

Hell To Pay

Stuart Hollingsworth slapped the manuscript he'd been reading onto his desk. Molly's anti-hangover concoction had cured his headache, but had done little to focus his concentration. Ten-thirty a.m., and he'd accomplished nothing since arriving at work.

Stuart had been surprised by the media gathered around Hollingsworth Tower. One particularly bold photographer had dashed forward to take a photo of Stuart driving up in his silver Lexus. Behind the privacy of darkened windows, Stuart had extended his middle finger and bestowed a not-so-gentle verbal blessing upon the man, his mother, and any future offspring. He'd never been more grateful for the employees' private parking garage.

The intercom's buzz sounded. "Yes?" Stuart answered.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Stuart, but there's someone on the telephone who insists he needs to speak to you."

Stuart sighed. "We're not accepting any phone calls from the press today, Teresa," he told his secretary.

"He says he's not with the press. He claims to be the author of a manuscript you're considering for publication."

"What's his name?"

"William Devlin."

Stuart felt like all his blood had rushed out of his body. "Okay, Teresa," he said slowly. "Put him through."

Stuart breathed deeply, exhaling slowly before answering the phone. "Good morning, Mr. Devlin."

"We need to talk," Devlin's voice sounded raspier than usual, like he'd been gargling with pebbles.

"Well, that's what we're doing, isn't it?" Stuart sounded edgier than he'd intended.

"I want to know why you lied to me about the reason for wanting the information on Dominique Carpenter," Devlin said. "I don't take kindly to being

jerked around.”

Stuart paused, trying to determine how best to answer.

“You’d better start talking, Mr. Hollingsworth, or I will.”

“What do you mean?” asked Stuart.

“I mean I’ll go to the press and tell them you manipulated me into digging up background information on that Carpenter woman.”

“You weren’t manipulated,” Stuart interjected. “You were paid handsomely, if I recall.”

Devlin’s voice was iron. “You approached me under the guise of being interested in my book and its investigative techniques. You can sugarcoat it as much as you like, Mr. Hollingsworth, but the fact remains that you lied to me and used me. And I’m not the kind of man you want to dick around with. I don’t go for that shit.”

Stuart sighed heavily. “What do you want from me, Mr. Devlin?”

“I wanna hear the truth. I wanna know if my book has a shot at being published or if you were just blowing smoke up my ass.”

Shaking his head to clear the unpleasant visual provided by Devlin’s words, Stuart said, “I’m going to do my best to get the book on our schedule for next fall, Mr. Devlin, but that meeting is still about six weeks away. I won’t be able to give you a definitive answer until then.”

There was silence for a moment, then Devlin said, “You’d better be telling me the truth, Hollingsworth.”

“I am,” Stuart said hurriedly.

“Because I don’t appreciate being used,” Devlin continued as if Stuart had never spoken. “And if I find out you’ve lied to me again, I may be forced to give you a more complete demonstration of my technique’s effectiveness.”

Stuart swallowed hard. “What do you mean?”

“I mean if you’re lying to me, I intend to do a little investigating on my own time.”

"Investigating whom?"

"You and your family," Devlin said. "I'm sure if there's one skeleton in the closet, there's bound to be another. Good day, Mr. Hollingsworth. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

The line went dead. With trembling hand, Stuart cradled the phone.



Abigayle Nguyen used her key to enter the back door of her parents' restaurant. Nguyen's Vietnamese Cuisine didn't open to the public until eleven a.m., so Abigayle still had fifteen minutes to get her parents' reactions about her big story. After Clifton O'Connor's tepid response to her triumph, and half-hearted attempt at celebration, it would be nice for someone to be happy for her.

"Mama? Papa?" Abigayle called, stepping into the busy kitchen.

"Abigayle! There you are!" John Nguyen said, his thin mustache drooping over frowning lips.

"Abigayle," Rose Nguyen's lips were tightly pursed.

