

# Payback Is Hell

Kris Hollingsworth sat forward on the edge of her seat, her attention engaged for the first time that evening. She suppressed a smile as her husband's cold eyes narrowed. His nostrils flared angrily and his face flushed.

"What do you think you are doing?" Edward hissed at his sister, reaching for his cell phone which she had just snatched out of his hand.

"Saving you from making a bigger ass of yourself than you usually manage to do," Dominique hissed in return, managing to look equally peeved as Edward. Her hand that held the phone disappeared beneath the table.

Kris struggled to contain her amusement. All she'd been able to consider since arriving in New York City was the fact that the last time she and Edward had been there, he'd called Heather's name while they were making love. That, coupled with the fact that Edward had made clear his intent that they share a hotel room to maintain public appearance, had made her entire day a miserable event. It was a pleasure to watch Dominique put Edward through the same torture, even if Kris wasn't exactly sure of her sister-in-law's intent.

"Return my phone, *now*." Edward's voice was steel.

Seeing the unabashed hatred in Edward's eyes, the queasiness which Kris had battled all day returned. The thought of spending the night in close quarters with Edward was unappealing.

"What is the meaning of this?" Constance quietly demanded.

Edward's look of consternation evaporated in the face of his mother's disapproval. "I simply wish for her to return my phone," he said to Constance.

"And I'm simply trying to tell you that you're out of line," Dominique said, her gaze never leaving her brother's face.

"What do you mean?" Constance asked.

"I mean that Edward's about to commit a major faux pas."

Edward held up his hands in exasperation. "By making a congratulatory call?"

Dominique shook her head, sending her dreadlocks flying. "Al-Marayati is Muslim, right?"

"Correct," Edward acknowledged with a slight nod.

"An Observant Muslim if I correctly recall his bio on the book jacket."

Again, Edward nodded.

"Assuming you read the book, why are you ordering champagne and lobster for the man when you should know alcohol and shellfish are prohibited by his religion?" Dominique demanded.

Kris had to stifle a chuckle. Beside her, Kyle gently touched her hand. Kris glanced at her brother, saw the warning in his eyes, then turned back to Edward. Her husband was obviously furious and having difficulty in managing a retort that would salvage his pride.

"That is true, Dominique," Stuart smiled. "Nice save." He shot a smirk Edward's way, drawing an evil look from his older brother.

"Be that as it may," Edward said, holding out his hand to reclaim the cell phone proffered by Dominique, "I find it extremely offensive that you would take my property without permission, Dominique. In future, if you wish to make a suggestion, it would be wise of you to find a less intrusive manner of doing so."

"Don't threaten her, Edward," Harris chimed in for the first time, obviously displeased with his eldest brother's tone.

Kris' stomach roiled as the tension among those seated at the table became palpable. Beside her, Kyle squeezed her hand.

"That's enough," Constance hissed. "Edward, stop making a scene!"

Edward's reply, if he made one, was lost in the sudden droning sound that filled Kris' head. She felt as if she could not breathe and was suddenly overwhelmed by panic. Kris stood, knocking over her chair in her urgency to flee the room. Her vision shimmered, then drastically shrank in size. Kris felt Kyle's strong hands clutching her elbow, then her world disappeared entirely.



Molly Crenshaw stepped out of her car, relieved to see the target of her excursion standing outside the Church of the Sacred Lamb. Father Greer stooped over a flowerbed, a fine mist of water from the lime-green hose spraying the multi-colored foliage. Knowing the priest to be a man of simple

pleasures, she had no problem reconciling her image of him as a pastor with that of a gardener.

Tracking to the front of the church, Molly carefully crossed the manicured grass. "Hello, Father. It's a beautiful day."

Dressed in blue jeans, a black button-up shirt, and his ever-present Roman collar, Father Greer put his weight on one knee and squinted up at his visitor. "Touched by God, I think. Hi, Molly."

"You've got a beautiful arrangement there," she said, pointing.

