

Time In A Bottle

The thin strip of light visible beneath the room's closed door was enough to let Edward Hollingsworth know its occupant was awake. Fingering the suede box tucked inside his pocket, Edward lightly knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Edward opened the door and stepped inside. His breath caught in his throat as he found himself staring at the scantily clad Heather Patterson.

"Oh! I thought you were Molly," the young woman said, reaching for a towel and covering herself.

"I am sorry. I should have identified myself. I will wait outside while you dress," Edward said, trying not to let the image of her voluptuous breasts spilling from the black lace bra become indelibly imprinted in his mind.

"You don't have to leave," Heather said. "Just give me a minute."

"Very well," Edward said, turning around not only to give Heather a modicum of privacy, but also to shield his growing arousal.

"Okay," Heather said.

Edward turned to see her smoothing her maid's uniform skirt. Her cleavage was still visible.

"What did you want to see me about?" Her eyes intently searched Edward's.

Remembering his purpose for the visit, Edward brought out the small suede box from his pocket. "This is for you."

Heather smiled warmly. "From your trip?"

Edward nodded. "I told you I would bring you something."

Heather ran a blood-red fingernail across the box's surface before opening it. Her eyes widened in appreciation. "Oh, Edward," she said breathlessly.

"Do you like it?" he asked with more concern than he had felt himself capable of mustering.

"It's beautiful," she said, carefully lifting the diamond necklace with a fingertip.

"Allow me to put it on you," Edward said. He took the necklace from its box. As he moved behind her, she gathered her long auburn hair in one hand and held it up so he could fasten the diamonds around her neck. The fresh, clean scent of her hair was enticing, as was the delicate expanse of exposed neck. It took all of Edward's willpower to not press his lips against her skin and sample her unique taste, to give in to the desires that stirred within him, to do the very thing of which Kris had accused him. Hampered by his throbbing erection, Edward's fingers fumbled with the clasp before fastening it.

"How does it look?" Heather asked, turning to face him.

"Marvelous," Edward whispered huskily. Just as he had imagined it would, the sharp V of the diamonds had come to rest at the top of her cleavage.

"Thank you," she said softly, stepping forward and pressing herself against him in a brief embrace.

Edward swallowed hard as Heather stepped back. With their bodies pressed together, he knew she had recognized his arousal, but her expression gave no indication of her thoughts. Her eyes remained fixed on his. In their brown depths, Edward saw more questions than answers.

"I should be going," he said, awkwardly walking toward the door.

"Thank you," she said again.

Edward was unsure of her gratitude's meaning, but managed to utter, "You are very welcome," as he opened the door.

Heather stood in the doorway and fingered the necklace, at last letting it drop between her breasts. Edward licked his lips as she said, "I'll see you at breakfast."

"Yes," he said.

Heather gently closed the door. Edward took a deep breath and adjusted his crotch before walking away, oblivious to the human form standing in the shadowed hall and the azure eyes that remained fixed on him as he made his way toward the informal dining room.



Ideas were hard to come by when she was under so much stress, but Kris Hollingsworth's diary was literally calling to her to write in it. For the first time in a couple of days she felt as if she could come up with an interesting, cathartic entry. She tried not to get her hopes up, but Kris thought she might feel good if she wrote.

Her step a little lighter, Kris rounded the corner and entered her sacred sunroom. She'd always found it a sanctuary away from Edward and the rest of the manor's troubles. She was surprised, but not displeased, to see someone else in her traditional seat.

"Dominique! Fancy meeting you here."

Crystal green eyes looked up from a book. "Hi there, girl. What are you up to?"

"I'm writing," Kris said, smiling, holding up her pen and notebook as proof.

"That's great. Don't let me disturb you." The dark-haired woman began to rise.

Kris waved her back down. "Don't be silly. You're not gonna disturb me. Stay right there. It might be nice to have some company besides Edward, actually." The young woman sat in the wicker lounge chair beside her sister-in-law.

Dominique's eyes cut to the floor. Kris almost thought she saw guilt there. "What is it?" she asked.

"I heard you and Edward arguing last night."

"Oh," was all the blonde could say.

"If you need to talk about it, or anything, I just want you to know I'm here."

This time, Kris' eyes shot away. "I appreciate that, but I think I'm okay. There's nothing to talk about, really. I'm sure you know that if you heard it all."