Abigayle sighed. Though at five-foot-four she was two inches taller than either of her parents, they always appeared to be looking down on her.

"Have you seen this morning's paper?" Abigayle smiled.

"What were you thinking?" her mother snapped.

"I am so ashamed," John said.

"Why? I was just doing my job!" Abigayle protested.

"Doing your job?" her father demanded. "Writing such things is your job?"

"Reporting the news is my job, yes," Abigayle huffed.

"This is not news," Rose frowned. "This is meddling where you have no business being."

"They were in a public restroom! I had as much right to be there as they did!"

John Nguyen interrupted his daughter before she could reach full volume. "Your

mother is not talking about where the conversation took place, but the conversation's content. This was not news. This was supposition and innuendo! You should not go behind bedroom doors and bring those matters into light!"

Rose Nguyen spoke softly, her hushed tone playing counterpoint to her husband's exclamations. "Family matters should never be broadcast like this, Abigayle. These people have a right to their privacy."

"This is the information age," Abigayle retorted. "The public has a right to know."

Disgusted, John shook his head. "This should be so far beneath you, Abigayle."

Abigayle bit back tears. Tossing her long, dark hair, she said, "Yeah, well, if having the two of you for parents has taught me anything, it's that there's not much in this world that's lower than I am." She turned and ran out of the restaurant.



It was almost noon when Dominique Carpenter's cell phone rang. Startled, she dropped the hotel phone's handset. "Hello," she answered breathlessly.

"I wasn't going to call," a steely voice greeted her, "but I want to know why you did this to me, Dominique. Why, when I thought things were—"

"I didn't do this," Dominique interrupted. "I've been trying to call you since I saw the paper, but your switchboard won't let me through."

"The operators have been instructed not to connect anyone to my office today. It's a lot easier than dealing with the mess that's been wrought by your story."

"Mama, I didn't do it. Please believe me," Dominique pleaded. "I can explain what happened. Please let me—"

"Not over the cell phone," Constance snapped. "Too many ears are able to hear," she added softly.

"Then what do we do? Do you want to come here? Or should I come see you?"

"No. You'd never get past the horde waiting outside the building. And I won't make it out of here unaccosted," Constance said.

Until that moment, Dominique hadn't fully realized how desperate she'd been to

hear her mother's voice, to explain to her what had happened, to seek her absolution. Dominique choked back a sob as tears of mingled frustration and relief leaked from her eyes.

"Dominique?" Constance said softly.

"Yes," Dominique whispered.

"Give me three minutes, then call the main switchboard. I'm going to tell them to expect your call and to forward it to my office, but you're going to have to give them a password."

"Okay," Dominique said, regaining her composure. "What's the password?"

"Your father's first name."

"Okay."

There was a pause as Constance seemed to consider what to say next. "I'll be waiting for your call, Dominique."



Judging by the way her legs burned, Kris Hollingsworth was sure she would be smelling smoke at any moment. Every nerve ending seemed to be pulsing a painful cadence in time with her heart. The world was a very screwed up place to require she put herself through this kind of torture.

It wasn't that she hated working out. Sometimes, it helped her to think through problems. Stair stepping, not being a mind engaging activity, left her mind to wander, which she was rarely ever able to do. Most of the time, she had to concentrate on pleasing Edward. Doing that was a full-time job these days.

Edward stood near a water fountain on the other side of the expansive room, chatting with a scantily clad young beauty who looked like she'd never before set foot in a weight room. He smiled at her as they spoke, puffing his chest out like a rooster, no doubt explaining to her his importance in the publishing industry.

Kris vaguely recalled the last time he'd smiled at her that way. The day after they'd arrived in Paris for their honeymoon, she'd seen a Hollingsworth book in French. Edward had gone into a dissertation about his plans for the company to go international and he'd smiled that sweetly. In that moment, the young bride hadn't thought she could be any happier.