Father Greer smiled. "I've always felt flowers were a reflection of mankind's splendor." Slowly, he stood, brushing dirt from his hands. "What brings you to me today?"

Not expecting so direct a question, the maid was unsure of how to answer. She looked to the gothic face of the church, wondering exactly what it was for which she was searching. "I guess I just need your guidance."

"That's what I'm here for," he said, taking her hand.

The priest led her to the back of the monstrous building, where a bench sat overlooking a playground. No one played on the equipment, but an aura of childish innocence floated through the air.

"What troubles you, Molly?" Father Greer asked as they settled.

"I'm having some medical problems and I'm very worried."

He sagely nodded. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Is it serious?"

Molly sighed and said a little prayer that it wasn't. "I don't know, Father. I have a lump in my breast. The doctor has to run more tests."

"I know you must be very frightened, but your faith will pull you through this crisis."

Swallowing hard, forcing down the lump in her throat, Molly nodded agreement. "Yes, I believe that, too. It doesn't help me sleep at night, though. I lie awake wonderin' why God has chosen this for me. I'm not sure I can take it."

"The good Lord doesn't give us more than we can handle, Molly."

The wheat-blonde maid thought about all the women who died of breast cancer every year and wondered how their circumstances fit into God's plan. "I hope that's true. I try not to have doubts, but I can't help it."

"Faltering is natural. We must simply look inside ourselves and let His light guide us back to where we need to be. You'll make it."

Molly wiped away a tear. "Is it enough, Father?"

"Is what enough, my child?"

"Faith. Can it keep me from dyin'?"

Father Greer smiled sadly. "Molly, I could quote you statistics about the success rates of today's medical treatment for cancer and tell you that you have a wonderful chance for survival." He gently took her hand. "But all I know for sure is that if you put yourself in God's hands and believe in His divine plan for you, this crisis will lead you only to a better position in the ranks of Heaven."

A small stream slipping down her face, Molly closed her eyes, borrowing strength from the quiet man, hoping their belief, together, would be enough. "Thank ya."

"Have you talked to your family about this?"

"No, I haven't had the heart. They have so much goin' on without me addin' to it."

"Their faith will aid your journey," he said, his eyes shining wisdom.

Molly knew he was right. She hadn't told the Hollingsworths a word of her problems, fearing they would either make a federal case of it, or worse, not care. Better she know now, she supposed. Saying goodbye to her priest, the maid wondered if there would come a good time to let her family in on the bad news. And if she would have the courage to speak the words should the time come.



The halls of Hollingsworth Manor seemed oddly morose with the family away, even though many days Heather Patterson could go through her entire cleaning ritual without seeing a soul. Heather supposed the feeling was because she knew the adult inhabitants were all in New York. Taking care of Nathan and Mark had helped keep her mind off the loneliness, but for the young woman, the empty spot in her heart never completely went away.

Nathan had been an angel all day, playing quietly, at least for a six-year-old, while Mark had stayed in his room with speakers blaring music directly into his brain. The youngest Hollingsworth had even surrendered to bed without much fuss.

Pausing outside a familiar door, Heather resisted the urge to go inside. It would serve no purpose, and even to her, the thought was a little creepy. Nothing in Edward's room could fulfill her curiosity—and need—of the man.

She longed to be his, completely possessed. The power Edward held over her was like nothing the young maid had been subject to before. Working in the manor, she often found herself lost in fantasy, conjuring up images she dared not voice to anyone. Her biggest fear was that the family would think she was insane.

But passionate touches and that kiss—*that kiss*—had told Heather that her dreams were more than whimsy. Edward wouldn't take such action if he didn't have intentions of something more happening between them. Without a doubt, he wanted her. And she wanted him, and all the prestige that came with being his wife.

Being a lady of the manor was like a fairy tale she'd never before imagined could be a reality. Every day, though, she saw Lisa and Kris disregard their potential puissance. Not that she would be a tyrant, but the mere position would be exhilarating. In her whole life, she'd never even known so much luxury was possible, much less had she had any measure of wealth. Now that she had constant access to it as an outsider, Heather had no doubt how she would use it.

