

Waiting For the Stocking To Drop

"Oh, Donald," Abigayle Nguyen called, smiling sweetly at her editor from his office's doorway.

Looking up from his desk, Donald Farraday stared at the young reporter. "Whatta ya want, Nguyen?"

Abigayle walked slowly toward Donald's desk. "I want to talk to you about the conversation I had yesterday with Stuart Hollingsworth."

"I read your article. It was good enough to make today's paper, but not exactly front-page material. Know what I'm saying, Nguyen?" Donald wiped perspiration from his forehead with a white handkerchief taken out of his shirt pocket.

"You're saying I didn't find out what you wanted to know about Dominique Carpenter and how she's fitting in with her newfound family."

Donald winked. "Always figured you for a smart one."

Abigayle snorted. "Then see what you think about this piece of information," she smiled seductively and leaned across his desk. "I have it on good authority that at this very moment, Constance Hollingsworth is on her way to make a huge business deal in Georgia."

"You're grinning like the proverbial cat, Nguyen. What else is there?"

Abigayle smiled wickedly. "And guess who she took with her?"

Donald's brow creased in concentration, then he spoke, his voice edged with hope, "Dominique Carpenter?"

"Give the man a prize," Abigayle grinned.

"Where'd you hear that?" Donald asked.

Abigayle clicked her tongue. "For shame, Donald. Don't you know that a good reporter never reveals her sources?"

Donald glared at her for a moment, then asked, "How reliable is the source?"

"Very. The person was given the information by one of the involved parties."

Donald leaned back in his chair, which creaked, protesting his weight. "So Constance Hollingsworth leaves one son in charge, then takes her daughter on an important trip." His eyes probed Abigayle's. "You think she's trying to teach her daughter the ropes for a reason?"

"Could be," Abigayle said. "She's getting old. Someone has to take over."

Donald's gaze drifted into the distance. "There'll be one hell of a headline on the day she hands over the reins."

"Maybe we could get a head start on it," Abigayle said quickly.

Donald focused on Abigayle. "What do you mean?"

Abigayle's brown eyes gleamed. "Why don't you authorize an expense account for me? I could fly down to Georgia and cover whatever is taking place."

"That's beyond my authority, Nguyen. Besides, it doesn't sound as if you fully know what's happening. What kind of business deal? Acquiring another publishing company? Wooing major authors away from their current publishers? What?"

Abigayle frowned. "Don't be such a downer. Have a little faith."

Donald smiled. "Never said I wouldn't check into it, Nguyen, but I have to go through the boss, and he's a stickler for details. The more the better, especially where his money is concerned."

"Fine," Abigayle said. "At least see what he says, then get back to me."



Rahne O'Connor turned to the next page in the two-inch-thick file, hoping some new kernel of information would show up. If she didn't find something riveting soon, the case was going to be a big loser. She'd already been at the office for two hours and it wasn't even nine yet. The day was not starting off well.

The murder trial for which she was preparing was in five days. For a case this big, she needed much more time to memorize the file. Unfortunately, she'd just finished another monster trial the day before. The murderers and drug dealers in Gossamer Falls didn't keep a very good schedule as far as she was concerned.

Her next trial looked to be particularly painful. Most of the time the victims of

the crimes seemed so distant and uninvolved. The Lawler murder, however, was very different. The deceased, a small girl from a middle-class family, would be the center of everything. With the evidence as circumstantial as it was, Rahne had no choice but to play on the jury's outrage.

A timid knock sounded on the door, and the attorney summoned the petitioner into the room.

Her faithful legal assistant, Jera, opened the door and stopped in the archway. Though a path did exist amongst the stacks of files covering the floor, the attractive young woman rarely took it unless she was forced. Not to mention that she knew her boss needed space.

"How are you this morning?" she asked.

Rahne appreciated the woman's attempt at pleasantness. "I've been better. What's up?" The attorney noted a file in her assistant's hand.

"It depends on your perspective as to whether this is good news or not. I was hoping you were in a good mood." Jera smiled sheepishly.

"You should have known better," Rahne said. Her assistant had to deal with her bad moods more than anyone, so she really *should* have known.

"It never hurts to dream," she replied, walking to the desk. The file unceremoniously plopped onto the ancient maple desktop. "Reed Monroe filed a motion."

Rahne snarled. "You mean they didn't confiscate his computer yet? What kind of motion did he file?" She began flipping through the documents.

"Motion to set trial. He apparently is anxious to get things moving for Griffith."

