

## Episode 12: Booze, Broads, and Big Breaks

Molly Crenshaw's knees and ankles popped and creaked as she hurried toward the rear entry of Hollingsworth Manor. At five-thirty in the morning, it could be no one other than her protégé. Smiling forcedly, Molly opened the door.

A young auburn-haired woman, who appeared to be in her mid-twenties, tentatively returned Molly's smile. "I hope I'm at the right door," she said in a smooth unaccented voice.

"Is your name Heather?" Molly asked the much-taller woman.

The young woman smiled, her brown eyes warming. "Heather Patterson, yes ma'am."

Molly smiled briefly. "Then ye're at the right door. Come on inside. My name's Molly."

"Thank you, Molly." Heather stepped inside the house. "The guard at the gate asked me to bring this up," she handed Molly a plastic-encased newspaper. Pointing back through the darkness, she said, "I didn't know where to park. Am I okay back there?"

"As long as ye're not blockin' the garage, ye're fine for now. We can work out somethin' later if need be."

"Oh, I'm not blocking the garage," Heather shook her head. Brightening a bit, she said, "I like your accent."

"Comes with bein' Irish," Molly said. "Why don't we go ta the kitchen?"

"This is really a nice house," Heather said as they walked. "And it's so big from the outside."

"Doesn't get any smaller on the inside," Molly remarked.

"Yes," Heather said quietly. "Mrs. Hollingsworth—Lisa—told me it was quite a chore to clean."

Heat rose to Molly's face. How could Lisa have told this stranger that she was having trouble performing all her duties? "Ye'll find that out soon enough, I'm certain."

"I'm really looking forward to this opportunity," Heather said. "Mrs—I mean, Lisa—told me you know everything about efficiently operating a household. I'm very grateful to you for allowing me to learn from you."

Molly's blue-eyed gaze examined the young woman's face for signs of mockery, but found only sincerity. "I'm sure ye'll do a fine job," she said uncertainly.

"If I ever disappoint you, Molly, I hope you'll let me know. I really want to learn the right way to manage a household. I mean, I know every family has their own way of having things done, but just knowing how to bring it all together will be so helpful for my career. When I find my own family to take care of, I'll owe it all to you." Heather blushed, and looked away.

"Your own family?" Molly asked, startled by the young woman's emotional gushing.

Heather's eyes widened, and she nodded. "I appreciate you and the Hollingsworths giving me this opportunity, but I really want to work for a family of my own someday, when I'm ready for the responsibility. I thought Lisa understood when she hired me that I wanted to use this position as a steppingstone toward being a head housekeeper for a family that doesn't already have one."

"Oh," Molly thought back to Lisa telling her that Heather had worked temporarily for many of New England's finest families. Lisa must've been trying to tell her that Heather was only going to be working at Hollingsworth Manor temporarily, but Molly's wounded pride had only allowed her to hear what she'd expected. Molly smiled brightly. "I musta misunderstood, dear. My mistake."

"Are you sure it's okay? Maybe I should speak with Lisa about it?"

Molly shook her head, wheat-blond bangs flying wildly. "I'm sure it's fine, Heather. I don't think it's necessary to bring it up again."

Heather nodded as they entered the kitchen, where the aromas of brewing coffee and tea mingled delightfully with the scent of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls. "Mmm. It smells wonderful in here," she smiled. "I'll bet you're a wonderful cook, Molly."

Molly blushed at the compliment. "Ya can help me set the table, Heather."

"Okay. Just show me what to do."

As they gathered the place settings onto a tray, Molly noticed a slight tremble in

the younger woman's hands. "Are ya okay, Heather?"

Heather smiled nervously. "I'm just a little anxious, I think. I get that way when I meet a new family."

Molly grasped Heather's forearm, squeezing it lightly. "Ye'll do just fine, dear. Ye'll do just fine."



Constance Hollingsworth felt claustrophobic as her three sons escorted her into her office at Hollingsworth Tower. It had been late-morning before she'd been released from the hospital, and all three of the men had taken off from work when all she'd needed was for one to give her a ride to the office. What had they been thinking? "Will the three of you stop hovering?" Constance demanded sharply. "I do recall where my desk and chair are located. Don't you have work to do?"

The men stepped away from her, and Harris said, "Sorry, Mother. We knew you lost a lot of blood yesterday. We're just worried about you still being a little weak." Edward and Stuart nodded silent agreement.

Amid surrounding bandages, green eyes narrowed and flashed. "I don't get weak, Harris. *Ever.*" Constance took a deep, calming breath. "I appreciate your concern," she included all three men in her sweeping gaze, "but if I hadn't been judged fit to leave the hospital, I'd still be there." There was no need for her sons to know that the reason behind her late discharge from the hospital was a disagreement with her doctor over whether or not she was ready to leave his care.

