

Small Packages

Throwing another invitation to a writers' conference into the trash, Stuart Hollingsworth wondered if the organizers would ever learn. He had, on rare occasion, attended the gatherings at his mother's insistence, but certainly not for fun. He could only take so much sucking up, and a whole weekend of brown-nosing wasn't something in which he would choose to participate of his own volition. The organizers of the conventions desperately wanted him, probably hoping to make a killing in fees by getting such a big name to speak. Stuart shook his head, glad he wasn't weak enough to bow to such pressure.

The next manila envelope in his mail basket was 8 ½ by 11 inches, the address printed in neat, feminine handwriting with a purple ink pen. Stuart warily eyed it, wondering what was inside. His secretary had screened it for him, as she did with all his mail, so it at least wasn't a bomb.

A stack of snapshots and a note fell out onto his polished desk when he opened the package. The photos scattered, revealing a montage of naked, sweaty body parts. Light blue eyes opened wide as the publisher gathered the pictures and filed through them. Taste was not an attribute of the woman, though flexibility apparently was.

Sorting through the photos, Stuart thought it odd that the woman hadn't included a photo of her face. Why would she feel the need to hide that? She certainly hadn't been shy about revealing far more personal anatomical features. *Probably a candidate for a Milk-Bone commercial*, Stuart decided.

Out of morbid curiosity, Stuart looked more closely at the pictures. The woman had apparently taken all of the pictures on her own. Many were close-up shots of her breasts and lower regions, and none were flattering. If she was trying to woo him, her priorities were way off.

It wasn't the first such package he'd received. Since being named America's Most Eligible Bachelor by *People*, no less than one hundred weird bundles had arrived on his desk, along with a generous smattering of well-adjusted fan mail. The most frequent offerings were marriage proposals. Women he'd neither met nor seen sent him sincere requests for his hand, as if he had anything to gain from such a union, or would choose a partner for any reason other than love.

He could almost understand the proposals. Some women would undoubtedly see his good looks, know of his immense wealth, and wish he were their own. Wasn't that supposed to be every little girl's dream? But the nude pictures and demented letters were a mystery to Stuart. Mental disorder had to be the

explanation, because surely no level-headed woman could think anything of value could come from such an approach.

Every day, Stuart had more and more appreciation for the security guards at the gates of Hollingsworth Manor. If he was lucky, no crazed fan would be able to make it past them to steal him away in the night.

Stuart had no idea what to do with the pictures. The wastebasket was the best place for them, he supposed, but they seemed to have potential. Perhaps the next time Father Greer showed up in his office, there would be a little surprise slide-show awaiting him.



"Where the hell have you been?"

Ford Blankenship sank down onto the plastic cushion, glad Rahne had secured a booth. "Nice to see you too, counselor," he said, greeting her with a smile.

Rahne shrugged coyly. "I've been waiting. Time is money, you know."

"To who? We both get paid the same no matter how much we work. You're dreaming of private practice again." Ford glanced around the small café as a waitress took the D.A.'s order. Three judges and twenty attorneys filled almost every seat in the place.

After the pink-uniformed woman left, Rahne said, "I'm not thinking about going solo, thank you. I just like to give the taxpayers their money's worth."

"You sound like a politician. Disgusting. Next thing you know, you'll be kissing babies."

"I don't think so. You'll be a daddy before I start kissing babies, and we both know that'll never happen," the tall woman said, smirking.

Ford crossed his well-muscled arms over his chest, covering his shining gold badge. "I'll have you know I could have a baby anytime if I so chose. I'm still holding out for you."

"Yeah, right. I heard you went out with that blonde the other night." She paused for a moment, her expression turning serious. "Is she a friend, or a girlfriend?"

The cop shrugged. "You know me, Rahne. There are a couple of women I see

on a semi-regular basis, but I don't have a girlfriend. I have a job."

"I know, but you need one. Everyone does."