Unfortunately, she'd probably been right. Kris blew out a heavy breath and looked down at the stair stepper's timer. *Almost done*, she thought with relief.

When she looked up, Edward was headed right for her, his steps smooth and strong across the busy floor. The publisher had more than his fair share of confidence and he exuded it all the time. He looked in his wife's direction, a half-smile still on his face.

Working out during his lunch hour had been a stroke of genius, Kris had thought this morning upon coming up with the idea. Since they didn't have many shared interests, spending time together would do them a world of good. She hoped, at least.

As her husband approached, Kris smiled brightly at him. He'd been so distant the past few days that any sort of attention from him made her ecstatic. And after this morning, she'd been genuinely frightened of him. Edward hadn't said a word to her, but the look he'd carried had been lethal.

"Hello, dear..." she said, trailing off as he walked past, never looking directly at her or speaking. Kris allowed her mouth to hang agape, not particularly caring if anyone noticed her shock or not. She couldn't believe she didn't even rate a sneer today. She numbly watched Edward casually slip through the men's locker room door.

The buzzing of her machine briefly brought her to reality, prompting the woman to step down onto the padded floor, totally unaware of her aching legs. Her heart hurt so much at the moment, nothing else compared.

Kris swallowed hard and allowed a flood of emotions to surface. *I can't take this anymore*, her mind screamed, tears welling in her eyes. *Living on this crazy roller coaster is going to kill me or him, one. Something has to give.* She brought a shaking hand up and rubbed her temples, willing herself to remain in control. This was no place to lose it. The family had enough bad press.

Expelling a deep breath, Kris moved through the gym, into the mostly male-populated weight section. Though most of her wanted to go home and cry, she was afraid she might meet up with her husband in the parking lot and create a scene. If she could just blow off some steam, the remainder of the day would go so much better.

She roamed the area for awhile, finally ending up standing between three leg-curl machines, all of which were in use. Today, though, she didn't mind waiting. At the present time, spending the night on the bench press didn't sound like too bad an idea.

God, what am I gonna do?

"You go to work and get a life."

Kris' brow furrowed at the voice she thought must belong to the large man suddenly standing beside her.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"I said, you can work in if you'd like." A meaty arm indicated the machine he'd just been using.

Laughing, the young woman took a seat and began adjusting the weight stack. "Thanks, that would be great."

Bruce Dooley watched her manipulate the weights, easily noticing the nice shape in which she kept herself. Her eyes told him, though, that not everything in her world fit together so nicely. One thing he was really great at was reading people, and he could tell the pretty blonde was very unhappy.

"You look like you have a lot on your mind," he said when she was done. They traded places quickly, and he began replacing the pin to the right position.

Kris shrugged. "Doesn't everyone?"

He spoke evenly as he repeatedly pulled the leg carriage down. "Yeah, I suppose so. But you don't look like the kind of person that lets life get them down easily."

She stared at him for a moment, wondering why he thought he could read her and why he looked so familiar. With his brown hair cut short and a goatee, he looked like half the guys in the gym. "I'm usually not," she answered. "Today's just one of those days, I guess."

"Ah, I've had those. As a matter of fact, last week was seven-and-a-half 'one of those days'. Sounds like you're lucky if you've just had one," he said, smiling.

Kris thought about walking away from the strange man, but for some reason, she simply smiled. "How did you manage to get another half-day in your week?"

"I won it in the lottery."

She couldn't help it. Looking up at his kind face, tilting her head to the side, she

laughed. "You're crazy," she said.

The man, standing at least a foot over her, stood from the machine and put his hands on his hips. "Maybe, but you're smiling. For a second there, life wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No, I don't guess it was. It will be when I get home, though."

"Family problems? They're the worst," he said sympathetically.

Kris sighed. "Name a problem, I've probably got it. It's just that lately, I've been working really hard to make things better, and I don't think I am."