Shaking her head, the attorney said, "Isn't that special? I'll be damned if I'm gonna let him do that. The bastard needs to wait his turn like everyone else."

The younger assistant walked back to the doorway. "You've got a hearing on the motion this afternoon."

"*What?*" Rahne stood up, sending the chair rolling into the wall. "How the hell did he manage that?"

Jera took another step back. "I have no idea, but he did. Do you need me to do anything?"

Sighing, the tall brunette took a step backward and dropped into her seat. "Not unless you're hiring out as a hitman these days."

"I'll be in my office, then," the assistant said, slinking from the room.

Rahne opened the Griffith file again and began searching through the pleadings. She didn't know how Reed Monroe had managed it, but he certainly did have the wheels of justice in motion. Now all Rahne needed to do was figure out a way to get them to run over him.



Heather Patterson stared at the blank wall of her new room in Hollingsworth Manor, still in quiet disbelief that she was moving into her new home. The room, tucked neatly away in the rear of the massive house near Molly's, was only slightly larger than the young maid's apartment bedroom, but that really didn't matter.

"Where do ya want these, lass?"

Heather turned around to Clifton O'Connor, who was standing inside the doorway with his arms filled with boxes. Lisa had asked the kind man to help move her belongings. "Over there with the others will be fine," she said, pointing to the far corner.

"Good choice," he responded, ready to set down the heavy box.

"There can't be much left, can there?" It seemed as if he'd been bringing in her things for hours.

The handyman flexed his arms. "I think there's one box left. You've certainly got yer share of clothes, if ya don't mind me sayin'."

The young woman laughed. She'd heard that before. "I didn't think I had that many, but it seems like it at the moment."

"Looks like you'll have enough room for yer stuff, though."

"Yeah, I think it will look nice when I have everything fixed. I still can't get over this." She turned back to the room and examined every inch of it. Her possessions looked so out of place stacked as they were on the perfect carpet.

Clifton moved beside her. "You'll like it here. The place is quiet when the

windows aren't explodin'."

She chuckled and rolled her eyes at him. "I hope that doesn't happen too often."

"Don't hold yer breath darlin'. Ya can handle it, though."

"You really think so?" she asked him sincerely.

"Sure ya can. You've got the goods." Clifton comfortingly patted her on the shoulder. "Now I need ta get that last box."

Smiling, Heather moved to the bureau and opened the makeup case sitting atop it. She took out a hair-tie and pulled her long auburn hair into a ponytail. She wanted to get her things situated as soon as possible. Maybe that would make her feel like she belonged.

She placed a small box on the mattress and began removing its contents. Her favorite books would go into the small nightstand beside the full-sized bed. The decor was fairly plain, but that suited her fine.

It would be so different living with people again. Heather realized it wouldn't be like having roommates, but at least there would be no more days during which she saw or spoke to no one. And having Molly next door would be amazing. The older maid constantly went out of her way to make Heather feel as if she were part of the family.

Taking a deep breath, the young woman tried to calm her thoughts. Though she was very hopeful about the change taking place in her life, she needed to make sure she didn't get carried away with it. Like so often turned out to be the case in her life, her plans didn't always turn out like she wanted.

Her deep brown eyes returned to the open door as Clifton O'Connor brought in the last box. "You can put that on the bed," she told him, remembering its contents.

"This was the easiest one o' the lot," he said, stopping at the footboard. "I should've brought it first."

As he released the small cardboard box, Heather stood, sending a wave through the soft down mattress and sending the package careening to the floor. Landing on its corner, the box's silky contents spread across the green carpet.

They both knelt and began gathering the clothes. Heather remained silent,

though she knew her face was red. Clifton's face was two shades beyond maroon, and his eyes were as round as melons.

"My goodness," he croaked, shoving a red thong into the box. "Sorry, missy. I'm an oaf today."

Heather laughed nervously. "Oh, it's okay, Clifton. I don't suppose this is the first time a man's seen my panties." She wadded up the last articles and shoved them deep into the container. Standing, she carefully tucked the receptacle against the headboard.

Clifton remained in a crouch. "Do you need anything else?" he asked, swallowing hard.

"No, I think you've done quite enough. Thank you so much."

"Great. No problem," he said with a strained smile. Beads of sweat trailed down his creased forehead. "Anything ya need, and I mean *anything*, I'm yer man." Still on one knee, he spun around, then stood and left the room.