A deep breath escaped the older woman. "It was a doozy."

Despite her melancholy, Kris chuckled. "You've got that right. Might as well not waste an opportunity, I say."

They were both quiet for several moments, then Kris said, "My brother is coming to visit me."

"That's great!" Dominique said, her face showing approval. "I think that is a

good idea for you. I'm sure he'll lend you some support."

"Yeah, he's a great guy. I can't wait for him to get here. During college, I lived with him for a while and he really helped me out."

"I'll be delighted to meet him, then. Every woman deserves a big brother to protect her," Dominique said, not seeming to notice she'd never had one of her own.

Kris nodded. Kyle had been around for her time after time when she'd been younger, trying to live up to her father's expectations. Though they'd been out of contact for a while, she knew her brother would never change. "I don't really know what he can do to change this situation, but at least he'll be here."

"Maybe he can put the fear of God in ol' Ed."

Shaking her head, Kris laughed. "I doubt that, but I'd love to see him try. I don't think Edward is afraid of anything."

Dominique turned serious. "I can't say I know where the man is coming from, Kris, but I do know one thing. You deserve to be treated better."

The little blonde blushed, and she patted the older woman's leg. "Thanks."

"Now before I drain all the creativeness out of you, why don't you get to writing. I've got another world to visit," Dominique said, holding up her book.

Agreeing, Kris pulled a lap desk onto her legs and opened her diary. Her heart still warm, she began to write.



"Ahhhhh!" Lisa Hollingsworth shrieked between clenched teeth as she hung up the telephone.

"Are ya okay, Lisa?" Molly Crenshaw asked as she entered the den. She carried a few pieces of newly polished silver delicately balanced on a tray.

"I'm fine," Lisa smiled. "I'm just aggravated with all this school stuff."

Molly frowned. "The school board refused to clear Mark's record?"

"Oh, no," Lisa said. "At least I hope that's not the case. I haven't heard from them yet. I was just talking to someone at the Sheltered Oaks Academy, which

is where I want to send the boys, and they're willing to accept Nathan right now, but they won't take Mark because of behavioral concerns regarding his suspension."

Molly shook her head. "No wonder ye're upset."

"I'm just tired of waiting. This whole situation is unreasonable." Lisa shook her head irritably, then waved her hands. "Enough about that. How're things with you?"

"With me?"

"With you and Leyland," Lisa grinned.

Molly smiled and blushed. "Oh, it's nice ta have a man's company, ya know."

"I know."

"He's a dear man, really he is. I'm afraid he may be a bit too much for me, though."

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "Too much?"

"He's an active man," Molly said. "He likes ta dance."

"That's a problem?" Lisa laughed. "I wish I had that problem with Harris."

Molly smiled. "Ah, it's not the dancing that's bad. It's how I feel afterward."

"How do you feel?"

"My body aches. My joints stiffen. I enjoy being with him, but my body doesn't seem ta share my enthusiasm."

"Oh, Molly. I'm sure there has to be some way for you to enjoy Leyland's company without being in pain. Why don't you see a doctor?"

"I'm going to," Molly smiled. "With Heather here, I don't feel so bad about leavin' my responsibilities behind. She's a very capable girl. And with Leyland back in town, well," Molly turned maroon, "I realize just how much I enjoy his company."

Lisa smiled broadly. "That is so great, Molly. I am so happy for you."

"You don't think—" Molly licked her lips.

"Think what?"

"That I'm being foolish?"

"For caring about Leyland?"

Molly nodded.

"Not at all! Molly, you deserve to be happy, and if Leyland makes you happy, there's nothing at all foolish about having feelings for him."

Molly nodded slowly. "Even at my age?"

Lisa laughed. "Honey, as long as you have a pulse, you're never too old."



John Nguyen wrung his hands and leaned forward in the unrelenting, stiff chair in which he sat. He and Rose had been waiting ten minutes for the banker to return. It was hard to tell if the delay was good or bad, but something told him things weren't going well.

"Where is she?" Rose asked, looking over her shoulder to the glass cubicles behind them.

The slim man patted her hand. "She will be back soon, I'm sure. Hopefully she is trying to work something out for us."

"Or she doesn't want to come back and tell us they are taking the restaurant."

