

A Brand New Day

Walking through the crowded cubicles, Abigayle Nguyen took a deep, impatient breath. Lately, her editor's office was her least favorite place to be. When he'd buzzed her and said she needed to come to his office, the reporter's first thought was to tell him to stick the intercom and the business beat up his ass. She'd restrained herself, however. Just barely.

The Hollingsworths had been big news over the weekend, and the previous day she'd been stuck writing about the latest fast-food franchise to take over Gossamer Falls. Sometimes it was hard to keep her eye on the prize when she continually had to roll around in garbage.

"What do you want?" she asked as she burst through his door. She stopped with her hands on her hips, and what she hoped was a deadly glare.

Donald Farraday looked away from his computer screen. "Hello to you too, Abigayle."

"Am I being transferred to another department or not?"

"No," he said slowly. "But I do have some news for you."

Abigayle sighed. "What is it?"

Donald smiled. "Well, I've got good news and bad news. Which first?"

She wanted to slap him. "Bad. I wouldn't want you to disappoint me right off."

"You're a brave woman. The new edition of *New Englander Weekly* has a review of your parents' restaurant by Preston Endicott. I don't think you're going to be pleased."

Abigayle's ire immediately rose. She'd been trying to block her parents' sabotaging mistakes out of her mind. She had enough problems at the moment without their help. "I don't have anything to do with their screw-ups," she told him, trying to believe it.

"Just remember that it will run in the *Gazette* this Sunday."

Shit! her mind exclaimed. She'd forgotten the paper ran that jerk's weekly column. Abigayle swallowed her anger and asked, "What's the good news?"

"The new issue of *People* is out and names America's Most Eligible Bachelor," he said, as if she'd understand its importance.

She sighed. "Yeah, I heard it was coming out and they're being hush-hush about the cover. What's that got to do with me?"

"I've got an interview set up for you with the winner."

Surprised, Abigayle stared wide-eyed at her editor. She couldn't believe he was actually giving her an assignment so chic. Interviews with movie stars were great steppingstones for a lasting career. "I wonder which movie star it will be?" she said absentmindedly, already focusing on the upcoming interview and forgetting about Donald.

"It's not a movie star," Donald told her. "America's most eligible bachelor is none other than Gossamer Falls' own Stuart Hollingsworth."

"You've got to be joking," she replied, exasperated.

Donald glared at her from under bushy eyebrows. "I want you to do a quick overview of Hollingsworth Publishing's standing in the industry—"

Abigayle interjected, "Oh, sure, it's not like that's been done before."

The editor went on like she hadn't spoken. "And talk to Stuart about his high-pressure job and whether and how he thinks this 'award' will change his approach to business."

Abigayle pursed her lips and asked, "Is that all?"

Donald smiled deviously. "If you could ask subtle questions regarding Stuart's new sister's welcome into the family, that may get you another headline."

"Consider it done." Abigayle said.



Melancholy green eyes stared out the sunroom window, watching the effects of a soft wind that brushed through the trees surrounding Hollingsworth Manor. Kris Hollingsworth held a book in her lap, but she hadn't read it in at least fifteen minutes. Her mind was elsewhere; another time, another place.

She was thinking about something Dominique had said. *Why haven't I been writing?* she asked herself. She'd been so ambitious in college. Everything she'd

done had been geared toward establishing a career in journalism. Kris had screamed with joy the day she'd learned she'd been hired to intern at Hollingsworth Publishing. Along with her grades and other honors, the job had practically elevated her from being just another graduate, to a highly desirable free agent.

The young woman leaned heavily on the chair arm, causing the aged wicker to whine sadly. She could scarcely recall even thinking about her writing career in the last two years. The person she'd been in college would probably not even recognize the spoiled housewife she'd become, nor would that former self like her.

"Kris?" Molly's voice sounded down the hall.

The young woman in question answered, straightening herself and feigning interest in her forgotten novel. She didn't know exactly why, but Kris didn't want anyone to see the sadness she knew was in her eyes.

The maid came through the doorway with a bright smile. "Yer father's on the phone." She held up the wireless handset like a trophy.

Kris put on her best smile, even with the new tremble in her heart. "Thank you, Molly." She reached for the receiver.