"We'll get back to work," Stuart said, as Edward hustled his brothers out of their mother's office.

"Call one of us if you need anything," Harris said.

"She will not need anything, Harris!" Edward snapped. "She is fine!"

As Constance's irritation rose, so did her hand to toy absently with the front of her gray wool blouse. "Harris!" she called, as Edward closed the door.

Dark eyebrows raised, Harris held open the door. "Yes?"

"Thank Lisa for sending my clothes to the hospital with you."

Harris smiled. "I will."

Constance sighed heavily as the door closed. She brought her hand to the space between her breasts, the space usually occupied by the tiny brass key that fit the lock on her office desk's drawer. But she'd left the necklace, on which was the key, laying on her bedside table yesterday morning. Now she had no way of opening her desk drawer, of getting to the bottle of heart medication it held inside. It was imperative she remain calm so the medication's use didn't become necessary until she was home where she could easily access the rest of her supply if she needed it.

Home. Constance had been sincere in her appreciation to Lisa for sending her clothes to the hospital. The last thing for which she was ready was to go home and stare at the space above the bathroom sink where her mirror had hung. She had not told anyone the truth of the experience that had sent her to the hospital. What would they think if she told them she believed she'd seen the reflection of something move in the mirror just before it had exploded into her face? No. Better to let them think the mirror had fallen out of its frame and broken upon impact with the sink.

Constance swallowed hard, pushing memory of the experience to a far corner of her mind. Another memory rushed, unbidden, to take its place. Memory of her conversation with Dominique. Constance still remembered her daughter's cell phone number.

Constance plopped into her desk chair. Impulsively, she picked up the phone. Should she call to let Dominique know she was out of the hospital? Or would doing so drive her daughter farther away, ruining any chance of reconciliation between them?

"Damn!" Constance slammed the phone back into its cradle. Her chest beginning to tighten and ache, Constance thumbed through the stack of reports and memos left her by Edward during his tenure in her chair, then, when she grew more agitated, swiveled her chair so she could look out the window. Looking at the waterfall always calmed her.

As she relaxed, watching the water spill over the mountainside to the north, Constance's vision focused on a pair of smudges on the window glass. She rose from her chair and walked to the window. Constance ran a finger across one of the smeared marks, which were slightly above eye level and about shoulder-width apart. The smudge was on the glass' interior and resembled a small handprint that had been repeatedly smeared up and down.

Constance wrinkled her face beneath its bandages. What the hell had happened

in the office while she was away?



The musclebound man continued wiping the glass he held as he watched the woman walk into the dimly lit bar, her shoulders slightly slumped. Since The Blue Streak had opened a few months ago, he'd seen thousands like her. They were all looking for something, and he rarely had answers for them.

The newcomer was tall and regal, despite her sad posture, with long black and silver dreadlocks streaming down her back. Sitting down at a stool directly in front of him, carefully removing dark shades, she revealed stormy, beautiful green eyes.

"Give me a double," she said.

He immediately knew she wasn't a big drinker. "A double what, ma'am?"

"Ah hell, just give me a beer. I ain't in the mood for havin' my throat scorched anyway."

The large man smiled. "Comin' right up." He pulled out a mug and began filling it at the tap.

Dominique Carpenter looked at him sourly. The last thing she needed today was a perky bartender. "You know, that kind of attitude is gonna drive customers away."

He placed the chilled beer glass on the treated wood bar, the loud click reverberating throughout the almost empty room. "I don't think so. People want to be cheered up when they come here."

"Is that so?" she asked with a snort.

His hand gripping the edge of the counter, the bartender leaned on one arm, his muscles flexing underneath his tight T-shirt. "Isn't that why you're here? You look like you could use it."

One dark eyebrow raised at him. "You're treading on thin ice, buddy. You don't know me."

Still smiling, the bartender stuck out his hand. "You're right, and I'm sorry. I'm Bruce Dooley. It's nice to meet you."

Her eyes shot daggers at him for several moments, but he persisted, keeping his hand extended, ready to be taken. Shaking her head, she relented. "Dominique Carpenter," she said softly.

"Hi, Dominique. If you want to talk about it, we've got bartender/beer-swiller confidentiality," he said, releasing her dark hand. "I won't tell anyone, and after we're done talking, you won't remember you told me."

She laughed for the first time in ages. "I don't usually indulge to that degree, but I might make an exception today." Dominique took a long draw from the beer, relishing the familiarity of its bittersweet taste. Everything seemed to have a bite these days.

