

A Fork In The Road

Abigayle Nguyen drove her brown Jeep into the nearly deserted parking lot of her parents' restaurant. It was no surprise to her that Nguyen's Vietnamese Cuisine wasn't doing a great deal of business, even at noon. After her parents' carelessness, it was a wonder they had any customers left.

Still smarting from Stuart Hollingsworth's casual dismissal a short time before, Abigayle stormed into the restaurant and walked toward the kitchen where she suspected her parents would be. The smell of *ca chien*—crispy red snapper with tomato sauce—assaulted her nostrils. The aroma of the *nuoc mam*—the fish sauce which was an ingredient of the spicy tomato sauce—made Abigayle nauseous. Or maybe it was just being in the same room with her parents that produced that effect.

"You know, this just keeps getting better and better," Abigayle said before either of her parents could react. "One embarrassment is piled on top of another. Is there anything else I should be made aware of, or has the last shoe finally dropped?"

"Abigayle, I'm sorry you have been affected by this," said John Nguyen.

Narrowing her eyes in response to her daughter's accusatory tone, Rose Nguyen said, "Hopefully, we have seen the last of such incidents."

"Let's hope so!" said Abigayle, giving full rein to the frustration she'd felt since not getting the desired information about Dominique Carpenter from Stuart Hollingsworth. "I don't understand how you could let such things happen in the first place!"

"I don't understand how they did happen, Abigayle," John said, choosing to ignore his daughter's tone. "We had set up the review with Mr. Endicott in an effort to get more business so we could pay for our recent remodeling and equipment upgrades, but something went wrong." He shrugged.

"Obviously, if there are rats running through the dining room," Abigayle said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "What do you use to kill them anyway?"

"We use exterminators, Abigayle," John said patiently. "And they've been effective. The Department of Health returned and said the building was rodent-free."

"Well, it obviously isn't if they've been found here twice," Abigayle said.

"But they haven't been found in the kitchen," Rose snapped. "Not a sign of them there. The only place they found droppings was under one of the tables."

"Oh, well, I'm sure the customers don't mind sharing their tables," Abigayle retorted. "Whose table were they under? Preston Endicott's?"

"No," John said. "It was one of the tables in the center of the room."

Rose Nguyen wrinkled her face, trying to remember. "I think there was a black woman sitting there that day."

"One of the regulars?" Abigayle asked.

"No. She wasn't a regular. She was sort of an older woman. She had graying hair that was tied up in those long things," Rose said, wiggling her fingers to indicate she couldn't think of the word.

Normally, her mother's finger-wiggling was irritating enough to drive Abigayle into a frenzy, but at that moment, she barely noticed. There was a sick feeling in the pit of

Abigayle's stomach that had nothing to do with *ca chien* or *nuoc mam*. "You mean dreadlocks?"

"Dreadlocks! Yes!" Rose said.

"The black woman," Abigayle said breathlessly. "What color were her eyes?"

Rose stared thoughtfully at her daughter. "Hmm. That's odd."

"What?" Abigayle asked.

"I hadn't thought about it until you mentioned it, but I seem to recall she wore sunglasses the entire time."

"Goddammit!" Abigayle stomped her foot and swept back her hair in a flurry of rage. At last, everything made sense. She walked away from her startled parents and out of the restaurant without another word.



Kris Hollingsworth pulled her black Mercedes onto the busy boulevard beside which Hollingsworth Publishing sat, hoping the speeding cars wouldn't hit her. She safely settled into the space behind a rumbling UPS van, glad to be in a

position that didn't take a lot of thought. She wasn't sure she had the wherewithal to change lanes at the moment.

When she'd arrived at her husband's office, he had already left for lunch. She'd hoped to surprise him, and they could go to a nice, romantic restaurant to rekindle their relationship. Kris had no doubt she had to be vigilant to keep her husband on the right track.

It was certainly odd that he was gone at 11:30. Many times he didn't leave for lunch at all, preferring to pore over some piece of business or another. His devotion to his work was amazing.

An idea formed in Kris' mind for an alternative to her fanciful lunch. They'd had a good time at the wine tasting the prior weekend, so perhaps it would be beneficial to bring back some of those feelings.

She turned into a small parking lot at the very edge of the major business district. The place was small, but didn't look dangerous. She didn't frequent liquor stores, but Bob's Beer and Spirits looked like a likely place to find what she wanted.

The inside was nicely stocked, and several customers were combing the isles. A prominent wine display drew her to the back of the store to where a large assortment of the beverage was stacked on the shiny metal shelves.

As she passed the five-dollar section, she briefly wondered what Edward's reaction would be if she brought one of them home. He probably wouldn't think it was very funny. With that in mind, she bypassed the wine-in-a-box variety, and stopped in front of a selection containing some of the wines they'd recently tasted. Edward had been particularly fond of one in particular, if Kris could just remember the name.