Heather chuckled as she watched him leave, wondering what could be going on in his head. They were just underwear, after all. Living in Hollingworth Manor had a lot of strange possibilities, and, thankfully, most of them were good.



Turn around. Mark Hollingsworth beamed the thought at the back of Tiffany Stevens' head, but the pretty blonde kept chatting with her friends. Mark sighed and returned his attention to his lunch tray.

Being rich couldn't save Mark from the horrors of Gossamer Falls Junior High's cafeteria food. The day's mystery meat could've been either a shriveled pork chop or a fried chicken patty and dessert was a gelatin mold that Mark was willing to wager contained ninety percent mold and ten percent gelatin. His eyes left the plate and refocused on the back of Tiffany's head.

"Earth to Mark." Jeff Davis waved a chubby hand in front of Mark's face as he sat across from him at the table. A smile lit Jeff's freckled face.

"Go away, Jeff," Mark said.

"Dude, you're blocking his view," Michael Hawthorne said as he slid into the chair next to Mark's.

"Don't start with the fat jokes, Hawthorne," Jeff said. "It's not like there aren't any for blonds."

"No fat jokes and *especially* no blonde jokes," Mark warned.

"Oh, of course not," Jeff said, rolling his eyes. "Can't let your girlfriend hear one of those, can you?"

"She's not my girlfriend," Mark said hastily.

"Dude," Michael said, digging into his food, "you take her to your house every day after school. If she's not your girlfriend, what is she?"

Mark felt his cheeks flush. "She's just a friend."

"Who just happens to be a girl," Jeff grinned.

"Sounds like a girlfriend to me," Michael said.

"Like you even know what a girlfriend is," Mark retorted.

"Ouch!" Jeff said. "That was low."

"Not as low as your IQ," Michael said.

Jeff's eyes narrowed as he scanned the room to see if any teachers were watching, then he glared at Michael and extended his middle finger.

"Ooh." Michael widened his eyes. "That hurt."

"Will you guys knock it off?" Mark shook his head in disgust. "How can you eat that crap, Michael?"

"I'm hungry."

"I'm hungry, too," Jeff said, "but even I have standards."

Michael snorted. "You gonna eat that?" He indicated the green glop on Mark's plate.

"I don't eat anything I don't recognize," Mark said.

"Do you recognize Jerome Taylor's fist?" Jeff asked.

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"We heard him talking after first period," Michael said around a mouthful of gelatin.

"Yeah," Jeff said. "He said you made him look bad in front of his friends the other day and he's gonna make you sorry."

Mark sneered. "I'm not afraid of Jerome Taylor."

"You're not?" Jeff asked.

"No!" Mark said. "Are you?"

Jeff nodded.

"Yup," Michael burped loudly, causing several girls, including Tiffany, to turn and glance his way.

Mark blushed and forced a smile when Tiffany's disgusted expression vanished as she recognized him. "No need to be afraid of Jerome," he hissed to Michael between clenched teeth. "I'm going to kill you before he has a chance."



Abigayle took a large bite of pastrami and provolone on whole wheat, but didn't take time to relish the taste. Her mind was far too busy to find pleasure in her lunch.

She'd spent most of the morning reviewing the things she'd learned about Dominique Carpenter and Constance Hollingsworth. Dominique had lived in Athens, Georgia before coming to Gossamer Falls, but she'd been born in Roseboro, Georgia. That was where she and her rich bitch of a mother were headed.

Haywood Johnson. What a crappy name, Abigayle thought. According to what Clifton had told her in his drunken daze the previous night, that was the name of Dominique's father. Abigayle had searched for the name on the Internet, but hadn't been able to find Haywood's name listed in any Georgia cemetery. It wasn't that surprising given the circumstances of his death almost a half-century before, and it made Abigayle's quest a lot easier.

The most difficult part of Abigayle's task thus far had been compiling a list of all the Johnsons she could find in Roseboro. From what she could tell, the whole

town must be inbred. Supposedly, only five thousand people lived in the town, but Abigayle was certain she'd already seen that many listings for Johnsons.

Abigayle had already determined she was going to Georgia whether or not Donald authorized an expense account for her. What Dominique had done by sabotaging her parents' restaurant begged to be revenged. And Abigayle strongly suspected Dominique hadn't been alone in her efforts. No, the entire caper stank of Constance Hollingsworth's behind-the-scenes manipulations.

Abigayle grinned as a delicious shudder raced through her entire body. *Just wait, you bitches. You messed around with my family, and now it's time I return the favor.*