A man in his late forties, who, Dominique noted, looked like a regular at The Blue Streak or like establishments, sat down a few stools from her. Bruce smiled at her before attending to the other patron, giving her the sense that the conversation was far from over.

This need to talk confused her. After Tessa's death, she'd shut down almost completely, barely allowing herself to think, much less communicate with others. Looking back, Dominique supposed that was the major reason her marriage had not survived. She'd stopped talking, and her husband had stopped listening. Then again, after her daughter was gone, they didn't have much to discuss.

Now she had much to say and no one to whom she could say it. Constance Hollingsworth seemed to have a lot about which to talk, but Dominique was so confused about her feelings toward her mother, she knew she had to work through her emotions on her own before they could get anywhere together.

She held up her empty mug and motioned the bartender over for another. Though he carried a large amount of muscle, his walk was natural and easy. Dominique supposed if she was going to talk to someone, this guy would be more helpful, and a lot cheaper, than any shrink she could hire.

"Here you go, ma'am."

Taking her drink in one hand, she pointed at him with the other. "Where are you from, farm boy?"

"Way south of here," he answered.

"I hear that. There's something easygoing about the South they lose up here, isn't there?" she asked.

Bruce took in a deep breath, thinking, and began cleaning another glass. "Yeah, I suppose that's true. Everything tends to move a lot faster here. Like everyone's in a hurry to squeeze all they can out of life. Where I come from, most people like to sit under a shade tree, let life flow of its own accord, and enjoy every little bend in the river."

"Um, um, um," she shook her head and muttered wistfully. "I'm missin' that already. I've been here less than a month, and my whole life has flashed before my eyes several times."

The tall man smoothed his mustache. "Did you like what you saw?"

Brows drawn, Dominique thought seriously for a moment before replying. "I—I don't know. It wasn't what I expected."

"It never is."

"When I came here, I thought I had all the answers. It didn't take long for me to sense I didn't know what the hell I was talking about." The dark woman twisted the mug on the countertop.

"And does it change anything?"

Dominique almost giggled. "It changes everything." She looked into his kind brown eyes. "I was sure I knew her, the woman I came here to see, even though we'd never met. She was such a monster. *I knew it.*" She looked away briefly. "Then I let down my guard, and I got a glimpse inside her, past the walls and the toughness, and instead of a monster, I saw a woman who didn't have any more control over her fate than I had over mine."

Bruce stared at the spotless mug in his hands. "After that, you don't know what to think anymore," he said quietly.

"Exactly."

He focused on her once again, knowing exactly how she was feeling. "You'll figure it out soon enough."

"I suppose." She sighed. "I just have a bad feeling all hell's gonna break loose before I do. That's how my luck runs, it seems."

"Sounds like you've had it tough. Maybe your luck will turn," he said optimistically.

Dominique smiled. "That's a nice thought, Bruce. I hope so." She pushed the untouched beer mug toward him and tossed several bills onto the bar. "In the meantime, I'd better get out of here before I start telling you all my secrets."

"My lips are sealed," he said, locking his mouth and throwing away the invisible key like a child would.

"Thanks," Dominique replied sincerely, turning toward the door.

When she reached the door, she paused to allow an older man to pass into the establishment. Sunlight coming in through the opening illuminated his white hair and beard. Though not her usual fare, the woman had to admit he was handsome.

He stopped in the entryway, blocking her exit. Caramel eyes stared intently at her, as if he were trying to tell her something telepathically. Dominique returned his strange, glare, though hers was mixed with growing irritation.

Clifton O'Connor felt struck by fate, looking at the Nubian beauty before him. Her skin shined gold before him and her tall, strong form enticed his imagination. More than that, she was somehow familiar. And even if she wasn't, he certainly thought getting that way would be rewarding.

"Have we met?" he finally asked, still searching her face.

Shaking her head, Dominique put on her sunglasses and resumed walking, prepared to push him out of her way if he didn't move. "Mister, you're not bad lookin' for a white boy, but today isn't my lucky day and it sure as hell ain't yours."

With an arrogant smile, the handyman moved out of her way, allowing her to pass unmolested. He definitely hoped he saw more of her.

"What will it be today, Clifton?" Bruce asked from behind the bar.

"Martini. Shaken, not stirred," he answered absently.

Walking to the back of the Blue Streak, Clifton chose his usual booth, tucked neatly in a dark corner. He sat down and slid across the plain vinyl, still thinking about the interesting woman he'd just run into, and picturing her perfect features and those brilliant, crystal green eyes.