As she searched the labels, she was aware of the sound of heavy footsteps approaching, but she thought nothing of it. The touch on her arm, however, was unexpected.

"Hi, Kris. What are you doing here?"

She was relieved to see the friendly face of Bruce Dooley. "Hello," she greeted him enthusiastically, pulling him into a brief hug. When she released him, she said, "I'm looking for a good dinner wine."

Bruce looked slightly flushed. "You'll find it here, they have a great selection."

Green eyes glanced back to the racks. "It certainly looks like it. I just need to learn how to speak French to figure out what I want."

He gazed at the price range of the bottles she was perusing. "I think anything out of that section would be a nice choice. With wine, you usually get what you pay for."

"Have you ever had this?" she asked, holding up the bottle she'd been scrutinizing.

Bruce looked closely at the name. "I don't think so. Not too many of the customers I serve have such fine tastes. And neither do I, for that matter."

"Oh, come on. You seem sophisticated enough to me."

He laughed, his face holding an expression somewhere between amused and astounded. "That's not something I hear everyday. I must be a lot more refined than I give myself credit for."

"Probably so," Kris said. If being humble could be a fault, it was the only one she'd ever seen in the quiet bartender.

"How are you?" they both asked at the same time.

Chuckling again, Bruce said, "I'm doing fine. I work too much to get in trouble. How 'bout you?"

"I'm doing better. It's been a wild few weeks, but I suppose I'll be stronger if I survive," she joked.

"You will. You're plenty strong enough. I've been thinking about you since that day at the art fair." The bartender turned somber. "I hated hearing that punk got out on bail."

Kris glanced away. She didn't even like thinking about what had happened, much less the possibility that her attacker was somewhere near. "Yeah, I would have preferred they kept him in custody. There's not anything we can do about it, though. I'm just hoping he'll be back in jail soon."

"We can hope. The legal system is a strange entity, but it usually works."

Pursing her lips, the young woman wasn't sure she believed that was true. So much seemed to be in the news lately that indicated otherwise. "Do you really think so? Sometimes I wonder."

"Nothing is foolproof, but there are so many technicalities that must be adhered to, it's almost impossible for an innocent person to get convicted. I think it does work. In my experience, people get what's coming to them, one way or the other." Bruce ran a hand over his mustache and nodded.

"Well, I hope that guy gets a long time to think about what he did to me." Kris replaced the wine bottle on the shelf. "What are you doing here, anyway? I would have thought you had access to any kind of alcohol you want."

"We ran out of grenadine," he replied, his eyes scanning her face.

Kris shook her head, trying to place the name. "Is that some sort of vodka?"

Bruce laughed and said, "No, it's a syrup made from pomegranate juice."

"What's a pomegranate?" Kris wrinkled her nose. The word just sounded disgusting.

Bruce covered his mouth and tried not to laugh. "I don't have a clue, but I'll be happy to add a dash of it to your soda the next time you're at The Blue Streak. It's really not half bad."

Kris smiled brightly, already looking forward to her next visit to the bar. "It's a deal."



Dominique Carpenter sighed heavily as she turned the car onto a highway that would take them south. *Finally!* she thought. Her mother's silly habit of not carrying cash had caused them to have to detour farther west than Dominique would have liked, but at least there now appeared to be no toll roads between them and their destination.

Dominique glanced over at her mother in the passenger's seat. Constance Hollingsworth's nose was still buried in a manuscript. Dominique shook her head. *Just my luck to get the gene that gave me her green eyes, but not the one that prevents motion sickness.*

Dominique returned her attention to the road and wondered how long the return trip to Georgia would take. It had taken her almost twenty-two hours to drive from Athens to Gossamer Falls, but that had been when she was alone and traveling the more expedient toll roads. Their unplanned detour meant the return trip would probably take longer. Constance had already made plain her

preference not to ride for more than eight hours each day, and Dominique had reluctantly agreed. Without money of her own, she had to let her mother call the shots.

Again looking over at her mother, Dominique thought, *Money and power go hand in hand in your world, Mama. And until I get home, I won't have either. Where does that leave me?* Dominique sighed and returned her gaze to the road. They were going to be in the car together for at least three days. She didn't see much sense in making the trip seem even longer by remaining stressed out or angry about things over which she had no control.

Constance put down the manuscript and spoke, disturbing Dominique's thoughts. "Are you hungry, Dominique?"

Dominique looked down at the silent radio's clock. It was just after noon. She hated to lose any more traveling time, but had to admit she was hungry. "I'm gettin' that way."

"Then why don't we find somewhere to eat?" Constance suggested.