For a supremely intelligent attorney, Rahne O'Connor was dense. He'd been trying to convince her he was in love since the day they'd met, but she never took him seriously. "Are you trying to tell me you're not married to your career? At least I don't string anyone along with the illusion of a relationship." Being harsh was in his nature, and it helped that what he said was true.

"Trent and I are different. We are committed to each other. He knows I love him."

Ford shook his head. "Sure he knows that. I hope he also knows that you'll never marry him. At least I'm honest with my lovers."

The sandy-blond woman opened her mouth to refute his statement, but shut it when their lunch arrived. In a way, Ford was glad. Maybe she'd think about what he'd said. Something needed to wake the woman from the dream world in which she let herself live.

Most of the customers left as Ford and Rahne finished their meal in silence. He knew enough about her to know she wouldn't hold his opinion against him. If they could be nothing more, in the least they were true friends who could be honest with each other. Watching a busboy clear the table next to them, the officer wished that was acceptable.

Tired of the silence, Ford decided to let his friend off the hook and change the subject. "Did you hear that the Griffith civil suit went away?"

"Yeah, I heard," Rahne answered. "It was bogus anyway."

The whole suit left a bad taste in Ford's mouth, but not just because it was frivolous. That much was obvious. He didn't necessarily like the way Bruce Dooley had handled the altercation, but he hadn't done anything improper. Something else was going on, and that was what bugged Ford. "The whole situation is suspicious."

Rahne frowned. "I don't think so. It was pretty clear cut to me. Take one scumbucket criminal, add one scumbucket attorney, and you've got one trumped-up lawsuit. I just hope Dooley didn't pay too much to make it disappear."

"Maybe you're right," he said. The simplest explanation was usually right. He'd

probably be better off to save himself the headache of thinking about the problem, which had seemed to resolve itself.

"Don't waste your time, Ford. If something fishy, or more suspicious than we know, was going on, it's done now. And besides, there are a lot of violent criminals out there I need you on the ball for."

Ford nodded, knowing she was right. "Yeah, I know. Protect and serve. As always, I'm at your disposal."

Scooting out of the booth, Rahne stood and smiled. "I love that quality in a man."



"I'm glad you weren't too busy to see me," Dominique Carpenter said as she entered her mother's office.

Constance Hollingsworth slowly shook her head. "There's no such thing as being too busy to see you."

Dominique smiled. She had waited her whole life to hear her mother speak those words, but had often doubted the day would ever come. The heartwarming sensation Dominique felt upon hearing Constance's words was rendered bittersweet by the knowledge that her mother's coronary disease would likely decrease the number of her days she would be capable of saying those words.

Forcing herself to maintain her smile despite her bleak thoughts, Dominique said, "I brought you some lunch. Molly made asparagus soup and oven-roasted chicken." She held up a large, paper bag from which exuded an appealing aroma.

"Thank you," Constance smiled. "I hope you brought enough for two."

"I did," Dominique said as she cleared a space atop Constance's desk to place the dishes and silverware.

"Was this just for the two of us, or did our dear Ms. Crenshaw intend on feeding the entire staff?" Constance's eyes widened as Dominique served the food.

Dominique chuckled. "She got a little carried away, I think."

Constance raised her eyebrows in mock irritation. "Some days I think she should

be carried away.”

Dominique shook her head. “You’re impossible.”

“Thank you.” Constance smiled wryly.

As they settled in their chairs to eat, Constance caught Dominique’s gaze. “So what was it that you wanted to discuss with me?”

Dominique raised an eyebrow. Was she that transparent? “Actually, there is something I want to discuss with you.”

Constance smiled, obviously pleased with her perceptive prowess.

“It’s about Abigayle Nguyen.”

Constance narrowed her eyes.

“Since we returned from Georgia, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” Dominique said. “While we were there, it seemed as if we made a lot of progress by letting go of the past and looking toward the future. Now I’m thinking maybe it’s time to let go of the anger we feel toward Abigayle Nguyen for what she did to us.”