Bruce thought for a moment, pursing his lips. "Have you ever considered that maybe you're not the cause of the problem?"

"I—" Kris paused, considering that possibility for the first time. "It's complicated," she finally responded.

"Everything is, Mrs. Hollingsworth, but people are primal. When it all comes down to it, we can't be controlled."

Thinking about that, Kris suddenly asked, "How did you know my name?"

The man smiled broadly. "Didn't you know? Everyone who comes to town is required to take Hollingsworth History 101 before they let you in."

She slapped him lightly on the arm. "Bull."

"Actually, I saw your picture in a magazine," he said, his eyes moving to look over her shoulder. "And I casually know your husband, who is coming toward us and not looking very happy," he said gravely.

Kris' eyes grew round, but she resisted the urge to turn around. She tried very hard to remember she was mad at him. "He's probably coming to talk to you then."

"Kris," Edward said sternly from behind.

She turned to face him, noting how right the stranger was about her husband's countenance. "Hello, Edward. Shouldn't you be back at work?"

"I expected you to follow me out," he said to his wife, his eyes cautiously scanning Bruce, stopping at his windpants, sweatshirt, and then his face.

Edward unconsciously tugged at the bottom of his pinstriped suitcoat.

Feeling slightly vindicated, Kris tried to act unaffected. "I didn't know you needed me. What is it?" she asked, aware of the other man still behind her.

Edward stepped closer to her. With large hands, he grabbed both her arms and drew her near. "I need my wife to leave with me," he said lowly.

She turned back around to the man, smiling as best she could. "It's been nice talking to you, but I guess I've got to go."

"I hope things work out better for you."

"Me too," she whispered as Edward took her by the arm toward the exit.



Constance Hollingsworth paced the length of her office's windowed wall. Breathing deeply, she tried to slow her heart rate to an acceptable level. It was two-thirty in the afternoon. Dominique should be arriving at any moment.

Dominique hadn't been keen on Constance's plan for the two of them to meet. She'd not wanted to reveal the name of the hotel at which she was staying. Constance had broken Dominique's resistance by suggesting that if she wanted Constance to trust the validity of her declaration of innocence, then Dominique had to be willing to trust her as well. Dominique had capitulated then, and Constance told her she was sending a limousine to bring her to Hollingsworth Tower.

Constance had ordered security at Hollingsworth Publishing's employees' private parking garage to admit the limo and to escort its passenger to her office as discreetly as possible. The security officers would be discreet; of that, Constance had no doubt. She was certain there would be more than a few raised eyebrows when the officers realized who they were escorting, but she wasn't concerned about what anyone else might be thinking. All that concerned her now was the truth.

And what would that truth be? Constance found herself hoping that Dominique had told her the truth, that she was not responsible for the newspaper story. If Dominique had double-crossed her....

The intercom's buzz interrupted Constance's thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Your guest is here, Ms. Hollingsworth."

"Thank you, Jessie. Send her in." Constance stood beside her desk.

The office door opened, and Dominique stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. She appeared genuinely upset as she approached Constance.

"I know how this must look to you, but I promise I didn't do this." Dominique vehemently spat the words, her lips drawn into a tight, grim line.

Constance appraised her daughter's green eyes, so like her own, and found their depths full of fire. Constance sat in her desk chair, motioning for Dominique to sit in the chair opposite her desk. "Then explain to me how this came to be."

"Do you remember our conversation in the seafood restaurant's restroom?"

Constance smiled thinly. "Where you insulted my shoes, among other things."

Dominique didn't respond to the mild humor. Her eyes flashed as she said, "She was in there."

Constance leaned forward across the desk. "Who was in there?"

"That bitch who wrote the story!"

"Abigayle Nguyen?"

"Yes."

Constance winced as her chest tightened uncomfortably. "Did you know she was there?"

"Hell, no! I told you I looked under the stalls and didn't see any feet but yours!"

Constance exhaled sharply. "So where was she?"