Realizing she was still standing outside Edward's door, Heather shook her head and began walking. Dirty dishes still sat in the kitchen sink.

She knew the first thing she'd do if she ruled the manor would be to hire another maid, someone like her who needed a second chance. Her life had taken such a drastic turn after getting this job, she couldn't help but want to give some other deserving woman the same chance.

A vision of Edward's chiseled features floated in front of her eyes, drawing a sigh from the woman. She wondered if he was also thinking of her at that moment, though somehow she didn't think he was. Soon enough, though, if she had anything to do with it, he'd think of no one else.



Clifton O'Connor sat at his kitchen table, his only companion a full glass of Jack

Daniel's over ice. It had been quieter around the house without Abigayle's presence, but Clifton didn't really mind. Lately, she'd been such a bitch that he was almost grateful for her absence. The only downside to her not being around was that the nights were longer, and Clifton had much more time to think without the sensual distractions Abigayle provided.

He was beginning to think that thinking was overrated.

No matter how hard he tried to otherwise direct them, Clifton couldn't keep his thoughts from straying to Rahne. His daughter thought he was a no-good drunk, just like his own father. "But I ain't my pappy," Clifton said, looking at the filled glass before him and startling himself when his voice bounced off the cleanly scrubbed appliances and tile floor.

"I'm not," he softly repeated.

It was true. He was nothing like his father. The old man hadn't been able to turn down a drink. In his younger days, Clifton had often joked about being the first attorney in his family. "You're a lawyer?" his companion would ask, and Clifton would reply, "Aye, I was the first O'Connor to pass a bar." So what if he stopped at The Blue Streak or another bar for a drink now and again, or that he kept a well-stocked liquor cabinet at home? That didn't mean that he was like his old man.

"Nothing like him," Clifton whispered, watching beads of condensation stream down the sides of the glass, unaware that his own body was perspiring in a similar manner.

"I can refuse a drink," Clifton said, determinedly setting his jaw. Though he and Abigayle often drank directly from the bottle, Clifton had always preferred his whiskey over ice. There was something about the dichotomy created by the frigid drink's ability to burn the throat that he found appealing. Perhaps it was the reminder to expect the unexpected, that what you thought you were getting wasn't necessarily that which you'd obtain.

As unbidden memories surfaced in his mind, Clifton reached with both hands for the glass of cold fire and tipped it to his lips. He greedily gulped half its contents before realizing what he was doing. With a choked cry, Clifton hurled the condensation-slicked glass across the room where it shattered against a cabinet door. Sobbing, Clifton buried his face in his hands, neither knowing nor caring as condensation mingled with perspiration.



Her eyes wanted to open, but even the minimal amount of light seeping through her eyelids sent razors slicing through Kris' brain. As the buzz in her ears turned into familiar voices, she decided she'd better figure out what the hell was happening, since she had no clue.

The faces of the whole family, as well as those of many people she didn't know, hovered above her. The blonde did not recall lying down, but apparently she had. The floor pressed against her back. "What happened?" she slurred, the weakness in her voice surprising her.

About ten people began talking, each word sending waves of dizziness over her. She held up her hand and briefly closed her eyes, until one distinct voice cut through the haze.

"You fainted, honey. How do you feel?" Dominique asked.

"Like three-day-old roadkill." Flashes of the dark woman and Edward arguing came forward, along with the remainder of the evening.

Dominique laughed, along with several of the other hovering banquet attendees. Edward wasn't smiling. "This was not necessary."

Kris had no idea about what he was talking, and she didn't really care. Her unfocused green eyes turned to her brother, then her friend. "Dominique, can you take me to my room?"

"Of course."

As Lisa and Stuart joined the effort, Kris concentrated on the numerous odd noises in the room. Above the curious chatter of the crowd, she heard the snap of cameras. Tomorrow, the Hollingsworths would be on the cover of countless scandal sheets, no doubt further endearing her to the more sinister, heartless members of the family, namely Edward and Mother Hollingsworth.

