

Sinners and Saints

"My God!" Edward Hollingsworth shouted as the windows of Hollingsworth Manor violently exploded outward. Glass and debris rained onto the front lawn, but didn't quite reach the small group of people gathered there.

Grabbing Stuart by the shoulders, Edward shook him, almost knocking Stuart off his crutches. "What was it? What happened? Was it a gas leak?"

"No, it wasn't a gas leak," Leyland said.

"Who are you?" Edward asked, as if noticing the balding, bespectacled man for the first time.

Molly Crenshaw's startled cry prevented Edward receiving an answer. As the others turned to see what had disturbed Molly, they saw a man, hands clutched to his chest, stagger out of the manor and fall to his knees.

"Someone was inside?" Edward shrieked as he and the others began moving toward the kneeling figure.

Stuart, Molly, and Constance trailed Edward, Kris, and Leyland as they moved toward the fallen priest.

"Oh, I hope Father Greer is okay," Molly said, her arthritic knees forcing her to hobble along beside Stuart.

"Mother? Are you all right?" Stuart asked, concerned by Constance's slow gait and drawn face.

"I'm fine, Stuart," Constance snapped, wiping perspiration from her face.

A commotion from ahead drew the attention of the three stragglers. As Kris and Leyland awkwardly tried to help Father Greer to his feet, Edward was yelling. "What were you doing in there?" Molly, Stuart and Constance drew near enough to determine the priest was holding something in his hands that were clutched to his chest. "Relinquish your hold on my father!" Edward shouted, and the others realized Father Greer was holding the urn that contained Edward Sr.'s remains.

"Edward!" Constance's harsh voice knifed through the air. "Leave him alone!"

Edward, mouth ajar, turned to his mother. His blue-eyed glare was piercing.

"Everything will be explained, Edward," Constance said. "Let's go inside." As an afterthought, she glanced toward Leyland. "If you think it's okay."

Leyland took the urn from Father Greer, whose eyes were only beginning to regain focus, and closed his eyes. A tense moment, during which Constance's heart seemed in danger of leaping out of her breast, passed, then Leyland slowly nodded.

"Thank you." Constance's gaze rested on the paranormal consultant and the priest.

Regaining the commanding tone she'd recently not been able to muster, Constance said. "Molly, phone the guards before they notify the police or fire department. We don't want their involvement. Then phone Clifton O'Connor and tell him we have immediate need of his services. Stuart, take Edward and Kris into the dining room and explain to them what happened. Perhaps Mr. Cross and Father Greer can assist you if they have no pressing matters."

"I need to be going soon, but I need a moment to rest," Father Greer said.

"Fine," Constance said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get—something to drink." Constance followed Molly inside the house.

Edward stared after his mother, then turned to his younger brother. "All right, Stuart. Explain to me what happened here."

"I was hoping someone could tell me," Stuart said.



As Dominique neared the front door, she looked at her watch to make sure the place would be open. Luckily, it was just after four, first call at The Blue Streak. Unlike many days in the recent past, she didn't need to tie one on today. She was still high from the amazing turn of events her trip to the art fair had held.

Even the talk about Tessa hadn't spiraled her into a depression. Normally it would have, but the compassion in Harris and Lisa's eyes had somehow touched her and pushed the negative memories far away. Tessa would have loved her big, teddy-bear uncle.

Dominique chose a barstool in the center of the bar and took a seat. Bruce Dooley ambled to her from the far end of the counter. "Hey, big boy, what's the special?"

"Same as always, Ms. Carpenter. Your pleasure," he said.

Tapping her lips with her index finger, the dark woman smiled brightly at him. "Then give me a frosty one."

"Sure thing," he responded and began filling a mug.

The big man's movements were stilted, and the smile on his face failed to reach his eyes. Though she hadn't known him long, Dominique knew him well enough to know something was wrong.

As he handed her the beer, she narrowed her eyes and said, "What's up?"

Bruce smiled at her innocently. "The sky?"

"Ha, ha, ha. Something's wrong. You want to talk about it?"

A large hand waved her off and he picked up a towel to begin his cleaning ritual. "Nah, nothing's wrong. Just a slow day's all." He began scrubbing a mug.

Dominique observed him for a moment, considering whether or not to let it go. The slump in his shoulders gave her a definite answer. He'd been there for her when she was down, so she thought she might as well do the same.

"I don't believe you, ya know," she told him.

He glanced around the bar, distractedly inspecting the other few occupants. A heavy sigh escaped his chest. "You shouldn't."

She reached out and tapped his hand. "I'm here if you'd like to talk about it."