Waiting until the older woman politely left the room, Kris took a deep breath. She hoped this conversation would not add to her ill feelings. "Hello, Daddy."

"Hello, Kris. I called to speak with Edward."

Her father's voice was crisp and cold, as always. Robert Curtis had never been one to mince his words. As she'd been doing since she was a child, Kris tried to put up a shield to protect herself. "He's gone to work already. You're forgetting about the time zone difference again."

"Ah, you are right. I guess I will have to call him at the office."

"What do you need to talk to him about, Daddy? Is something wrong?"

Papers shuffled over the line from California. "No, honey. I wanted to ask him about a stock in which I was considering investing. Nothing about which you should concern yourself."

"Oh." She was partly insulted, but mainly relieved. "How's Mom?"

"She is fine. I need to go, Kris. The market is already open."

Kris closed her eyes. Her voice was soft when she spoke. "Okay. Tell Mom I said, 'Hi,'."

"Sure thing," he said, then promptly hung up.

"Goodbye," she whispered, wondering why she'd even got out of bed.



In Hollingsworth Manor's garage, Lisa brought the minivan to a stop and turned off the engine, silencing Enya in mid-note. She rarely had opportunity to listen to music she liked, usually giving way to the boys' preferences, but she'd recently adopted the habit of listening to some of her favorite CDs on the way back from taking Mark and Nathan to school.

As Lisa exited the vehicle, she pressed the button on the overhead door's remote control. The door lowered, clanging heavily against the concrete slab, the sound reverberating and sending shivers throughout Lisa's body.

This house never used to get to me like this, Lisa thought, but after all that's happened recently.... I need to shake it off and enjoy the day. I don't have to pick up the boys for another 6 hours. That's too much time to waste pondering questions I can't answer.

Lisa walked toward the kitchen, hoping to find a cup of tea. The warm weather that had visited over the weekend was supposed to be moving away, replaced by much-cooler air. Hopefully, Clifton O'Connor and his crew would finish replacing all the manor's broken windows before the cold air arrived.

Lisa entered the kitchen to find Molly Crenshaw polishing silverware and muttering to herself. "Is everything okay. Molly?"

"Ah!" the maid shrieked, throwing her arms into the air. She whirled to face Lisa. Blue eyes peered frightfully out of a plain face, framed by a colorful scarf that bound Molly's wheat-blond hair.

"I'm sorry," Lisa said, moving to soothe the older woman. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Molly sighed in relief. "I wasn't payin' attention ta the clock or I woulda been lookin' for ya."

"Maybe I should wear bells on my shoes." Lisa laughed and Molly joined her.

"Let me get ya a cup of tea," Molly said, walking to the sink to wash her hands.

"Thank you, Molly. You read my mind."

Molly smiled and handed Lisa a filled cup before resuming polishing the silver.

"Is everything okay?" Lisa asked. "You usually polish the silverware only when something's troubling you."

Molly looked up and smiled. "Now who's readin' who's mind, eh?" Her smile slowly faded as she said, "I guess I'm just worried about Miss Constance and Miss Dominique."

Lisa nodded, not surprised by Molly's answer. The maid was nothing if not devoted to her employer. Lisa frowned, remembering how Constance had been prepared only a few weeks before to fire Molly for failing to fulfill all her duties.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Lisa said, managing a smile.

"I hope so." Molly scrubbed harder at an imaginary speck of tarnish. "There's just so many things that can go wrong when two women travel alone."

"I'm sure Mother Hollingsworth is quite capable of taking care of herself," Lisa said.

Molly looked up, blue eyes sparkling. "That she is. I wonder if Miss Dominique is made o' the same stuff?"

"I don't know her that well, but I can see some similarities," Lisa admitted. "What about you? What do you think of Dominique?"

"Well," Molly's brow wrinkled in thought, "I had a hard time keepin' her out o' the kitchen. And she didn't seem ta like bein' waited on."

Lisa smiled. "I remember being the same way when I first came here."

Molly grinned. "Yeah. I remember thinkin' I would never get ya outta my way."

Lisa's mouth fell open in mock indignation. "I wasn't *that* much of a liability in the kitchen, was I?"

