

Sharp Edges

Time seemed impossibly slowed as the massive chandelier in the formal dining room of Hollingsworth Manor broke free from the ceiling and began to fall toward the family gathered at the table below.

Lisa was the first to spring into action, snatching Nathan out of the chair between herself and Harris, and moving her child out of harm's way.

Harris, seeing Lisa had their youngest son, turned his attention to Molly. Knowing he wouldn't be able to lift the maid from the chair his mother had offered her, Harris settled for grabbing the chair's upper posts, and yanking both the chair and Molly away from the table.

Edward, who only moments before had been almost angry enough to strike his mother, now cried a warning and threw himself on top of her, knocking Constance to the floor.

To his right, Stuart saw Kris apparently unable to move, her gaze fixated on the falling chandelier, and he roughly shoved her shoulders, sending her and her chair sprawling. He turned to his left and did the same for the transfixed Mark, just as, with a crash of crystal, the heavy brass chandelier slammed onto and splintered the long mahogany table.

The impact was tremendous, and even before its sound could stop reverberating, the room was rent by the sound of Nathan's terrified sobbing. Lisa clutched him to her and whispered soothingly, gently stroking his fine blond hair. Molly, still seated, silently clutched Harris' hand in gratitude. As Kris and Mark clambered to their feet, Constance's strident voice commanded, "Edward, get off me and help your brother!"

Everyone turned to see Stuart, whose right leg from mid-calf down was pinned beneath the debris caused by the chandelier's impact. "Dirty word! Dirty word! Dirty word!" Stuart shouted, pounding the floor with each exclamation.

Edward moved quickly to his feet, raising Constance with him. Adjusting his suit-sleeves, Edward barked, "Harris, help me raise the chandelier off him! Mark! Kris! Pull Stuart free once there is clearance!"

Everyone quickly assumed the positions Edward had assigned them. As Edward and Harris grunted with the effort of raising the chandelier, Mark and Kris locked their arms beneath Stuart's and pulled him free of the remnants of the splintered table.

Stuart's face was pale, his right foot turned at an awkward angle.

"Uncle Stuart, are you all right?" Mark asked.

Stuart looked down at his foot before answering. "I hope no one expects me to help Molly clear the table."



The low din of voices filled The Blue Streak, as it did every Saturday. The longer the night went on, the louder the volume became, until the place slowly wound down and emptied.

After working behind the bar for several months, Bruce Dooley barely noticed. He made drinks, kept the waitresses busy, and tried to watch over the place. The establishment was generally peaceful, considering blithering drunks were its main customers.

Bruce had worried in the beginning that tending bar here would eventually bore him. To his surprise, he'd found that he very much enjoyed the job. Dealing with intoxicated people wasn't something he loved, but talking to the people who genuinely needed a shoulder on which to cry was strangely satisfying. Somewhere in his past, Bruce supposed, he'd missed his true calling.

"Give me a beer, big guy," a man said from a nearby stool.

Unconsciously picking up a mug, Bruce looked at him and smiled. The guy came in only occasionally, but a few weeks earlier he'd been having serious problems with his wife. After a long, heartrending conversation, the bartender had convinced the man to go home and talk it out. "Here ya go."

A shout from the far side of the room drew Bruce's attention. Two rough-looking, leather-clad men stood behind two women. The women were wearing too little clothing for the chilled New England air and were having an intense conversation, invading each other's space. The bartender didn't like the looks of the situation.

As one of the men stepped between the women, pointing a finger at the enemy, Bruce realized the situation was about to escalate. He hopped the bar, startling the man to whom he'd just handed a beer. By the time he took his first step toward the back of the room, the second biker had thrown a punch.

As always seemed to be the case in such situations, a small circle had formed

around the combatants. Bruce broke through the people and assessed the scene. One man was in a headlock, his face being pummeled.

"Break it up, guys," he yelled authoritatively.

Neither man responded, continuing to struggle against each other.

The men broke apart, cursing at each other and completely ignoring Bruce. They both threw a punch, the man with his back to the bartender connecting, sending the other man backwards.