Constance’s smile faded. “Now is most definitely *not* the time for forgiveness, Dominique. Especially not when my first goal has almost been achieved.”

Dominique swallowed a spoonful of soup, then wiped her lips with a napkin. “You know, you’ve always kept your plans for her a secret. I have no idea what you’ve planned.”

“I wanted to give you plausible deniability in case things didn’t work to my satisfaction,” Constance said.

Dominique’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe you just acknowledged the possibility of failure.”

Constance shrugged. “Failure is always a possibility. But I try to take courses of action with the least chance of failure.”

“So what actions did you take to strike back at Abigayle?”

Constance smiled thinly. “As she struck at me through my family, I did the same to her. The banks have foreclosed the loan the Nguyens had taken on their restaurant. They have to vacate the property before Monday.”

"Wow." Dominique chewed a piece of roast chicken and contemplated her mother's actions. In a way, it was almost karmic. Abigayle Nguyen was certainly getting back what she'd put forth. But it bothered Dominique that Abigayle's parents were the ones bearing the brunt of the attack, and she marveled at the amount of power her mother must possess in order to accomplish such a feat.

Dominique shrugged. "I guess I should feel grateful or happy, but—" She swallowed hard. "Wait a minute! You said you'd almost accomplished your 'first goal.' What's your next goal?"

Constance smiled. She clicked her tongue as if shaming Dominique. "Now, now, that would be telling. Besides," her eyes narrowed and her smile thinned, "you'll soon enough see what more I have planned for Abigayle Nguyen."



Molly Crenshaw shifted position on the examination table and waited for the doctor to arrive. She wished Dr. Rahall would hurry. The woman was making Molly nervous by her absence.

Molly gently drummed her heels against the metallic side of the exam table. She found the echoes to be disturbing, placing in her mind the vision of an empty, mechanical heart which was struggling to maintain a normal rhythm. Molly stopped moving her legs and forced herself to remain still.

After what seemed to be days, the exam room door opened and Dr. Susan Rahall walked in. "Thank you for coming in, Molly," she said.

Molly managed a weak smile. It wasn't as if the woman had given her a choice. Even if Dr. Rahall hadn't been reluctant to reveal her test results over the phone, Molly would have known something was wrong after seeing the woman's face. Dr. Rahall's normally stern features had somehow softened, and a previously unrevealed warmth shined in the depths of her ice-blue eyes. "What is it?" Molly croaked.

Dr. Rahall took a deep breath before answering. "Your Pap results were fine; however, your mammogram showed an abnormality."

Molly felt numb. "An abnormality?"

The doctor nodded. "It detected a lump in your right breast."

Molly swallowed hard. Her head reverberated with the sound of rushing blood. She thought for a moment that she would faint, but she somehow managed to steady herself. "Cancer?" she whispered.

Dr. Rahall's eyes were kind. "We don't know that."

"How do we find out?" Molly was suddenly possessed by a fierce need of knowledge. She felt as if her body had suddenly been invaded, and she wanted nothing more than to expel the intruder.

"I'd like for you to schedule an appointment with Dr. Michaels. He's a general surgeon. I can send him your records, and he can go over your options with you."

"Can't you do it?"

"I'm afraid not. Surgery isn't my area of expertise."

"So I'm gonna have ta have surgery? I'm gonna lose my breast?" Molly protectively clutched her chest.

"That's a premature assumption, Molly. What's most likely is that Dr. Michaels will want to do a needle biopsy, which, while not major surgery, is an invasive procedure. He, of course, may have other ideas, but I'm sure he'll discuss them with you."

Molly shook her head, trying to make sense of what she'd heard. "Are ya sure ya have the right tests?"

Dr. Rahall's brows knit. "You mean are we positive that these results are yours?"

Molly nodded.

"Yes, we're certain," Dr. Rahall said kindly.

"I don't understand," Molly said bluntly. "I do a self-exam every month, and I've never found a lump."

"Sadly, some lumps are impossible to detect by a manual breast examination. That's the reason mammograms are so important, particularly as we age."