Blue eyes searched the ceiling for a dignified response. "I don't think I'll answer

that.”

Lisa laughed. “Speaking of being a liability in the kitchen, I know Heather thought that was what she was when she first started working here. How’s she coming along?”

“She’s doin’ a good job, but—” Molly frowned.

“But what?”

Molly sighed. “I don’t think her heart is in the job.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, her attitude seems changed somehow.”

“In what way, Molly?”

“Well, I don’t rightly know how ta explain it,” Molly said. “It’s sorta like she’s puttin’ up a block. Like she’s distancin’ herself personally.”

“Hmm.” Lisa tucked a stray curl behind one ear as she took a sip of tea from the Limoges. “Can you think of any reason that would make her act that way?”

Molly looked stricken. “I pried where I shouldn’t have, Lisa. I asked her a question that hurt her.”

“I’m sure you didn’t do it intentionally, Molly,” Lisa said soothingly. “Did you try to make amends?”

“Oh, yeah. I apologized and she accepted, but I don’t know that that was enough.”

Lisa stared thoughtfully at the older woman. “Other than that, how’s her work?”

“Oh, I can’t find a thing ta complain about with her work. She’s a hard worker and a fast learner.”

“She follows your instructions, then?”

Molly snorted. “What instructions? The girl seems ta know what needs ta be done before I can tell her. She has the house’s routine down pat. I had ta help her some in the kitchen at first, but now I hardly have ta say a word.”

Lisa took another sip of tea, thinking. Finally, she said, "I don't think it has anything to do with whatever was said between the two of you."

Molly's brows knit questioningly.

"Her trial period of employment here is almost up," Lisa said. "Maybe she's not sure where she stands. Maybe she's trying to emotionally distance herself from the job in case she has to leave."

"Do ya really think that could be it?" Molly asked hopefully.

"I think it's a strong possibility," Lisa said, gently touching Molly's arm. "It's obvious to see that Heather enjoys your company. I don't think she holds anything against you."

Molly's eyes filled with tears. "I enjoy her company, too. I just hope that ye're right."

"Only one way to find out," Lisa said.



Stuart stared out the window at the rushing waterfall, watching the mists rise like an angry cloud, still in awe at the power he was soon to possess. He'd never been granted such a wonderful opportunity, and he had no intention of wasting it. Hollingsworth Publishing would get everything he had for as long as he was in charge.

Swiveling the chair, Stuart faced his mother's desk. The crafted wooden surface glistened under the florescent lights. He'd only been to this office twice as a child, but he remembered how astounded he'd been then, seeing his mother's power and grace as she sat behind it. Now it was his turn.

A buzz turned his attention to the telephone just as Jessie's voice poured through the intercom speaker. For a moment he wondered who she was, so used was he to his own secretary. "Your 9:30 appointment is here," she said.

Stuart's eyebrows rose as he stared at the phone. Finally, he remembered who he was supposed to meet. The *Gossamer Falls Gazette* had requested he do an interview regarding his latest honor. Stuart cringed. He still couldn't believe all the curious and appraising looks he'd received today.

Mother had told him to be a good boy and respond to queries. She was also explicit in telling him to avoid mentioning Dominique or their whereabouts.

Nothing he couldn't handle, of course.

He told Jessie to send the reporter into the room. Straightening his black satin tie, Stuart waited for what was sure to be a surreal experience. This was one part of the CEO job he'd have to accept that he certainly didn't envy.

Stuart had to almost physically stop his jaw from dropping as Abigayle Nguyen entered his mother's office. Her long, raven hair brushed behind her as she walked, a mini-cassette recorder in one hand, a briefcase in the other. The smirk on her ruby lips was unmistakable.

"Good morning, Mr. Hollingsworth."

Retaining his composure, Stuart smiled at the woman. His mind was already turning the possibilities of what she might be scheming. "Good morning." He gathered his crutches and unsteadily stood. *If Mother could swallow her bile and deal with this little viper, so can I.*

"This is a very nice office, but I couldn't help noticing your mother's name on the door. Any reason we're meeting in here?"

"That's very perceptive of you," Stuart lowered himself into the plush chair and motioned to the one across from him. "My mother has taken a sabbatical and appointed me as CEO during her absence."