Bruce, his anger building, put both hands on the closest man's shoulders, and spun him around. The biker, his bearded face blazing red and a small cut above his eye, faced the larger man, a switchblade suddenly in his gloved hand.

"Take a hike, beer-jockey. This don't concern you," he spat.

Taking a deep breath, Bruce tried to keep his cool. This could go downhill, fast. "I don't want any trouble here."

"I ain't givin' you any trouble as long as you keep your nose outta my business."

The man began to turn around, but a large hand on his shoulder spun him back.

"You're not fighting in my bar," the bartender stated calmly.

Before Bruce's conscious mind could register the movement, the biker's hand lashed out with the knife, aiming for a deep stab in the midsection. Instinct moved the bartender as he stepped to the side, grasped the man's outstretched arm, and maneuvered him into a solid, unbreakable hold with Bruce at his back and the knife squeezed against his own shoulder blade.

Bruce whispered into the troublemaker's ear. "I said there will be no fighting in my bar. Do you understand?"

"You'd better not let me go, you big bastard, cause if you do you're dead," the biker yelled angrily.

The crowd stared at the scene with rapt attention. The other combatant and the two women looked concerned, but not enough to rescue the man.

Bruce wrenched the man's arm another notch, eliciting a loud curse. "I don't guess you got me."

"Go to hell, fucker," the man gasped.

Feeling his anger grow exponentially, Bruce put more pressure on the biker's limb and turned toward the door. "If you can't play nice, you can't play here."

With a procession of onlookers following, the bartender pushed his charge toward the entrance. The man cursed along the whole journey, vowing revenge, but making no progress at escaping his powerful captor's grasp.

As they stumbled out the door, Bruce forcefully shoved the man into the motorcycles parked closest to them. "Don't come back."

The biker charged him, uttering a hate-filled scream which died with a thump as a powerful kick connected with his jaw. He collapsed into a moaning pile of leather, blood streaming through his beard from his nose and lips.

Stormy brown eyes burned through him as Bruce reined in his energy. Despite the blood, the man would recover. Hopefully, he'd think twice before setting foot in The Blue Streak again.

The bartender turned to reenter the bar and was met with a host of curious faces. He could see the questions in their eyes and knew they'd never look at him the same way again. It never hurt to have a little respect, he supposed.

Bruce pushed past the group, ignoring the looks as best he could. He hated to take such violent actions, but the last thing he needed was to bring The Blue Streak to the attention of the Gossamer Falls Police Department.



"Are we even making a dent in this mess?" Kris Hollingsworth asked as she disposed of what seemed like the millionth fragment of a china cup.

"It doesn't seem like it, does it?" Lisa asked, plucking the remains of a gravy boat from beneath the antique brass chandelier which she, Kris, and Mark had already stripped of its crystal.

"I wonder if Uncle Stuart's okay," Mark said.

Lisa smiled. It seemed she'd heard the statement a hundred times over the course of the past few hours. "I'm sure we'll find out something soon, honey."

"I guess we should have called from the hospital," Harris said, entering the room ahead of Edward and Constance.

"Dad!" Mark ran to hug Harris.

"Where are Nathan and Molly?" Harris asked, embracing his oldest son.

"I didn't think Molly was up to crawling around in all this mess, so I asked if she'd monitor Nathan's bath, and put him to bed," Lisa answered.

"How is Nathan?" Harris asked.

"He's a little shaken, but I think he'll be okay."

Harris nodded absently.

"Where's Uncle Stuart?" Mark asked, looking around Harris and seeing only Edward and Constance.

Harris' blue eyes met Mark's. "He's resting at the hospital, son. His leg's broken just above the ankle, and he was in pain, so they gave him a sedative. He fell asleep, and they're going to keep him overnight. He'll be fine."

"Good," Mark said.

"Are you okay, Mother Hollingsworth?" Lisa asked, seeing Constance's drawn face.

"I'm fine, Lisa." Constance managed a half-smile. "Why don't we help you clean this mess?" she suggested, looking pointedly at Edward.

They worked quietly and quickly, each lost in their own thoughts, and soon all that remained of the mess was the chandelier and the larger fragments of the shattered table.

"That looks better!" Harris said cheerily, if a bit out of breath.