John scowled at her, but he knew his wife to be a sound judge of character. He hated to admit it, but she was probably right. "Have faith, dear."

Rose tried to smile, but failed. The pain on her face broke her husband's heart. "Faith will not pay the rent, John."

Sighing, John turned to look into the bank, unable to look in his wife's eyes any longer. He still couldn't see their loan officer, but another familiar person strode into the lobby, causing him to cringe. "Our daughter is here," he whispered.

"Abigayle?" Rose asked, spinning in her uncomfortable chair.

"Yes. I hope she does not see us," he answered. If their strong-willed child knew what was going on, she would be more upset than she usually was.

They both turned away from the glass wall and stared ahead, forgetting about the bank officer. The sounds of the lobby changed as Abigayle took it over, apparently setting up interviews with various tellers. John had heard of the bank robbery, but did not connect Abigayle to it. He should have known she'd somehow have a hand in the story.

The sounds quieted, then a voice from behind said, "Mama, Papa, is that you?"

John closed his eyes, knowing his premonition had been correct. "Hello, Abigayle. What are you doing here?"

"I'm covering the aftermath of the robbery. Why are you here?" The young woman stepped into the office and closed the door.

John was glad of that. "We have some business to take care of. Nothing for you to worry about." He could feel Rose glaring at him and wished she would stop.

Abigayle looked from him to her mother. "What the hell is going on? If there was nothing to worry about you wouldn't be talking to a loan person instead of being at the restaurant in the middle of the damned day."

Rose silently urged John to tell Abigayle. "Calm down, daughter. It is not your business."

With her sternest look, the one she'd learned from her mother, Abigayle said, "It will be my business when I have to bail you out of whatever trouble you're in."

Exhaling heavily, John gave up. "We received a foreclosure notice, and we are here trying to get the loan restructured."

The reporter's jaw dropped. "Son of a bitch!" she exclaimed.

John looked outside the office, but no one seemed to have heard. "Abigayle, watch your mouth."

"Papa, don't even give me that! You're about to lose the business and you're worried about my mouth? What the hell are you going to do?"

Clenching his teeth and the arms of his chair, John worked hard not to lose his temper. "You are going to leave, and we are going to talk to the nice young woman who is helping us."

Narrowing her eyes, Abigayle looked as though she was about to say something very hateful. Instead, she turned and left the office. John squeezed his wife's hand and hoped the loan officer would return soon with good news.



Constance Hollingsworth swiveled her desk chair to look out at the waterfall in the distance. As she watched the roaring waters of the Gossamer River, she focused her thoughts on the future of Hollingsworth Publishing.

Stuart had done a credible job at the company's helm while she was in Georgia, but his reticence at firing his brother's executive secretary caused her concern. There was no room for sentimentality in business. The fact that the woman was the mother of Mark's girlfriend shouldn't have even been a consideration. That weakness made Constance wonder whether Stuart had the capability of remaining dispassionate under severe circumstances.

She had no such thoughts about Edward. Her eldest son was capable of being dispassionate to the point of being ruthless, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing in the competitive publishing industry. Her main concern with Edward, however, was that given enough rein to make decisions, he would effect radical change in company policy and operations. Change could be good, but Edward's ideas of change were so sweeping that putting them all into effect would endanger the company's financial standing.

Still, Constance pondered whether to give Edward an extended opportunity to show what he could do from the CEO position or to give Harris an opportunity to show what he could do. She suspected that while Harris did a competent job as head of genre fiction, he lacked the necessary drive to run the entire company. His dedication to Lisa and the boys, while certainly admirable, could only be an impediment to his leadership.

Constance smiled slightly as her thoughts turned to Dominique. Though her strong-willed daughter had declared that she wanted nothing to do with Hollingsworth Publishing, Constance felt certain Dominique would be an asset to the company. If nothing else, her very presence should spur her brothers to new competitive heights.

Soon, very soon, Constance thought as a smile played upon her lips.



Regis Philbin's flashy silver tie and gigantic head dominated the television screen,

making no pretense as to the identity of the star of the show. Rahne had a general distaste for *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, but it seemed like when she and Trent sat down long enough to watch the tube, the channel always stuck there. The program seemed to be on as often as the news.

"I don't care what everyone else says, I still think *Jeopardy!* beats this show all to hell," she said.