His sad brown eyes peered into hers. "I went home with someone from the bar last night."

"And your point?" she asked, confused.

"It's not like me," he answered, shrugging his shoulders.

Dominique smiled at him. He really was a sweet guy. "So you got a little lovin'?" His shaggy brown hair moved as he nodded. "What's the harm in that? I'm not sure I've ever seen a man upset he bedded a lady. You're supposed to enjoy it."

"I can't, not the way it happened," he answered in a strained voice.

Imagining the possibilities, Dominique's expression turned stern. "You didn't take advantage of the woman, did you?"

Bruce shook his head emphatically. "No, nothing like that."

The older woman leaned on her elbows, perched over the bar. She peered at him, completely lost. "Then what?"

Setting down the glass, the bartender moved closer to her and whispered so no one else could hear. "I see people get drunk here every night and make choices they wouldn't have made if they were sober: choices that are usually mistakes." He rubbed a hand across his face. "I made one of those mistakes last night, and I wasn't even drunk."

Dominique snorted. "Do you have a hammer behind the bar?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I think there's one somewhere. Why?"

"Somebody's gotta get you down off that cross, boy."

Bruce rolled his eyes and shook his head, backing away from her. "It's not like that," he assured her.

Dominique took a sip of her beer. "That's exactly what it is. You're being too hard on yourself, honey. As long as you didn't take advantage of the girl, there's nothing wrong with getting' a little mutual satisfaction. Everyone has physical needs, and you shouldn't feel bad about scratching that itch."

He sighed heavily again. "You don't understand."

"Yes, I do. You're hardheaded. Just like a man."

Despite his glum mood, Bruce laughed. "Well, at least one of us is in a good mood today."

Her brow furrowed as Dominique analyzed the comment. "You know what? I am in a good mood. Wonder of wonders. I had lunch with one of my little brothers today," she said, then launched into an account of her meeting with Harris and his clan.

When she was done, Bruce fixed her another beer. "I'm happy for you, Ms. Carpenter."

Dominique took the glass and leaned back, eyeing the bartender closely. "I'm just gonna stay right here in this bar until your face shows what your mouth says."

A small grin crept upon his bearded face.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Dominique said.



In the Church of the Sacred Lamb, Stuart sat quietly beside Mark and reflected on the day's events that had brought him to Mass.

Immediately after he'd gone inside the house to attempt to explain to Edward and Kris why their home had suddenly become a windowless, air-conditioned haven for every insect known to man, Harris, Lisa, and the boys had arrived home. After explanations were given to all and Edward's protestations after learning his father's remains were to be entombed had quieted, disbelief had turned to stunned awe for each of them.

Clifton O'Connor's arrival had brought conversation to an end, and the handyman had probably taught Mark and Nathan a few new vocabulary words when he saw the extent of the damage to the house, even though it was limited to the windows and their frames. He'd promised to try to repair as many windows as possible before nightfall, but he wasn't certain he could find that much glass in the right sizes on a Sunday afternoon.

Mother, of course, had encouraged Clifton to work hard, authorizing him to find as many trustworthy and capable workers as he could muster and pay them triple their normal hourly wages. She had then phoned the security company which provided the estate's gate guards and asked them to send extra personnel to watch the house. She'd then suggested the family go out to dinner and leave the workers to their jobs.

After dinner at an Italian restaurant just west of downtown Gossamer Falls and Hollingsworth Tower, the family members had gone their separate ways. Edward had announced that he needed time alone, leaving Kris to go home with Constance and Molly. Harris announced that he, Lisa, and the boys were going to Mass, and Stuart had surprised everyone, including himself, by asking to join them.

Stuart eyed Father Greer as he recited Mass and thought back to what had happened earlier at the manor. It was impossible for the priest to have somehow conspired with the psychic to produce such an effect.

After what he'd witnessed earlier that day, Stuart had no doubt that the psychic's powers were very real. And, apparently, so were the forces that had protected the priest. Stuart wasn't certain which realization most disturbed him. It had been so long since he had anything resembling a spiritual belief, and now it seemed he had seen proof of a world beyond the physical one.

What does it mean? Have I been wrong all this time? And if I have, what are the consequences?

"Uncle Stuart? You okay?" Mark asked.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, I'm fine," Stuart said, realizing the service was over. He stood and began following the others outside, then paused. "Harris?"

Harris turned to Stuart. "Yes?"

"Could you wait a few minutes for me?"

"Sure, Stuart."

"Thanks." Stuart entered the confessional, propped his crutches against the wall, and closed the booth's door. Sitting, he said, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."