"I don't know! Maybe she was standing on the seat, or maybe she squeezed her skinny ass into the ventilation system! I don't know where the hell she was!"

"How do you know she was in the restroom?" Constance asked.

"She told me so."

Constance's heart sank. "So you did speak with her."

"It wasn't like I had a choice," Dominique protested. "The bitch came to my motel."

"How did she find you?"

"I don't know," Dominique admitted. "You said my name in the restroom. I suppose she may have phoned around until she found where I was registered."

"Possible," Constance admitted. "But why did you talk to her?"

"She stood in front of the door saying she'd overheard our conversation the previous day. I didn't think it was a good idea to have her saying such things in the open, so I invited her into the room."

"Where you proceeded to grant an interview, according to her," Constance said.

"I did no such thing!"

"You didn't tell her that you'd discovered I was your birth mother?"

Dominique momentarily looked away before returning Constance's gaze. "I did say that, but let me explain."

"I'm listening," Constance said stiffly.

"She knew I'd told you I was going to the press with my story if you didn't contact me some time this week. She tried to make it sound like she was doing me a favor by coming to me and saving me the trouble of determining which reporter to talk to. I told her I'd given you a week to respond and I intended to keep my word."

Constance put her elbows on the desk. She steeped her fingers and rested her chin on her thumbs. "And what did she say to that?"

"She tried to make it sound like it was in my best interest to grant her the interview, that she had enough to run the story, and that you were definitely going to be given the opportunity to air your side of the story, but if I wanted to tell mine, I'd better make sure I was heard first."

"And you believed her?" Constance asked, a trace of bitterness in her tone.

Dominique laughed. "Actually, I thought you'd sent her."

Constance was taken aback. "Why?"

"I thought you might assume once I told my story I'd be ready to get out of town, and then you'd be rid of me."

"Yet you told her I was your mother."

Dominique sighed. "It was later in the conversation. I said something to the effect of I would tell her the story of how I learned you were my mother, but only if she agreed to sit on the information until the week had passed and you'd had time to call me as you'd said you would."

"So she broke her word to you?" Constance asked.

"No." Dominique shook her head, black-and-silver dreadlocks flying wildly. "I never gave her that information. She said something like I was assuming you'd be well enough to phone by the end of the week, and when I asked what she was talking about, she told me you were in the hospital. I asked where you were, and I immediately left for the hospital. To see you," she finished quietly.

Constance was silent for a moment. "Did you see her after you left the hospital?"

"No. I told you I needed time to think. After I left the hospital, I went back to the motel and checked out. I got enough cash to pay several days' rent for a nicer room on the outskirts of town, and I registered under an assumed name so that little witch or any like her couldn't find me."

"You didn't speak with her again?" Constance asked.

"No. I didn't know anything about her article until I saw this morning's paper."

Constance stood from her chair, and turned toward the window, looking to the waterfall north of town. "So the little witch did this on her own," Constance said. "She took it upon herself to take what she'd overheard and what you'd told her, and write a piece of tabloid-level trash designed to present me as some sort of self-centered racist bitch."

"Mama, I'm sorry for my part in this. I wish I'd thought more clearly—"

"No," Constance said softly, turning to face Dominique. "If I'd been able to be honest with you from the beginning, this wouldn't have happened."

"You were hurting," Dominique said.

Constance waved her words away. "I've had my lawyers look over the article. They say there's no way we can file a suit if you spoke to her, so litigation's out of the question."

Dominique sprang from her chair like an arrow shot from a bow. "We can't let her get away with this!" she cried.

Constance narrowed her eyes. "Oh, I never said she was going to get away with it."

"Then what are we going to do?"

Constance smiled grimly. "There's an old saying, Dominique, that if you dance with the devil, there's hell to pay." She turned back to the window and watched the Gossamer River power its way through the falls. "It's time Abigayle Nguyen learns that lesson."