

One Push Too Far

Abigayle Nguyen placed bagels in the toaster and slammed down the lever with enough force to rattle the toaster's metallic innards. "I can not believe I agreed to let them move in with me!"

Clifton O'Connor sighed and sipped his coffee. Abigayle had gone to bed bitchy and risen the same way. Clifton thought he might be able to better tolerate Abigayle if she could find a new source of complaint rather than continually gripe about her parents coming to live with her, but he was beginning to think that murdering her would be a more effective route to tolerance. *Wonder if Constance Hollingsworth would let me borrow her woodchipper?* Clifton idly thought.

"I mean, why can't they find their own place? What were they thinking? Why didn't they plan their finances better?"

"Probably could've if they hadn't've had to put ya through college." Clifton took a long swallow of black coffee.

"What the hell does that mean?" Abigayle glared.

"Nothin'."

"It always means something with you, Clifton. Are you trying to say this is somehow my fault?"

"Course not. I've never known ye to be at fault for anything."

"Fuck you!"

"Ye're an hour late, and I'm a half-cup of coffee too sober."

"You are such an ass!" Abigayle snatched the bagels out of the toaster and plopped them onto a saucer.

"Aye, and ye're too damn short-sighted ta see what's in front of ya."

"Which is what?"

"The answer to yer question."

"My question? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You asked what yer parents were thinkin'. Maybe they're thinkin' they're lucky ta have a daughter who'll let `em stay with her when they need help."

Abigayle rolled her eyes. "Oh, shit. Is this about little Rahne?"

Hurt swelled in Clifton's chest at the mention of his daughter's name.

Abigayle wrinkled her face in disgust. "I'll never understand why her opinion is so important to you."

"You wouldn't."

Abigayle tossed the bagels into the garbage. "Fine. You can sit here and grump around all day if you want to, but I'm not listening to it. I'm going to work. Try to be in a better mood later," she said as she pulled on her coat, grabbed her purse, and headed for the door. "I'll see you later."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Clifton muttered as the door slammed.



"Thank you, Heather." Dominique Carpenter smiled as the young maid handed her the telephone and left the room. "Hello."

"How's my favorite niece?" said a familiar voice.

"Morgan?"

"You find another aunt you didn't know about on your trip home?"

Dominique joined Morgan's hearty laughter. "Where are you?"

"I'm still in Roseboro. It's taking a little time to get everything together so I can come for a visit."

"I've been thinking about you. In fact, Mama and I were just talking about you a couple days ago."

"How is Constance's health holding up?"

Dominique walked out of the library and checked the hallway. Hollingsworth Manor had a way of carrying sound at times, and she didn't want anyone who happened to be nearby overhearing a conversation about the family matriarch's

poor health. "She's doing fair, Morgan. She had an episode recently. There was some trouble while we were away, and things came to a head after dinner one night. Mama was able to get to her medicine without anyone else seeming to notice her distress, but she refuses to go to a doctor and see if any further damage has been done to her heart."

"It must be hard for you to be in that position and not be able to share it with the rest of the family."

"It is," Dominique admitted. "I wish she would tell them. I think they have a right to know."

Morgan sighed. "What are we going to do with her?"

Dominique exhaled sharply, moved by emotions that had lain dormant until Morgan's words stirred them. "All I can do, Morgan, is to try and love her the best I can for as long as she's here."

Silence filled the line for a long moment before Morgan spoke. "I'm going to get there as soon as I can, Dominique."



Entering the kitchen to see Heather and Lisa talking over cups of tea, Molly Crenshaw had mixed feelings. Part of her wanted to run to her room and a scalding hot shower. Another part wanted to talk to women who'd be able to commiserate with her. She didn't want to be a baby about the situation, but her visit to the doctor had been a little traumatic.

Lisa's smile immediately lifted her spirits, making the dirty feeling under her skin recede. "Hello, ladies. Have you eaten lunch yet?"

They both greeted her, then Lisa said, "No. We were just wondering where you'd gotten off to."

"Don't wanna cook for yerselves, huh?"

"Exactly," Lisa answered.

The younger maid moved over to the refrigerator and opened it. "I thought we could have sandwiches, if that's okay with everyone," she said, pulling out a package of lunch meat.

The other women agreed, and within a few moments everyone had filled plates.

They moved into the informal dining room and sat down. Molly wouldn't normally join one of the family members at a meal, but Lisa had insisted that they all break bread together. And besides, Molly didn't want to be alone.

"Have you been working today?" Molly asked.

Chewing a bite of her ham sandwich, Lisa nodded. "Yes, I'm reading an amazing manuscript right now. It's not anyone famous, but the story is inspirational. I hope we print it."