Constance grunted her assent.

"What do we do about all this?" Mark gestured toward the remaining mess.

"We'll have someone come in and remove it," Constance said. "Later, we'll get new lighting and a table, but until then we'll use the informal dining room."

"Mother. About earlier—"

"It's late, Harris, and I'm tired," Constance interrupted. "I'm going to bed. Good night."



"I don't want to go to sleep now, Molly. Will you sing to me?" Nathan, having been freshly bathed, and now dressed in pajamas bearing the likeness of Jake Lloyd as Anakin Skywalker, looked pleadingly at Molly.

Molly smiled kindly at the six-year-old. The poor child had been so frightened by what had happened downstairs that he'd wet himself, which was something he hadn't done since he was two years old. "Of course I will," Molly said. "But let's get ya tucked into bed." She pulled back the twin bed's *Star Wars* comforter and sheet, and waited for Nathan to get into bed.

Nathan made a production out of diving into bed, and Molly had to suppress a grin. Whereas Mark, and even Harris and Stuart at comparable stages in their boyhoods, had been quiet, Nathan was a bundle of energy. Sometimes just watching him flit about was enough to tire Molly, and she was grateful she didn't have to keep up with him.

Settling down on the edge of the bed beside Nathan, Molly asked, "What would ya like me ta sing ta ya?"

Nathan scrunched up his face in thought. "How about the one about Molly Malone?"

"Ah," Molly widened her eyes and smiled. "Ya mean *Cockles and Mussels*. A fine choice, if I dare say so myself!"

Nathan grinned and settled back on his pillow as Molly began singing in her crisp, clear voice. He sat up and listened attentively as she neared the end of the song.

"She died of a fever, and nothin' could save her. And that was the end o' poor Molly Malone. Now her ghost wheels a barrow through streets broad and narrow—"

"That's silly," Nathan interrupted.

"What's silly, dear?" Molly asked, well-accustomed to Nathan's interjections and not the least bit perturbed.

"That a ghost could push a wheelbarrow. Ghosts don't have hands!"

Molly chuckled. "Well, ya might have a point there, Nathan."

"Besides," Nathan continued, "how would anybody know it was a ghost and not just the wind moving the wheelbarrow?"

"Well, I don't rightly know," Molly admitted. "But I've heard old folk tales that claimed ghosts make their presence known by a pocket o' cold air or a cold breeze."

"Like what happened earlier in the dining room?"

Molly shivered with a chill unaccompanied by wind. "That was just an accident, Nathan. I'm sure it's nothin' ta worry about." She forced herself to smile for Nathan's benefit. Taking a deep breath, she pulled him to her, laying his head on her breast. Slowly rocking back and forth, Molly sang a quiet lullaby, hoping the child in her lap had an easier time falling asleep this night than she suspected she would.



Pulling the washcloth across her face one last time, Kris Hollingsworth switched off the bathroom light and walked into the bedroom. Edward sat in the bed, covers up to his waist and a reading lamp over his shoulder. The manuscript he was reading was thick, but it appeared he was almost finished. Blue marks filled the margins.

Kris took a deep breath and crossed the room. She crawled under the covers, noting that her husband had not looked at her once. *Can't he tell something is wrong?* she asked herself. After the chandelier incident, he seemed as calm as ever. The man had ice in his veins.

Poor Stuart. He was such a brave, nice man. Thankfully, he was going to be fine. She would have felt even worse had he been seriously injured. Not that she still wasn't shaken. The whole incident had been so strange. Her skin still felt cold.

Shivering, Kris scooted farther beneath the comforter. Edward didn't seem to notice. "Edward, would you like to talk?" she asked softly.

After a moment, cool blue eyes cut to her. "No, I am trying to finish this tonight."

Kris tucked a blonde lock behind her ear. "I need to talk, okay?"

Edward sighed harshly and shut the book. He placed it on the nightstand and moved down on the bed. "It has been a very long day, Kris. We both need to rest."

"I thought you said you wanted to finish that?" she said, pointing to the manuscript.

"It does not matter what I said. We both need sleep. My brother is in the hospital, and I would like to go to sleep."