Dominique tried to swallow the resentment that rose within her. She knew it wasn't her mother's fault that she'd been robbed and almost killed, but she couldn't help feeling as if she was still being victimized. She wondered why she felt that way. Was it because her mother seemed to be making all the decisions while she was powerless to do anything but accept the consequences? *Just like when she gave me away*, came the unbidden thought, driving the air from Dominique's lungs with the realization of its truth.

A torrent of memories, vivid in their recall, tore through Dominique. She and Tessa were at the center of each. In an instant, she seemingly recalled every single thing she and her daughter had shared, and at the same time realized how many experiences she and Constance hadn't shared through no fault of their own.

"Dominique?" Constance said quietly.

Realizing she was near tears, Dominique fought to keep control. Seeing an exit ramp, she took it.

"Where are we going?" Constance asked, surveying the landscape.

"Right over that hill," Dominique said, pointing ahead to where a pair of golden arches could barely be seen cresting a ridge.

"You have to be kidding!" Constance said, her expression one of awestruck terror.

Suppressing a smile, Dominique said, "No, I'm not. What have you got against McDonald's anyway?"

"Nothing particular," Constance sniffed. "I've just never been to one is all," she added quietly.

"What?" It took all the effort Dominique could muster to keep from slamming on the brakes in the middle of the feeder lane. "Are you serious?"

"Completely," Constance said. "I've never eaten at a drive-thru in my life."

"Are you sure you lived in more than half the twentieth century?" Dominique asked, shaking her head as they pulled into the parking lot.

Once inside the restaurant, Constance came to a halt.

"What's wrong, Mama?"

"Where are the chairs?" Constance hissed.

Dominique managed to stifle her laughter, but couldn't contain her smile. "Right there."

Constance's mouth fell open. "We're supposed to sit in those yellow-and-red plastic monstrosities?"

"They're quite comfortable, actually," Dominique smiled.

Constance shook her head. "I need to go to the restroom," she said quietly, "but if the toilet is the same color scheme as the chairs, we're leaving." Walking away, she said, "See if you can get us a table."

Dominique smiled and stood beside a plastic potted plant until Constance returned a few minutes later.

"You haven't been seated?" Constance asked, her face and tone indignant.

"I thought I'd wait on you," Dominique said.

"Fine. Let's see if we can get seated and get a menu."

"I think we'd better do it the other way around," Dominique said.

"What?"

"You order first, then take a seat," Dominique explained, unable to stop smiling.

"Then where do we order?" Constance asked.

Dominique led her mother around the corner and pointed up. "There's the menu."

"A lighted board?" Constance shrieked, loud enough for people nearby to glance her way.

Dominique grinned and nodded while Constance diverted the gawkers with a glare.

"I'll defer to your judgment," Constance said, nodding toward the menu and searching her purse for a credit card.

"We'll have two Big Macs, two regular fries, and two large teas, please," Dominique said.

The smiling blonde who took the order repeated it over a microphone, startling Constance and causing her to drop the credit card. She hurriedly retrieved the card and handed it to Dominique, then stepped away.

Picking up their tray, Dominique turned to Constance. "Where do you want to sit?"

"Any seat that doesn't swivel is fine by me," Constance said tersely. "I can't believe how rude these people are! Did you hear the way that woman at the register shouted what we'd ordered? Someone should report her to her manager, and I've half a mind to do it."

Dominique chuckled as she unloaded the tray. "Mama, that *was* the manager."

"Oh," Constance said. "Then it's no wonder this place's decor looks like the aftermath of a kindergarten class' fingerpainting session. And can you believe they serve drinks in these absurd cups?"

Dominique grinned as she sipped tea through a straw. "What do you think of the food?" she asked after Constance had eaten a fry.

Constance shrugged. "Not bad, surprisingly."

Dominique smiled as she unwrapped her burger.

"Good Lord, what the hell is that?" Constance asked as she followed Dominique's lead.

"What's what?"

"That thing in the middle of my burger."

"It's an extra piece of bread," Dominique said.

Constance turned the sandwich every possible angle, carefully scrutinizing it. Her face scrunched in confusion, she looked to Dominique. "What purpose does it serve?"

Dominique smiled and shrugged. "Damned if I know."



Harris Hollingsworth looked up from his desk when he heard his office door close. "Lisa!" he exclaimed, surprised to see his beautiful wife standing beside the door. "I didn't know you were here!"

"I don't think Joyce even knows I'm here," Lisa said. "She seemed hard at work and I didn't want to bother her."

"I'm sure you wouldn't have," Harris said.

Lisa leaned back against the wall, placed one foot against it, and raised her hem, displaying a considerable length of leg beneath her lilac skirt. "I'm not—bothering—you, am I?" she breathed huskily.

"Only in a good way," Harris smiled, rising to greet her.

After sharing a gentle kiss, Lisa asked, "How's your day?"