It always hurt her knuckles, but she did it anyway. Undying determination was one of her faults, or so she'd been told many times. The benefits she received from the activity far outweighed the pain in her hands.

Abigayle Nguyen hit the punching bag again, harder, rattling the chains attaching it to the support beam. Ken's Dojo was a good place for her to come when she was stressed, and at the moment, she was so hyped up she was about to freak.

A lock of long, black, sweat-soaked hair stuck to her face. She angrily wiped it away with her gloved hand. The dark-blue sports bra and tights she was wearing were wet as well, but she didn't care. The men working out around her knew all about perspiration.

She growled as she hit the canvas again, the bag gloves she was wearing barely cushioning the blow. At the moment, she needed the release Tae Kwon Do gave her more than she'd ever needed it before.

Donald Farraday, her mind spat like a curse as she pictured her editor. She'd never been in love with the man, but now she could truly say she hated him for what he'd done. She was vegetating in this new assignment, and he knew it.

Picturing him in front of her, Abigayle drove a hard kick into his crotch. *You'll regret the day you screwed me for as long as you live, bastard.* What little power he had wouldn't protect him forever. One day she would be a star and he would grovel at her feet. At least until she discarded him like smelly trash.

She wished she'd be able to get rid of her parents in the same way, but Abigayle knew that would be impossible. Nonetheless, she punched the bag furiously with them in mind. Thanks to their incompetence, she was a laughingstock at the paper.

Learn how to run your business, Papa, she thought, jostling the heavy bag. Though she'd never known her parents to let pests get out of control in their restaurant, she could almost believe they'd do it just to set her up for failure. After all, they'd spent her whole life convincing Abigayle she would never be a success. They'd never even given her a chance.

The only person in her whole life that made her feel good was Clifton, and ninety-nine percent of the time he was a big pain in the ass, as he had been that afternoon. They'd just finished having phenomenal sex when the phone rang. Being the idiot he was, Clifton had answered it.

He'd hung up the phone and sighed. "That was Molly, the maid over at Hollingsworth Manor. She's hysterical about something, and I've gotta go take care of it."

"You're not going anywhere," Abigayle had told him.

Clifton had raised an eyebrow at her. "Ya don't tell me what I can and can't do, girl. She said it was an emergency. I'll go take care of it and be right back."

"Fine," she'd conceded, but refused to speak to him as he prepared to leave.

She'd waited for him like an obedient little dog until he called saying the job was going to take all day. After cursing at him, she'd hung up and sulked.

Bastard, she silently screamed as she pounded the bag. He had no right to treat her this way.

Fueling her rage, the image of Constance Hollingsworth appeared on the punching bag, her gray hair tightly pruned, a taunting smile on her lips. This

was all her fault. The old bitch's problems had called Clifton away from her earlier. A roundhouse kick connected with the bag, followed by a flurry of stiff punches, violently swinging the bag from side to side.

In the back of her mind, Abigayle could tell the gym was turning silent around her. She could faintly feel the eyes on her back, but it didn't matter. Anger stood out a bright red mass in her vision, blurring everything else. The reporter knew that if she attacked long enough, the universe would have no choice but to bow to her whims.



It was midnight when Dominique walked out of The Blue Streak, sighing heavily as she closed the door behind her. Trying to raise Bruce's spirits had proven a futile effort. The big man had worn his depression like an impenetrable suit of armor, and all of Dominique's efforts to pierce his defenses hadn't been enough. Whatever was really bothering Bruce was something he wasn't yet willing to share.

Dominique inhaled deeply, drawing in the night air. After the recent cool weather, the warm gentle breeze felt wonderful. Being from Georgia, New England's weather was a new experience for her.

On a whim, Dominique bypassed her car and walked past the parking lot. It was too nice a night to not take advantage of the weather, especially after having been cooped up in one hotel room or another since her arrival in Gossamer Falls. And after dealing with Bruce Dooley's morose mood for the entire evening, she needed something to take her mind off his problems.

As she walked along the riverside, Dominique's thoughts returned to the previous afternoon's events. She felt as if attending the Gossamer Falls Downtown Art Fair had been a turning point for her. First, she'd found the magnificent beaded purse she now carried on her shoulder, then she'd been approached by her sister-in-law, and the day had only improved. Spending time with her youngest brother and his family had been marvelous, despite a few awkward moments.

The fragile bond she and her mother had established was important to Dominique, but it had been—and remained—equally important to her to meet her brothers. She hadn't pushed the idea on her mother, willing to let Constance decide when might be the best time for her to be formally introduced, but Dominique had longed to meet and be accepted by her brothers; however, she had never expected a reception such as she'd received from Harris, Lisa, and her nephews.