It was nine p.m. when Stuart Hollingsworth went to his room for the evening, a Limoges cup full of hot tea and brandy as his companion. As he reached his bedroom, the door across the hall opened, and Stuart's nephew, Mark, emerged.

The thirteen-year-old stood in the hallway, shower-damp hair ruffled, blue eyes intently studying Stuart. "Going to bed, Uncle Stuart?"

"In a bit." Stuart looked curiously at Mark. The boy had been a study in contrasts the last couple days. The previous day he had been hyperactive while tonight he'd been unusually restrained. Stuart had attributed it to Constance's accident, but perhaps there was something else troubling Mark. "Do you want to come inside for awhile?"

Mark smiled. "Yeah."

Stuart turned the doorknob with his free hand, cradling his cup in the other. As Mark slowly ambled by, Stuart released the door and gently put his hand on the boy's thin, bare shoulder.

Mark smiled, leaned toward Stuart, and hugged him around the waist. Patting his uncle's abs, he grinned up at him. "Nice six-pack, Uncle Stuart."

A sweeping wave of affection for his nephew washed over Stuart. He playfully ruffled the boy's damp hair. "I try."

Mark pulled away and walked toward the bed. "I'm glad Grandmother is home."

"So am I," Stuart said, sipping from the cup of brandy-laced tea before setting it on his bedside table. So that *was* what had been bothering Mark yesterday.

Mark climbed onto the foot of the bed and folded his legs beneath him. "I've been thinking about what you said."

"That you can't hide broccoli in milk?" Stuart teased.

Mark rolled his eyes. "No. What you said about Tiffany."

Stuart's dark eyebrows joined as he wrinkled his brow. "You've been thinking about kissing her?"

"No!" Mark's eyes widened, then he looked away and blushed. "Well, maybe." Returning his gaze to Stuart, he said, "But that's not what I'm talking about."

Stuart took off his shoes and joined his cross-legged nephew in sitting on the

bed. "So what are we discussing?"

Mark leaned forward, his words coming out in a jumbled rush. "You remember when you said if you like someone you should just tell them?"

"Yes."

"Well, I sort of ran into Tiffany yesterday, and, ever since, I've been thinking about what you said. How would you tell someone you like them?" Mark's eyes searched Stuart's.

Stuart took a deep breath, turned, grabbed his cup, and took a long draught, welcoming the brandy's warmth. Cradling the cup in his lap, Stuart cleared his throat. "First, tell me what was said yesterday."

Mark straightened his posture, and sighed. "Well, she was mad at me for running into her—"

"*You actually ran into her?*" Stuart, disbelieving, shook his head. "I thought you were using an idiom."

Mark laughed. "No. I really ran into her. I was worried about Grandmother and not paying attention to where I was going. I bumped into her and knocked her down."

"Always a good way to break the ice." Stuart quipped.

"Now, *that's* an idiom!" Mark smiled.

Stuart grinned. "Your grandmother would be so proud."

Mark laughed. "Anyway, Tiffany was upset with me for knocking her down, but when I told her why, she hugged me." He stopped speaking, remembering the feel of her breast against the back of his hand, and his physical reaction. He blushed, and shifted uncomfortably on the bed.

Stuart, seeing Mark's reaction, intuited there was something more to the story than what he was being told. "Is that all?"

Mark's blush spread to include his ears. "She apologized for yelling at me, and said she'd had a bad class just before that."

"Uh-huh," Stuart said absentmindedly. "Is that all?" He hastily raised the cup to his lips to hide his smile.

"Pretty much." Mark's face was crimson.

"Well, if you want my opinion, I think you need to have a little more conversation with her before telling her you like her."

"How can I do that? We don't see each other except for at lunch. She sits with her friends, and I sit with mine. I don't want to say anything in front of any of them."

"Hmm." Stuart tapped the rim of his cup while he thought. "Sounds like you need some time alone with her."

Mark's eyes widened, and he almost fell backward off the bed.

For a moment, Stuart thought the boy was having a seizure of some sort, then he realized Mark had misunderstood his intent. Stuart exploded into laughter, spilling the remaining tea and brandy onto the bed. In an attempt to keep the spilled liquid off his clothing, Stuart uncrossed his legs and leaned back.

Mark laughed as Stuart fell off the side of the bed.

"I saved the Limoges," Stuart said weakly, brandishing the intact cup overhead.

"Are you okay?" Mark asked between giggles.

Stuart rose unsteadily to his knees, wishing he'd gone a little lighter on the brandy. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'm just going to stay down here and rest for a minute."

"Okay," Mark chuckled. "Man, that sure looked funny."

"No funnier than you looked when you misinterpreted what I said."

Mark's face regained a hint of its former crimson hue. "What *did* you mean?"