"I'm sure they will," the older maid said. "Miss Constance has an eye for great work. I've read every book Hollingsworth Publishing has ever produced."

A charmed, surprised look crossed Lisa's face. "Really? Does she know that?"

Molly laughed. She'd long ago accepted that Miss Constance paid little attention to her, other than if she made a mistake with the chores. "I'm sure she doesn't. And it doesn't matter if she does."

"That must have been a lot of books," Heather added.

"Quite a few, but Hollingsworth Publishing can only print so many a year, so it wasn't that hard. Not with the time I've had on my hands over the years. Reading has always been a pleasure."

Lisa smiled, a devious look appearing in her soft brown eyes. "Speaking of pleasure, let's talk about where you were this morning. Have a hot brunch date with Leyland?"

Molly waved her off with a hand, but couldn't quite muster a smile. "I wish." She cleared her throat and generated the courage to go on. "I had a doctor's appointment."

Lisa's tone changed to one of concern. "Oh. I don't want to pry, Molly, but is it anything you want to talk about?"

Despite the fact that she was turning red, Molly nodded, knowing she did want to confide in someone. "I—I had an appointment with the woman doctor," she whispered.

Simultaneous cringes crossed Heather's and Lisa's faces and each mouth formed a sympathetic "o." Lisa said, "That's always the highlight of my year."

"Yeah, that's the only time I dread seeing a man who wants to get into my

pants," Heather offered.

They all laughed. Molly was glad to hear she wasn't the only one not thrilled with the process. "It wasn't like I expected."

"Did you go to a different doctor this year?" Lisa asked.

"Not exactly," Molly answered. "This was my first time," she said sheepishly.

"Molly!" Lisa responded excitedly. "You've never been to a gynecologist before? I can't believe you."

Shrugging, Molly took another bite of her food. She knew Lisa was just concerned, so she didn't take offense at the snipe. "I know. I know. My doctor thoroughly scolded me."

Lisa reached across the table and touched Molly's hand. "Well, it was really a brave thing for you to do, and I'm glad you did. What did you think?"

The maid gasped, finally able to express herself. "I thought it was the most disgusting experience I've ever had."

Both of the other women laughed. Heather leaned back in her chair, tossing her napkin on the table. "I remember the first time I went. I hadn't even started my period yet, so I didn't know half of what the doctor was saying. Once it was over with, I just tried to forget it ever happened."


"I think I'll do the same." Molly shivered, thinking of the extremely rude sensations she'd had on the examination table.

"It's certainly not very pleasant, but it's better than the alternative. It's simply another price we ladies pay for being God's finest creatures," Lisa said airily.

"I'd be one of the lower creatures if it meant I didn't have to do that again," the older woman said. "I'm gonna be a wreck until the results come back."

Once again, Lisa patted her hand. "Don't worry. I'm sure it will turn out fine. And it won't take long for the results. You'll be so busy here you won't even notice the wait."

Lisa was truly a treasure of the household. "I hope ye're right," Molly said. A small voice in her mind told her some things were best left unknown, but it was too late to listen now.



Blue eyes glanced to the top right drawer in his desk for the third time in the last minute. Stuart Hollingsworth loathed having to use what was in there, but he knew he needed to get on the ball.

He picked up the memo from his mother again, rubbing the thick parchment paper between his thumb and forefinger, letting his eyes glance across the words he'd already read. It was his annual direction to make sure he had an escort for the National Book Awards banquet. His mother had sent such a memo every year since the first time he had attended, much to her horror, without a date.

God forbid it should appear I'm not getting laid, he thought bitterly. Stuart did not understand his mother's obsession with him being accompanied. After all, to his knowledge, she hadn't had a date since their father's death and she'd never brought anyone to the banquet.

With more force than necessary, the dark-haired man jerked open the drawer, not stopping until it would come no further. In the very back, amongst a stack of pamphlets and important papers, he withdrew a small black book. He'd always found it very ironic that he kept the clichéd tomb only for his mother's sadistic purposes.

Stuart opened it to the first page and read the top name. *Gloria Allen*. He rubbed his chin, thinking. *No, I took her last year*. Laughing, Stuart decided he needed to put more effort into this search for the perfect date this year. *Perhaps I'll start in the "Zs."*

He glanced through the myriad of names, compiled from people he knew from the business, blind dates into which he'd been forced, and other women he'd met and dated throughout his life. Many were good friends, or at least good acquaintances, who were dependable for a pleasant evening. When he delved into the book for a companion, he never seemed to have much trouble quickly making arrangements.

For the ten millionth time, Stuart wondered why it had been so long since he'd been in love. And for the ten millionth time, the answer quickly materialized. He was married to his job and his family, not leaving enough time to pursue a personal relationship on the simplistic basis of finding happiness. Love, it seemed, was not in his cards.

