointed to see Officer Ford Blankenship come through it. He’d arrived on the scene shortly after the paramedics and agreed to question Bruce and Stuart at the hospital.

“Hello, Officer Blankenship,” Stuart greeted him unenthusiastically.

“Hi, gentlemen.” In his navy blue uniform and his hat under his toned arm, the officer walked over to stand in front of them. “How’s she doing?”

Bruce shook his head. “We don’t know.”

“Sorry to hear that. I’m sure she’ll pull through, though.” Ford removed a notepad from his back pocket and cleared his throat. “I know you’re under some stress right now, but I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course,” Stuart responded. Bruce shifted uncomfortably in his chair beside him.

“Did either of you know Ms. Tucker?”

Stuart held up a hand. “I did. She worked at Hollingsworth Publishing and she was dating Kris’ brother at one point.”

“You didn’t know her?” the officer asked Bruce.

“No, sir.”

“You didn’t have a personal relationship with her, Mr. Hollingsworth?” Ford asked Stuart.

Stuart shrugged. He knew Virginia as well as he knew most people, which wasn’t very well. At this point, he was glad of that detachment. “No. She was an acquaintance. She worked for us, but I didn’t know her very well. She seemed okay to me.”

“Did she ever indicate that she wanted a person relationship with you?”

“Do you mean did she ever hit on me?” Stuart paused to think. “No, not really. She always seemed eager to please, but that was it. I barely noticed her,” Stuart said.

Ford chuckled. “Well, she noticed you. We went to her apartment and found a shrine to you. There were—pictures—of you all over the place. She’d written a book of love letters. It was pretty intense.”

Dropping his head into his hands, Stuart groaned. “Why does this kind of shit happen to me?” he asked no one in particular.

“You are America’s most eligible bachelor,” Bruce offered.

After a moment of silence, they all three laughed. The sound trailed off after a moment, though, into sad sighs.

Stuart turned to Bruce. “I’m so sorry Kris was hurt because some nutcase had it in for me.”

“Not your fault,” Bruce said.

The door opened again and Bruce shot to his feet. The doctor, still wearing his aqua scrubs and white surgical cap, walked into the waiting room with an unreadable expression on his face.

“How is she?” Bruce asked, desperation in his voice.

The doctor clasped his hands together in front of his body. “She’s lost a lot of blood, and we won’t know for sure until the morning, but I think she’s going to be okay.”

Bruce reached one big paw down and pulled Stuart out of his chair directly into a bear hug. “Thank you,” Bruce whispered.

Smiling, Stuart rejoiced over the news, and as much over the fact that Bruce had surely found love. Holding his friend, Stuart made a wish that one day, he too would care so passionately about someone.



Kris opened her eyes slowly, shielding her pupils from the light intruding upon them. Sunlight streamed through the closed blinds on the window beside her as if it were noon, sending pulses of pain through her head. Though she could tell

she was in a hospital, the reason why seemed buried in her mind somewhere, just out of reach. It could have been hiding behind the multiple points of misery in her body. In addition to her head, her left shoulder tingled as if a thousand pins were piercing it and she also felt like she might throw up.

She blinked her eyes to bring the room into clear focus. Bruce appeared to be asleep in the reclining chair next to her bed, his big body completely filling it. His head tilted to the side and his eyes closed, Bruce looked like an innocent child—other than the beard. Kris smiled as much as she could muster. She shouldn't have been surprised that he was there for her.

"Bruce," she whispered, barely making a sound.

His eyes twitched and he shifted his body.

Kris cleared her throat, wincing at the non-localized pain that coursed through her body. "Bruce," she said again, louder.

His bleary brown eyes popped open and he blinked to clear them. Bruce looked at her, probably trying to determine if she'd said something, or if he'd been dreaming.

"Are you going to stare at me or tell me what's going on?" Kris asked.

Bruce bolted out of the recliner, its legs scraping against the tiled floor. He bumped into the bed, shaking it violently, and bent down over her. "You're awake," he said.

"I think so," she answered.

"Thank God," he said, gingerly taking her hand. He pulled it up and kissed the back. When he looked down at her, Bruce's kind eyes were filled with tears.

Kris squeezed his hand. "What happened?"

"Virginia Tucker shot you," he whispered.

"Why?" Kris asked. She barely knew Kyle's friend.

"She was apparently trying to kill Stuart because he was marrying Abigail. Turns out she was seriously twisted." Bruce shook his head, causing his hair to wave around his head. "Escaped from the big mental hospital in Red Bluff."

Bruce caressed Kris' hand in both of his. She watched the reverent way he touched her, and was instantly thankful that she'd met him. "My Lord. I can't

believe she shot me.” While she was in pain, Kris could not fathom that her injury was caused by a gunshot wound. “Am I going to be okay?”

A brilliant smile lit Bruce’s face. “The doctor said that if you made it through the night with no complications, you should be fine. And here you are.” He reached forward and touched her face.

“The baby?” she asked.

“The baby is fine too. You’re both going to be fine. The bullet went through your upper chest and shoulder, and you lost a lot of blood, but the doc didn’t think there would be any permanent damage.”

Shaking her head, Kris couldn’t comprehend what he was telling her. She’d been shot at Stuart’s wedding. Things like that didn’t happen to normal people. “Am I dreaming?” she asked, at least partly serious.

“No, but I feel like I am,” Bruce answered. He smoothed the covers at her side and sat on the edge of the bed. “I thought I’d lost you, Kris. I didn’t know what to do.”

The look in his eyes told her that he’d indeed done some serious thinking. “I’m still here,” she said.

“And I can’t tell you what that means to me. I intend to make sure that you stay here, and that you stay here with me.” A shy smile formed on Bruce’s lips. “I love you, Kris, and I’m going to tell you that every day for the rest of your life.”

Though shocked by the confession, a megaton of weight lifted off of Kris’ shoulders. “I think I’ve loved you from the moment we met,” she answered.

Bruce bent forward, careful not to contact her damaged body, and brought his face to hers. Their lips met in a soft, gentle kiss that made her want to weep for joy. After the meaningless, wasted years she’d spent with someone who cared nothing for her, one touch from Bruce let her know what she’d been missing.