On the leather couch beside her, Trent nodded. "This seems harder because it's more arbitrary, but for *Jeopardy!* you've got to be more diverse in your knowledge.

"Right, and Alex Trebek is not nearly as annoying."

The doctor gave her a raised eyebrow, but did not respond. He was very good at not lightly passing judgment on people, but he knew exactly about what she was talking. They were too much alike for him not to know.

"How did the board meeting go last night?" she asked. They usually tried not to talk about work too much, but the attorney knew big things were ahead for her partner.

Trent sighed, turning to her. "It doesn't look very good. The CFO gave a summary of the budget, and Mercy is facing some serious cutbacks. It's a shame," he said, his soft brown eyes showing how deeply he felt his words.

"That's terrible. It's sad to see the places that really need support not getting any. What do you think this means for you directly?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Nothing hopefully, but there are a lot of rumors going around."

Rahne chuckled. "There always are."

"Well, these say that almost the entire psych department is on the chopping block."

Shaking her head, the D.A. said, "If that happens, you'll be okay."

"I know, but there will be a lot of people who need me who'll be unable to get my help. I didn't become a doctor to sit in a high-rise office and collect insurance benefits."

She took his hand, rubbing the back of it with her thumb. "I know. And that will

never happen. This could lead to bigger and better things where you can help even more people."

"Perhaps," he said, but his eyes didn't show as much faith. "How was your day?"

The deflection of attention was obvious, but she didn't mind. Trent was not the kind of person to let things build up. "I'm ready for my hearing tomorrow. Those boys will never know what hit them."

"Is that good or bad?"

This time Rahne shrugged. "Neither. It's just reality. They've got to pay, no matter how young they are. Justice demands it."

"So do you," Trent pointed out.

"Yeah, I do," she said, once again questioning why he always had to be so honest. Then again, she wouldn't have him any other way.

They both turned back to the television, answering questions and trying to forget about the stress they were under.



The chairs at the kitchen table were hard. He'd always said they were too hard and that he was going to replace them. It was tough to eat with a numb butt, Rahne had said often.

Clifton O'Connor ran a hand over his parched mouth and tried to concentrate on his current line of thought. However, he couldn't remember what it was and he really didn't care. What he needed was a drink.

Standing, the handyman winced in pain as the chair screeched, sending lightning through his brain. He leaned on the table and stared at the liquor cabinet on the other side of the room.

"I don't need it," he whispered, a snarl on his lips.

What Rahne had said to him in court had not left his mind for a moment in the last few weeks. *Does she really think I'm a drunk?* he asked himself. If she did, Clifton didn't know if he could ever face her again. He'd spent a lifetime working in an attempt to raise the girl right. Though there had been a few detours along the way, he thought he'd done a good job.

Not like my pappy, he told himself, remembering the gruff man. Francis O'Connor had been a beast of a man, mean whether he was drunk or sober, unfit to watch a child, much less raise one. Luckily, Clifton's blessed mother had taken him away from the wretch and come to the United States. Even broke and hungry, their lives had improved immensely in the new world. The day Lady Liberty had come into sight, her torch rising like a shuttle from a cloud of fog, the young man had sworn never to repeat the sins of his father.

"Not like my pappy," he whispered, staring at the cabinet, his eyes watery slits.

The screen door slammed as Abigayle Nguyen entered the house behind him. Clifton wiped his eyes and straightened. The spicy reporter was either a godsend or from the devil, and it wouldn't take long to tell which.

"There you are," she said, entering the kitchen, a bottle of Jack Daniel's in hand. "I need you tonight, baby." She leaned heavily into him and kissed his lips.

Clifton closed his eyes, but couldn't resist her passionate touch. "This isn't a good night, Abigayle."

"No shit. That's why I'm here. I've been dealing with my bastard boss all day and my crazy parents. I'm gonna go wacko if I don't get some relief."

"Why don't you go out, then?" he asked, but could feel her pulling him into her orbit.

Abigayle smiled wickedly, running her hands over his chest. "Because I don't need to go out. I need you." She took a long drink from the bottle and thrust it into his hand.

Staring into her fiery almond-shaped eyes, Clifton knew his effort was a lost cause. "Then you're in the right place," he said, pulling her closer and tipping the glass bullet to his lips.