Being so welcomed, feeling they had a genuine interest in her—despite her momentary loss of composure when Harris had asked about meeting Tessa, it had been a wonderful experience. Dominique smiled, remembering Nathan asking if he could call her “Aunt Dominique.” For the first time since coming to town, Dominique was beginning to believe she was actually going to be part of a family.

A family: it was all she’d ever wanted. Growing up in the state-operated orphanages, Dominique had always yearned to be part of a family, but it hadn’t been until she’d gone to college and met a young, black, engineering student named Ellis Carpenter that her dreams had seemed capable of becoming reality.

Dominique stopped beneath a lamppost and looked down at the Gossamer River, which was roiling black in the night. She’d been thrilled to fall in love with and marry Ellis, but when they hadn’t immediately conceived, her own thoughts had been as dark and murky as the water now before her.

A year after their marriage, Dominique had been tested for fertility problems and was told she’d never be able to conceive. At first devastated, she and Ellis had resigned themselves to a life by themselves, but over the next few years, Dominique’s thoughts turned to adoption. She realized she was in a position to help a child who was involved in the same type of situation as she’d been.

They’d registered with several adoption agencies and waited for news of a child. Six weeks later, Ellis learned the architectural firm for which he worked was facing severe cutbacks. Reluctantly, they’d set aside the idea of adoption until their financial situation became more stable.

Deciding he couldn’t live by placing his future in someone else’s hands, Ellis left the firm and opened his own. Though the first couple years were rocky, Ellis quickly gained respect and recognition as an architectural engineer, and his business thrived.

Dominique and Ellis decided they were financially secure enough to adopt a child, but Dominique was ill on the day they were supposed to meet with an adoption agency. A trip to the doctor revealed the unthinkable had occurred: Dominique was pregnant.

Dominique had always hoped to have a large family, but after the miracle of Tessa’s conception and birth, she couldn’t imagine loving another child as much as her precious baby daughter. Knowing her feelings wouldn’t be fair to another child, Dominique had squelched the notion of having more children or adopting, which was fine with Ellis, who had grown up as one of nine children and had seen how his parents struggled to care for them. Having felt poverty’s bitter

sting, he was determined no child of his would ever know the same feeling, and he had worked hard—at both being a father and a good provider—to ensure Tessa would never want for anything.

For a time, all had been perfect in their little world. The difficulties of their pasts behind them, Dominique and Ellis had focused their love and attention on their daughter and one another. But Tessa's death in the car wreck had changed everything. In an instant, Dominique's world had disintegrated, and she'd been forced to rebuild it from the beginning.

But the beginning hadn't proven a good place for Dominique to start. The circumstances of her birth, the fact that she'd seemingly been given up for adoption because she was biracial, hurt. That pain, heaped upon the already overwhelming grief wrought by Tessa's death and the anger she felt toward her husband for allowing their daughter to drive alone at night when she'd only recently received her driver's license, had caused Dominique to turn away from Ellis.

Lost in his own pain, Ellis had also turned away from Dominique, so a divorce had seemed the only logical resolution. Their family had been obliterated by Tessa's death. The divorce had been a literal representation of the emotional rift that already separated them.

There, beneath the faint lamplight, Dominique marveled at how her life had changed in recent weeks. Though she and her mother had got off to a rocky start, their relationship was improving, and spending time with her youngest brother and his family had been marvelous. Dominique felt almost as if she'd been reborn. Even if her other brothers weren't as welcoming as Harris, she had more family than she'd had at any other time in her life, and it felt wonderful. She knew that nothing—not even Bruce Dooley's foul mood—could quell her high spirits.

Dominique turned away from the river and saw a flicker of movement in her peripheral vision. Her heart hammered, and she tried to loose a scream, but the wind was knocked out of her when she was seized roughly from behind. A gloved hand clamped over her mouth, and a strong arm encircled her waist, pinning her arms to her sides.

"Nice night for a walk," a man whispered into Dominique's ear. She didn't recognize the voice, but thought she detected a trace of Hispanic accent.

Dominique mumbled against the gloved hand and tried to struggle, but her captor was too strong. She tried to calm herself, to silence the roar of blood pounding through her temples, so she could think. But all thoughts swiftly fled

when she saw another figure step into the light beneath the lamp.

It was another man: a white man, his hair dirty and unkempt, his eyes wild, lips pulled back in a feral snarl. But it wasn't the man's appearance that frightened Dominique: it was the wickedly curved knife the man held in his gloved hand.