Shaking her head, Kris laughed bitterly. "You don't even care about Stuart. He's just a good excuse."

Edward leaned up from the bed. "That is not true." His voice was emotionless.

"You wouldn't even have helped him if your mother hadn't told you to." She took in Edward's frown with disdain. "Hell, you didn't even try to save me. You were too concerned about Mother Hollingsworth, who you were screaming at only a moment before. Stuart was the only one there for me."

Putting his weight on his elbows, Edward eyed her warily. "So that is the reason for this conversation. My mother is frail and still recovering from getting her face full of glass, if you recall."

"How could I forget?" she said quietly, leaning heavily into her pillows. "This house seems to be falling down around our ears almost as fast as my world is collapsing on me." She wiped her sad eyes.

"Stop being melodramatic."

"I'm not," she whispered, trying to collect herself. "I'm trying to tell you how I feel. It doesn't even seem like I'm a part of this family, Edward."

The publisher sat up. "That is ridiculous. You are my wife, and that makes you part of the Hollingsworth family."

She smiled sadly. "I know I'm your wife, but there hasn't been one moment you put me ahead of your family." Edward began to protest, but she continued. "I don't expect you to stop being involved with them, or the business, but I'd like to feel appreciated every once in a while for something other than what I do for you in bed."

"You are being crude," he chastised, getting out of bed. "I need something to

drink.”

Watching him walk out their bedroom door, Kris could feel a sob building. She didn't think she was asking for too much or being too needy. Sometimes it seemed she was the only one giving anything in this relationship. She was beginning to wonder when she would run out of energy to give.

As the door clicked shut, the first tears came and the young woman crumpled onto the bed, grief filling every pore.



When the door clicked shut behind them, Lisa launched herself into her husband's arms. "Thank God this day is almost over," she whispered, muffled against his chest.

Harris smiled, stroking her hair. "Yeah, it's been a hell of a day. We made it, though."

"I hope the boys sleep okay. They're so worried about your brother."

Moving toward the bed, Harris looked in the direction of their sons' rooms. "The boys are tough, and so is Stuart. They'll be okay."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"I had an interesting conversation with Stuart earlier today. Sit down, because we need to talk about it," he plopped on the waterbed and smoothed a place for her.

Lisa looked at him curiously, then sat. "Go ahead, though you're scaring me," she said, smiling.

"You should be scared," he grinned in return. "He seems to think we need to talk to Mark about sex."

Sighing, Lisa nodded. "That may not be a bad idea since he will be tutoring Tiffany Stevens."

"How do you think we should approach it?"

Brown eyes glanced away, then back to her husband. "I'm not sure *we* should approach it at all."

Harris frowned. "What do you mean?"

She took his hand and pulled it into her lap. "I know we usually do this kind of thing together, Harris, but our little boy is becoming a young man now, and I think he needs some advice from his dad. And lately, Mark has been treating me differently. I don't think he'd feel comfortable with me there."

"What has he done?" Harris asked, concerned.

"Oh, nothing major. It's just that, in the mornings, he never gets out of bed when I'm in the room, like I'm not supposed to see him in his underwear anymore." She shrugged. "And if he glowed red just telling me the friend he wanted to tutor was a girl, how do you think he'd react to me being around for the birds-and-bees conversation?"

Rubbing his beard with his free hand, Harris let out a long breath. "I guess you're right."

"I don't mind doing it, but I think it would be best if you fly solo on this."

"No, you're right, but maybe I could wait until Stuart comes home, and let him talk to Mark," Harris said, rubbing his temples.

She laughed. "I think you're the perfect man for the job," she stated, giving his arm a soft shove.

"Why?"

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Harris, you are a very considerate, passionate lover. You probably don't realize how rare you are. With your influence on Mark, he'll grow to be the same kind of man."

"So this is for womankind everywhere?"

She smirked. "Sure."

Her husband put an arm around her. "If I'm considerate and passionate, it's only because you are equally so."

She touched his face. "Mmm-mmm-mmm. You are amazing. Care to test our skills?"

Close to her ear, Harris whispered. "Ready if you are."

Pulling him into the waves, she growled. "Always."