Living with his brothers, he'd always known he was different than both of them. He could look at their lives and appreciate the sacrifices they'd made to make it

to where they had in life. Stuart did not find either situation acceptable.

Edward was a complete louse. He'd used women and spit them out so often, it was never surprising to see his latest victim. Part of Stuart felt guilty for not trying to warn Kris about her fate. Of course, back then, he hadn't realized that the young woman was a genuine decent person.

Edward had an immense amount of power and wealth, but his life was a pit of selfish excess that was pathetic to anyone close enough to realize what the man was missing. Harris was the complete opposite, but his lot wasn't any more pleasing to Stuart than Edward's.

The youngest Hollingsworth had none of the power, but the greatest love and support of all the family. Lisa wasn't perfect, but she was the most caring and trustworthy member of their clan. Stuart knew he could never do better than her. But he also knew his ambition kept him from devoting the kind of time it took to find, and maintain a relationship like Harris had.

Nothing wrong with wanting it all, he thought, knowing how unlikely his dreams were. But he supposed that was why they were called dreams.

"Mr. Hollingsworth," his secretary said over the intercom, "Father Greer is here to see you."

Lovely. Stuart rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Teresa. Send him in."

Feeling obligated to see the man, Stuart hoped the father was soliciting a donation, or something equally impersonal. He didn't know if he was up for another philosophical debate.

"Hello, Father," he greeted the man when he entered. As always, the priest's appearance was perfect, down to the skin-close shave and pressed robe.

The older man nodded. "Thank you for seeing me, Stuart," he said formally.

"What can I do for you?"

Father Greer's cool blue eyes narrowed slightly. "I have been expecting to see you at Mass. I'm concerned."

"Don't be," Stuart responded, trying to keep the darkness out of his voice. "I'm not an altar boy anymore."

"After the last time you attended, I thought you'd be coming more often. Why

haven't you been back?"

Taking a deep breath, Stuart ignored the defensive walls slamming shut in his mind. "That should be obvious."

The priest shook his head and took another step into the office. "I thought perhaps you'd had a change of heart after the close call at your home. You seemed so open to the Divinity."

"No, that was just temporary insanity. Probably the blow to the head."

Another step forward. Father Greer held his hands out to his side's. "Stuart, my son, the Lord is always ready to embrace you. The first move must be made by you."

Standing abruptly, Stuart clinched his teeth. "Father, I attend your services when I want, why I want. That's not going to change. The balance of the Church's coffer, however, might take a drastic nosedive should you continue making these little recruitment visits to my office."

An outraged look on his face, the priest straightened rigidly, his body reflecting the threat he must have felt. "Very well, Stuart. The Lord forgives you, and so do I." The man turned and left the office, gently closing the door behind him.

"I don't forgive so easily, Father," Stuart said, roughly sitting down in his chair.



Kyle Curtis was not impressed. As his sister exited the car and stood waiting for him on the sidewalk, the sandy-blond looked at the dingy building and wondered what his sister was thinking. Anyone who worked at a dive like this could not be worth meeting.

Deciding to give his often inculpable sister a chance, Kyle joined her. "How long have you been frequenting The Blue Streak?"

"Not long," Kris said, leading him into the unremarkable building. "A couple of months. It's not as bad as it looks."

"Let's hope not," he said without much hope. "What's this guy's name again?"

Kris opened the heavy door and ushered him inside. "Bruce. You're gonna love him."

The inside of the bar was much as expected, a thin layer of smoke polluting the dark atmosphere. For a Tuesday night, the place had a good number of customers, most quietly drinking at the booths lining both walls. Kyle followed Kris up to the bar. He noticed a blithe smile grace his sister's lips as her green eyes focused on the mountain of a man behind the bar.

As he approached them, Bruce smiled, his teeth a bright contrast to his full beard. Kris introduced them and Kyle found his hand engulfed in a much larger one. The bartender seemed relatively surprised that Kris had come with her brother.

"How long are you here for?" Bruce asked.

"As long as Kris needs me. It's a nice place to visit."

Kris squeezed her brother's shoulder. "Kyle has been great. We haven't been able to spend much time together lately, so this has just been a dream."

Kyle smiled as she and Bruce continued to talk. Every so often, when required, he threw in a line or two. Mainly, he watched the interaction between his innocent little sister and her friend. The attraction between them was obvious. Even when Bruce walked away to help a customer, Kris' eyes stuck to him, closely following every move.

He knew his sister well enough to know she hadn't slept with the man, but he didn't like the attention she lavished on the bartender. By the time Kris finally invited Kyle to play pool, he knew he'd seen more than enough.