"I meant you need to find a way to spend time together, to get to know each other better."

Mark nodded thoughtfully. "How can we do that?"

"I don't know," Stuart admitted.

Silence filled the room. Stuart sat the cup on the bedside table and slowly stood. "Didn't you say she'd had trouble in a class before you trampled her?"

"Yeah."

"Did she say the trouble was with the subject?"

"I think so. Algebra."

"You're good at algebra, aren't you?" Stuart asked.

"Pretty good," Mark answered slowly.

"Then why don't you offer to tutor her sometime?" Stuart suggested. "Maybe in study hall? Or after school?"

"That's a great idea, Uncle Stuart! Thanks!" Mark beamed.

"You're welcome."

"I guess I'd better get to bed," Mark said. He got off the bed and crossed the room to give Stuart a brief hug. "Good night, Uncle Stuart."

"Good night, Mark. Could you turn out the light on your way?"

"Sure."

Stuart watched his nephew leave the room, then slipped out of his clothes, too affected by the brandy to bother with a shower. He turned off the Tiffany lamp, then pulled back the cover, slipping between the Egyptian cotton sheets.

"Oh, shit!" Stuart exclaimed as his briefs-clad butt slid into the pool left by the brandy-laced tea. "Just my luck," he moaned. "No one to share my bed, and I still wind up in the wet spot."



Stumbling through the front door, Clifton O'Connor caught himself on an antique oak credenza situated just inside the entrance to his small frame house. He dropped his keys on the surface, belched, and walked toward the kitchen. After several hours of drinking and cavorting at The Blue Streak, the handyman's mood was bright, if a little blurred. He'd only had one close call on the road

home, so it was a good night.

A voice from the shadows startled him. "Have fun?"

He quickly switched on the light to see Abigayle Nguyen sitting on his couch, a silky smile on her lips. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see you," she said, faking offense.

"I've told ya not to come over like this. What if Rahne had come over or I'd brought someone else home?" he asked.

Abigayle laughed. "If you didn't want me to drop by unannounced, you shouldn't have shown me where the extra key is."

Even through the fuzz in his brain, Clifton could follow that logic. "You don't own me, woman," he said testily.

Abigayle stood as tall as her 5'4" frame would allow. "Listen. I came here to have a celebration, but if you're going to be a dickhead I can go find someone else to party with."

Frowning, Clifton took a step toward the woman. She could be a pain in the ass at times, but at others, she could make him moan with delight. "Hold on now. What are we celebrating?"

She smiled, her almond-shaped eyes lighting up. "My eventual rise to stardom." Sitting back down on the floral-patterned couch, she lifted a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the coffee table, offering some to her part-time lover.

Brown eyes narrowed at her, curious. "What are you talking about? Did you finally get that producer in the sack?"

Abby flipped him the bird, then poured a shot of whiskey into a glass. She held the offering up to Clifton, who, plopping down beside her, accepted the drink. "No, asshole. I just have a big story that's set to break tomorrow."

"What's it about?"

"I'm not telling. I want you to be surprised. The headline will have my name all over it in the morning." She giggled.

"As long as it's not about me, I don't really care. It's not, is it?" he asked as he knocked back the drink.

The reporter shook her head at him. "Who the hell would want to read about you? This story is big, Clifton. It took me all day to convince my stupid editor to run it, but he promised me."

"Well don't ya count on it."

She watched the handyman pour another shot and consume it quickly. "If he won't run it, I can find someone who will. This story is gonna get out, and my name will be on everyone's lips."

Clifton set down the shot glass impatiently. "You're just dying to tell me what it is. Out with it."

Staring at the older man, Abby thought about letting it all out. She was so excited, she could hardly contain herself. Still, she wanted him to read the headline and be shocked like all the rest. Being responsible for that kind of reaction was her dream.

"Don't worry about it. We've got plenty of other things we can do. After all, this is a party."

She swept the whiskey bottle from the table, took a long swig, then jumped into her companion's lap. The handyman laughed, putting one hand inside her loose blouse and the other on her rear.

"Then let's celebrate," he said, smashing her lips in a searing kiss, relishing the taste of her desire and the rugged Jack Daniel's.

He pulled away, his eyes full of fire. Abby filled his glass again and forced it into his hand. She held up the bottle for a toast.

Familiar with the routine, Clifton clinked the shot glass against the container. "To big breaks," he said, chugging his portion as the dark-haired woman took a drink from hers. Before the bottle left her lips, she closed her eyes as she felt herself being pulled down to the couch and covered by the handyman's weight.

*To Constance Hollingsworth*, Abigayle thought, losing herself in the alcohol and her lover's arms.