Abigayle's eyes glittered darkly. "Why has she taken leave? She's such a workhorse."

Stuart wanted to wretch, but he controlled himself. "She is that. And she drives us like coal miners. That's a good reason for us to get to the subject of our interview. I've got several appointments today."

She looked like she wanted to probe further, but apparently she had at least a modicum of professionalism. "You're right. And who wouldn't want to meet with America's most eligible bachelor?"

"Who, indeed?" Stuart said, wishing he could rid himself of the woman.

"Has this changed your outlook on your career?"

Stuart touched his lips with his fingertips as he thought of the best way to answer. "No, my outlook hasn't changed. I consider this honor as a huge compliment. I don't expect it to have any impact on how I do my job."

"What about your mother? Surely she must want to cash in on this newfound fame of yours." Abigayle leaned her elbows on her knees, placing the recorder on the desk.

"I can't comment on how she feels about it, because I don't know. We haven't discussed it." He was beginning to feel very antsy. The manipulative bitch had a grin Stuart didn't like. "Corporate matters are of more import."

She looked pointedly at his left hand where it rested on the desktop. "Do you think this will help you find a new Mrs. Hollingsworth? You've been a bachelor for quite some time."

Stuart swallowed hard. "I expect I'll get additional attention, but it most likely won't be the kind I want." He quickly amended the statement, saying, "I'm not interested in a person who is interested in me on the basis of fame alone."

"What about on the basis of money alone?"

"That goes without saying," Stuart told her. *I should have told Jessie to buzz me after five minutes.*

"Did the Hollingsworth fortune attract Dominique Carpenter to Gossamer Falls after almost fifty years?"

The opportunity was too good to pass up. She was completely out of line. "I'm sorry, but I have another appointment. I think you've got plenty of material for your article." He hobbled up on his crutches again.

"Did your mother tell you not to talk about the black sheep of the family? I thought you might want to get some things off your chest." She picked up the recorder, but never hit the stop button.

"I'm afraid you've gotten all the juice out of me you're getting. Thanks for stopping by."

Abigayle glared at him for a moment, but she obviously recognized a losing cause when faced with one. She raced out the door, slamming it behind her.

Stuart let out a sigh of relief, hoping this wasn't a sign of things to come.



Dominique Carpenter shifted in her seat behind the wheel. Though it was only mid-morning, she felt as if she'd been traveling for days instead of hours.

Dominique was accustomed to music accompanying her thoughts as she traveled, but her mother's presence had changed her usual behavior patterns.

They had barely reached the outskirts of Gossamer Falls when Constance had irritably asked if Dominique had to listen to "that tripe." Dominique had raised an eyebrow in response before sighing and reluctantly turning off the radio. There were few people for whom she'd silence Luther Vandross' golden voice. Her mother had been damned lucky Aretha Franklin wasn't singing.

Dominique glanced to the passenger seat where Constance Hollingsworth sat, reading a manuscript. She'd done nothing but read since the radio had been silenced. Dominique shook her head. *Woman brings one suitcase full of clothes and practically a piano crate full of manuscripts. I should've told her we needed to rent a U-Haul.*

Imagining her austere mother's mortification at the knowledge that the car in which she was riding was pulling a bright orange trailer, Dominique chuckled, drawing Constance's attention.

"What's funny?" Constance asked.

Dominique shook her head. "Nothing, Mama."

Constance sniffed and turned her attention back to the manuscript.

Dominique was still smiling twenty minutes later when she pulled up to a toll booth and looked expectantly to her mother.

Constance looked up after a moment. "What's wrong? Why are we stopped?"

"We need to pay the toll," Dominique said.

"Why?"

Dominique widened her eyes. "So we can take the road," she said incredulously.

Constance glared past her daughter to the automated toll booth. "That's ridiculous!"

"Well, just give me some change and we can get going," Dominique said.

"I don't have any change," Constance said.

"*What?*" Dominique wrinkled her brow and squinted her eyes in disbelief. "Are

you sure?"

"I'm positive!" Constance snapped. "I never carry change."

Dominique sighed and looked in the rearview mirror. Backing up wasn't going to be a popular decision, but she had no other choice. Putting the car into reverse, she said, "Fine. We'll just go to a manned booth."