She tried not to listen to everyone arguing as they zipped up the elevator to her suite, concentrating instead on not throwing up. The queasiness that had been with her all day was intensified in all the activity. As soon as this little excursion ended, Kris planned on some serious downtime, possibly involving consumption of alcohol. Anything to make her forget.

The loveliness of the luxury penthouse was lost on the agitated crowd. They ushered Kris to the bed, where she sat down on the end, her body devoid of energy.

"I suppose this is all part of your master plan to humiliate me," Edward's venomous voice reached her ears.

Looking to her husband, appalled if not quite astonished, Kris shook her head. "Fuck you, Edward."

The dark-haired man snorted and pointed his index finger at her, but Dominique cut him off. "This is not the time for a domestic problem. In case you missed it, Edward, your wife just passed out. That's not normal, and it wasn't fake. Get a grip."

A layer of ice formed on Edward's eyes, his jaw clenching as he resisted the desire to retaliate. Kris knew she shouldn't antagonize the man, but sometimes she couldn't help herself. He seemed to know exactly what lever to pull to set her off. Glancing at Kyle, she noted a concerned expression on his face.

"Why don't we get you out of that dress?" Lisa said, smiling kindly at her protégé.

Kris nodded gratefully. "Yeah, I want to lie down."

"Boys, I think we can handle this. We wouldn't want you to miss your party," Dominique said, not quite commanding Kyle, Stuart, and Edward to leave.

Edward's face turned so red Kris thought he might explode. "She is my wife, and I will stay here as long as I wish," he bellowed.

Dominique began to speak, but Lisa's gentle hand on her arm quieted her. "Perhaps you can do some damage control if you go back to the party. Kris is going to be fine," Lisa said to Edward.

"Tell the sharks I had some bad shellfish earlier. Happens all the time," the blonde woman said, running a hand through her hair. She really wanted to be alone, or at least out of her husband's presence. "I'll be okay," she said, pointedly looking at her brother.

"Fine." Edward stormed out of the room, followed by a shrugging Stuart and solemn Kyle.

Several moments later, Kris was changed into a pair of pajamas and tucked into the fluffy king-sized bed. A peculiar weariness settled in her bones, draining any desire she might have had to escape. Not to mention that her bed in Hollingsworth Manor didn't really feel like home anymore. She had little question that her current episode had been caused by the stress that dominated her life.

"Can I get you anything else, Kris?" Lisa asked, sitting softly beside her.

Kris patted her leg. "No. Thank you for tolerating me."

"Oh, don't say that. I'd do anything for you. You know that."

The younger woman looked away. "I know," she whispered.

"Lisa, why don't you go back to the party. I can stay here and watch over Kris," Dominique offered.

Lisa stood, the bed compensating for the new lack of weight with a swoosh, the mattress slowly taking form. "I don't mind staying."

When Kris looked back over, her green eyes misty, the taller woman was leading Lisa toward the door. She couldn't hear what Dominique was saying, but Lisa nodded, then left with a wave.

Her eyes closed, Kris heard Dominique reenter the room a few moments later. The older woman didn't immediately say anything, so Kris opened her eyes and found herself caught in a penetrating emerald glare.

"What?" she asked, slightly alarmed.

"Maybe you should see a doctor," Dominique said.

Kris sighed. "I don't think so. I'm just under a lot of stress right now. Right—here." She thought of her last trip to New York, when Edward had made his infamous verbal slip.

"I'm not sure that's all it is, Kris."

The younger woman's brows furrowed. "What do you mean? If it's not that, I might really have had some bad food. I don't know."

"It could be stress, but I've got a gut feeling about this," Dominique said, her face still a mask of mystery.

Turning her head, Kris screwed up the courage to admit what she thought her problem was. "I think I'm just freaked out to be here with Edward again. Feels like I'm in prison."

"I don't think so."

Kris looked back to Dominique, who was beginning to scare her. "What, then? Am I dying?"

Dreadlocks swayed as Dominique shook her head. "No, but I think you may be pregnant."