

Two Shots With Captain Morgan

The sun glittered radiantly off her golden hair, causing her eyes to shine as brightly as emeralds. Her creamy skin glowed in the ethereal haze which surrounded the two of them. Bruce gently caressed her face, content to stare into her eyes and listen to the calming sound of the wind soughing through the surrounding trees. He didn't recall how they'd arrived at the small clearing, and he had no idea where he was, but it was the perfect setting for spending time with the love of his life.

He knew it was a dream, which only encouraged him to do the things he couldn't in real life. They were seated on a blanket, their thighs touching as she leaned against his shoulder. Kris Hollingsworth didn't say anything as she returned his loving glance, her genuine smile saying more than words ever could. The tender expression on her face mirrored the way she'd looked at Bruce the last time they'd parted.

"I love you," he whispered.

The petite woman leaned in, delicately touching his chest, her breath mingling with his. "I'll always be here," she said, her voice low and needy.

Threading his fingers through short, silky hair, Bruce pulled her close, their lips touching smoothly, perfectly. His eyes closed involuntarily, his entire being savoring the sweetness of Kris' contact. Leaning over, his chest pressed against her breasts, sending long-dead sensations through every nerve. Kris whimpered, languidly rubbing her small hands across his back.

No matter how long he slept, Bruce knew he'd never get enough of her. Even though they spent little time together in the waking world, in his nighttime journeys they exhausted hours on end simply staring into each other's eyes. He wasn't necessarily a sensitive, modern man, but Kris brought that side out of him like no one else ever had.

Bruce opened his eyes, a flood of soft light sneaking in through the dark blinds in his room. He didn't always remember the details of his dreams, but he couldn't recall the last day he'd awakened without Kris' image in his mind. As usual, his mind wasn't the only thing to rise and shine to her beautiful face.

Shifting his focus from his throbbing groin, Bruce pulled himself from his bed and headed to the kitchen to pour a glass of orange juice. What he needed was something to take his mind off of what he couldn't have.

When he was dressed and ready to go, the stocky bartender left the apartment at a jog, purposely ignoring the living room which Kris had furnished for him. The cold morning air stung his lungs; his exhalations plumed around him upon leaving his mouth. To the east, the sun barely peeked through the scattered skyscrapers on the horizon. This particular jogging route wasn't the most scenic he ran, but having a nice view was of little importance this morning. Bruce needed hot blood running through his veins for an entirely different reason than it had been.

The frigid breeze on his face—the only skin on his body not covered—made for a good distraction. After the first mile, he was able to begin compiling a list of things to do when he got to the bar. He'd found that owning a business was almost as challenging as any job he'd taken on before, and though it wasn't his chosen profession, it was satisfying in its own way.

The bartender liked being able to call his own shots. He'd managed to hire a couple of good waitresses—ladies who'd needed a second chance when he met them—and the place ran smoothly. Bruce liked being able to help his customers beyond the offer of a cold drink. He didn't consider himself a tome of wisdom, but at times he caught himself saying something especially sage and couldn't help but grin in surprise.

Rounding a corner, he strode into a park, wooded sparsely with scraggly saplings and pine clusters. Forest sounds stilled as he strode through, his footfalls and heavy, measured breaths the only noise. Reflecting on the silence, Bruce realized that one of the aspects that he missed most about having a partner was the conversation. Sure, he talked a lot while he worked, but it was mainly about other people's families or problems. The missing link was that he wagered in none of their lives and they speculated about no plans for the future that included him.

His breathing rhythm disrupted, causing him to attempt a deep breath. It was hard for Bruce to remember the last time he'd been a part of such dreams. Even in his last relationship, the one he'd thought would last forever, there hadn't been any elaborate, romantic plans about what was to come, which turned out to be a good stroke of luck, considering how the union ended.

But that was something he tried not to ponder, just like he tried not to think about Kris Hollingsworth. Neither attempt seemed to work. If his past wasn't clouding his mind, a beautiful blonde was. Not that he really minded the latter. He simply knew that with his track record, any fantasies of being with her were doomed to failure. Bruce wondered if Kris ever thought about him—of being *with* him—if she might be thinking of him at that moment.

Pondering why he tortured himself, he ran harder, striving not to think at all.



What am I gonna do? Kris Hollingsworth asked herself as she laid in her bed, the covers pulled over the top of her sleep-matted hair. Though she'd never really went to sleep the night before and was unsure that she ever again would, she'd stayed in the protective cocoon of pillows and comforter, hoping the world would take the cue and stay away. She had no desire to interact with anything or anyone beyond her door. Too much weighed on her mind.

For the thousandth time since she'd looked at the test results that had told her so plainly that she was pregnant, Kris ran a hand across her stomach. She didn't feel any different, other than the occasional nausea, yet her whole life had changed, again, in a whirlwind. She considered herself a plain, non-dramatic person, but since meeting Edward Hollingsworth, her existence had been anything but uncomplicated.