Harris shrugged. "Fine. It's a little weird with Stuart in the big office, but it's not bad."

"How's Edward handling it?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Great. He's probably in a mood."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Harris said. "So what have you been up to?"

Lisa sat down in one of the brown leather chairs opposite Harris' desk. "Well, I hired Heather on a permanent basis."

Harris tugged at his tie, trying to get it to relinquish its stranglehold as he returned to his desk chair. His thick brown eyebrows knit in confusion. "I thought you had more time to make a decision about that."

"I did, but I talked to Molly earlier, and she said Heather was feeling a little low, so I thought she might be worrying about whether or not she was going to be staying on as Molly's assistant, and I decided to put her mind at ease."

Harris smiled. "That was a very considerate and generous thing for you to do, Lisa."

"It was the right thing," Lisa said. "At least, I feel that way."

"I'm sure it was the right decision," Harris said.

Lisa shifted in the chair and leaned forward. "You know, there's something I want to discuss with you."

"What is it?" From her pursed lips and the intense expression in her brown eyes, Harris knew whatever Lisa wanted to discuss was big.

"I want to get a job," she blurted.

Harris licked his lips. It was one of the last things he would've expected her to say. "What sort of job?"

"Just something part-time." Lisa perched on the edge of her seat, her eyes pleading for understanding. "Harris, you have to know that I love being your wife, and I love being Mark and Nathan's mother, but I feel like I need to be doing more with my life than taking them to and from school and occasionally meeting you for lunch."

Harris stood and reached across his desk, gently stroking Lisa's chin. "I know you love me and the boys. I could never doubt that. And if a job is what you want, then I support you."

Lisa stood and walked around the desk into Harris' ready embrace.

"What are you interested in doing?" Harris asked.

"I don't know," Lisa admitted. "I hadn't thought ahead that far."

Harris pulled her to him. "You could come to work for me."

Lisa placed a hand against his chest and slowly moved it down his torso. "Aren't their rules against sleeping with the boss?" she asked.

"Only if you don't want to," he said breathlessly.

Lisa laughed. "I don't know what I want to do, Harris."

"You don't want to sleep with me?" he pouted.

"You know the answer to that," Lisa said, leaning forward to kiss him. "I just don't know what I want to do as a job."

"Well," Harris said, consulting his watch, "why don't we go get a bite to eat and see if we can come up with any ideas? If not, maybe you can talk to Stuart and find out if there are any job openings at Hollingsworth Publishing when we return."

"Oh, I do love a man with a plan," Lisa grinned.



The building was a little darker and mustier than those to which he was accustomed, but Edward didn't much mind the dinginess. Attorney Reed Monroe was doing a spectacular job for him thus far. If the man was lucky, Edward would help him move into an environment more appropriate for a practitioner of the law.

Stepping into the attorney's office, the publisher noted the ringing bell over the door and the lack of a secretary. A worn wooden desk, sections of particleboard showing where the finish had eroded, sat in the center of the small lobby. An open doorway to the right led to where the attorney worked.

Edward proceeded into the small room without waiting. Monroe sat behind his desk, his head been over a stack of papers, oblivious to his visitor. Pausing in the doorway, Edward narrowed his eyes at the man and cleared his throat.

The attorney stood quickly, an alarmed look on his face. Edward had no doubt the man had barged in on before under less pleasant circumstances. Monroe's wrinkled white shirt showed sweat stains across his bulging stomach and under his arms.

Edward smoothed his blue silk tie, knowing it cost more than this man's entire wardrobe. "Hello, Mr. Monroe."

The man's frightened grimace turned into a conspiratorial smile and he ran a shaky hand through his greasy blond hair. "Nice to see you, Mr. Hollingsworth."

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

Monroe cocked his head. "You're the one with the bucks."

Raising his eyebrows, Edward knew this man was exactly who he needed to pull his plan off. "If you play this right, I will not be the only one."

The attorney's smile turned desperate as he sat down, pointing to the chair across from his desk. "I'm listening."

Edward looked at the chair and its layer of dust, and remained standing. "The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that your client suffered a grave injustice." Reed Monroe and Kirk Griffith, the man who had assaulted Kris, had more to offer the publisher, though he seriously doubted either one of them realized it.

"Please continue," Monroe said, obviously not following.

"I think you should demand an immediate court date."

Monroe's whole face pursed in concentration. "I'm not sure I see the logic in that."

Edward smiled. "Give me a moment to explain, and you will."

The lawyer leaned back as far as possible in his stiff wooden chair and listened raptly as Edward went into the details of his scheme. The publisher's voice was calm as he detailed each point that would bring him closer to the result he desired, his crystal eyes gleaming in controlled delight.

When he was finished, Edward asked, "What do you think?"

Reed smiled confidently. "I think I'm glad you approached me to represent Mr.

Griffith."