"Good," Constance said. "Which credit cards do they accept?"

Dominique, who had been slowly backing up while praying the burly man in the pickup behind her limited his displeasure to boring holes in the back of her skull with his gaze, suddenly slammed on the brakes. "*What?*" Gathering her dreadlocks in both hands, Dominique pushed them to the back of her head. Looking incredulously at Constance, she asked, "Didn't you bring any cash?"

"I—"

"Let me guess," Dominique interrupted. "You never carry cash."

"That's right," Constance calmly replied.

Dominique stared at her. "I thought when you said you had stuff to take care of yesterday that you were going to the bank." Dominique sighed and threw her hands into the air. "This is great. What are we supposed to do now?"

"Just pull over to one of those manned booths. I'm sure they'll have an ATM or something."

Dominique continued staring at her mother. "Mama, have you ever been on a toll road before?"

"No," Constance said unabashedly. "I pay enough in taxes every year to pave every road in this country. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay anything more for the privilege of driving on them."

Dominique sighed, finished backing up, then drove toward the exit ramp. *This is going to be one hell of a long trip*, she thought.



Heather Patterson was in Hollingsworth Manor's laundry room, folding Kris and Edward's sheets when she heard someone behind her clear their throat. She turned, thinking it was probably Clifton O'Connor, who seemed to have

developed a habit of watching her rear when he thought she wasn't looking, but was surprised to see it was Lisa.

"Good morning, Heather. How are you?"

"Fine," Heather said quickly, forcing herself to return Lisa's smile. The curly-haired brunette smiled more than anyone Heather had ever known, and Heather found it a bit disconcerting.

"Are you sure?" Lisa widened her kind brown eyes. "I get the impression there's a lot on your mind."

Heather shrugged, unsure of what to say.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Heather could neither hold Lisa's gaze nor continue returning her smile. Heather shook her head and averted her gaze, trying not to give rein to the tears that threatened to spill.

"Oh, honey. What is it?" Lisa asked, gently touching Heather's arm.

Heather swallowed hard. She didn't want to talk about what was bothering her, but knew if she didn't, the tears would come, and she wanted that even less. "I don't know if I should be here," she blurted.

"Why do you feel that way?" Lisa asked, her smile having evaporated, concern now etched on her face.

How best to explain it? Heather sighed. Taking a deep breath, she said, "It just seems like a lot of things have happened since I've been here. A lot of bad things," she clarified.

Lisa narrowed her eyes, trying to understand. "And you somehow feel responsible?"

Heather looked into Lisa's eyes and shrugged.

"Heather, don't blame yourself. There's always something happening in this house. With this many people living together, it's only to be expected."

Heather saw Lisa's smile and recognized it as false. She'd seen enough of them in her life to know when a smile was used merely for show, but this was the first time she'd sensed Lisa was being insincere with her. There was obviously

something Lisa wasn't saying.

"You just have to not let it get to you," Lisa continued. "I assure you, you're not to blame for anything that's happened here recently."

Lisa's smile had returned, but Heather recognized it as genuine. Whatever had crossed Lisa's mind, it hadn't been about her.

Heather returned the smile. "I suppose you're right," she said.

Lisa's smile widened. "You really are doing a wonderful job here, Heather."

"Thank you." Heather nervously brushed back a few loose strands of her long auburn hair.

"Aside from the negative things you mentioned before, have your thoughts changed about staying on here after your probationary period is up?" Lisa asked.

Heather thought for a moment before answering. "I think I would really enjoy working here."

"Then congratulations are in order!" Lisa smiled. "Your probationary period has officially ended. You're Hollingsworth Manor's newest permanent employee!"

Heather was too stunned to reply. "Thank you," she finally managed to reply.

"You're welcome! How soon can you have your things ready to move into the manor?"

"Umm. Tomorrow?" Heather offered weakly.

"That'll be fine," Lisa smiled. "We'll have Mr. O'Connor move your things. Right now, I'm going to call your former agency and make the necessary arrangements with them." Lisa stepped forward and embraced Heather. "Welcome to the family."

Heather gently gripped Lisa's shoulder and smiled.