"Guess I shouldn't have waited so long ta come in," Molly remarked bitterly.

Dr. Rahall lightly placed a hand on Molly's shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up over

this, Molly. The lump is small. It's entirely possible that even if you had been having annual mammograms, the lump wouldn't have shown up before now."

Molly nodded, but said nothing.

"So, can I speak to Dr. Michaels about seeing you?" Dr. Rahall asked.

Molly swallowed hard. "I dunno. I think—I think maybe I need some time to think about this."

Dr. Rahall's features assumed more of the sharp edges to which Molly had been accustomed. "I know that this may seem a bit overwhelming, Molly, but I can't begin to stress how important it is to see Dr. Michaels or another surgeon in a timely manner."

"I understand. I just need a little time."



Tossing her shopping bags onto her bed, Kris Hollingsworth waited patiently for her brother to join her. When Kyle finally entered the room, he dragged himself, and at least ten sacks, near the bed, then dropped them in a heap.

"Edward is gonna kill you," Kyle said, collapsing onto the bed.

Kris smiled and plopped down beside him. "I know. Isn't this fun? I've still got a while before the card statement comes in, though, so I'm not done yet."

"What else can you buy?" the blond man asked. When he'd suggested his sister get Edward's attention by spending money, he hadn't really intended to create the monster Kris had become.

"Well, I guess I'm about done with cars. Now that I've got a BMW for you to drive while you're in town, I don't know anyone who needs one."

Thank God, Kyle thought. Looking back on the idea, the outsider had a bad feeling Kris' behavior was going to make Edward even madder than he had been. "Maybe you should buy something for your husband now. You know, a peace offering."

The younger woman took a deep breath. Throwing her arms above her head, she sighed explosively, rocking the bed frame. "I don't think I'm ready for that. I'm still very angry at him, Kyle, and the feeling won't seem to go away. I don't know if it ever will."

Closing his eyes, Kyle wished he hadn't heard that. His mission here was failing miserably, and he had no idea what to do about it. Something needed to happen soon, or it would be too late. "Just give it time, Sis," he said with as much heart as he could manage.

Kyle bid his sister farewell for the evening and retired to his room. He needed some time to regroup. After spending most of the day with her, he could tell things were getting worse between Kris and Edward. They hadn't even spoken in days, and she didn't seem to mind at all. He knew his sister was a sensitive soul, but this time she didn't seem as willing to forgive as was her nature. Perhaps Edward had hurt her more than he knew. Or perhaps she had her mind set on something—or someone—different.

Not knowing was the worst part. Unfortunately, women, especially his little sister, were hard to understand. Kyle decided to call his father and tell him the bad news. The old man might have some insight on what he should do next.

"Well what the hell is wrong with that girl?" Robert Curtis asked after Kyle explained the impasse.

Kyle could imagine his father's red, angry face, his gray eyebrows sticking out in every direction. "I have no idea, Dad. I think she and Edward are both stubborn."

"That's not good enough, Kyle. Your sister is about to ruin her life. Being stubborn is not an excuse I will accept."

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Kyle suddenly remember why he'd left home the day after he'd turned eighteen. "I don't know what to tell you. Kris isn't exactly under my control."

Something slammed near Robert Curtis at the other end of the line. "You'd better get her under your control then. She cannot leave Edward."

Sure she can. Laughing to himself, Kyle wondered why he'd thought his dad would help. "I'm not sure I can stop her, Dad. He really hurt her, and she's been very unhappy."

"I don't care how you do it, but keep them together at all costs. I'm losing money hand over fist in the stock market and I need to get back in Edward's good graces. Since he and Kris are fighting, Ed won't respond to my damned phone calls."

Kyle thought he heard his dad spit. The younger Curtis stared up at the ceiling, trying desperately to come up with an answer. "I'll do what I can."

"You do that, son," Robert said venomously. "Don't forget that it's also in your best interests to keep the two of them together."