Opening bloodshot green eyes, the young woman stared at the early morning light radiating across her makeshift canopy. She knew she should get up and do *something*—perhaps write in her journal or play with Nathan. However, her body and her mind rebelled as her life choices loomed before her. Sooner or later, she'd have decisions to make.

Keeping the baby was way down on her list. Doing so would mean making a commitment she'd so recently decided would be a mistake. Having a baby would be fine, but being shackled to Edward for the rest of her life, or at least eighteen years, was not something she wanted to do, no matter what financial perks were attached.

Option number two was giving up the baby for adoption. She realized, however, how improbable execution of such a plan would be. Preventing Edward from knowing she was pregnant would be hard enough, no matter where she went. Convincing him that giving up the child—especially if it was the son he'd always wanted—would be impossible. He wouldn't love the baby, of course, at least not more than himself, but he'd want to control it, just as he wanted to control her.

No, that won't work. If this baby is born, I'll be a Hollingsworth, miserable and beaten, for the rest of my life, Kris thought with a sad sigh.

She didn't really like the idea of the last option, either. The liberated young woman completely believed in the right to choose. She simply didn't think she could live with the guilt of having prevented a child from being born. For her, there were some reasons she could accept the decision to abort. Not loving her

husband hadn't been on that list before now.

Can I really have an abortion just to save myself from this marriage? It was all her fault, after all. Making her unborn child pay for that seemed unfair. The baby didn't get to choose who its daddy was.

Still, abortion seemed to be the cleanest option. Edward would never know, never have an excuse to keep his chains on her. Kris could get out unsoiled that way, she was sure.

Who the hell am I fooling? I'm not sure about anything. Forcing her head into the down pillow and closing her eyes, Kris groaned in frustration. There just weren't any easy answers. That fact didn't surprise her, but she couldn't help but wish a solution would make itself clear. Or that someone could help her make the right decision.

A clear, happy image of a rugged smile came to her mind. Bruce Dooley was extremely adept at giving advice. The thought of talking to him, about anything, brought a sense of calm to the troubled young woman. Kris knew she wasn't ready to talk to him about her pregnancy, or the extent of her broken relationship, but she knew if she did, he'd gently help her come to terms with it all. In the least he'd make an honest attempt, and that would mean to the world to her.

Being a married woman, Kris had very carefully kept her thoughts of Bruce at a chaste level. Most of the time. But on some late, dark nights, after being ignored and berated by her husband, she'd let her mind drift to Bruce's gentle ways and the kindness he so willingly showed her. Though she didn't know everything about the bartender, what she knew showed that he was like the man she'd always wished for Edward to be. When Bruce did something for her, he did it because he wanted to make her happy, not because he would get something in exchange.

Now, when I am almost in a position to show Bruce how I feel about him, how much I care for him, I've screwed that up, too. No doubt he would be a wonderful father, but he wouldn't want to be burdened by another man's child. And having to deal with Edward Hollingsworth after a divorce would be a living hell. Kris wouldn't wish that on Bruce, even if he were willing to do it.

Rubbing her forehead, Kris thought of her own father. If he were to find out about the pregnancy, she'd be just as locked in as she'd be if Edward discovered it. Robert Curtis would love the idea of her being tied to the Hollingsworths. Kris, for some inexplicable reason, still loved her father dearly, even knowing that dollar signs made a bigger impact on him than seeing a smile on her face.

The blonde gritted her teeth. *There has to be another way.* A perfect answer was probably barely beyond her mental grasp, waiting for one thought before it presented itself.

Kris picked up the telephone and dialed Bruce's number. She needed to hear his voice. After the fifth ring, she replaced the phone into its cradle, glad he hadn't answered. Talking to him, hearing what could have been in his compassionate words, would have hurt almost as much as the turmoil she was in now. As wonderful as Bruce was, he wasn't the solution to her problems.

Unfortunately, she wasn't going to find the answers lying in bed. Sitting up, letting her covers fall to her lap in a crumpled heap, Kris thanked God she had more time to search.



Clifton O'Connor was struggling to get the table leaf into place when Dominique Carpenter walked into the formal dining room of Hollingsworth Manor. "Ah, thank goodness ye're here," he said.

Dominique suspiciously arched an eyebrow. "If you plan on clubbing me with that board and dragging me off to your cave, you'd best think again, handyman."

Clifton snorted derisively. "Been listening to Molly's tales again, have ya?"

"Molly isn't the only one in this town who knows you," Dominique smiled.

"Yeah, yeah. Could I get ya to stop gloatin' about vicious gossip and give me a hand?"

Dominique's smile widened as she heartily applauded Clifton's efforts.

"Very funny," he grinned. "Now can ya grab the other end o' this leaf and help me slide it into place?"

"Never would've suspected you'd need help with something like that," Dominique said coyly as she moved to help Clifton.

Clifton shook his head. "Ya woke up wicked this mornin', I see. That have anything ta do with why you people want another leaf added ta the table?"

"Not a thing," Dominique said as she maneuvered her end of the leaf into place.

"So I heard yer brother's author won a big award over the weekend," Clifton said, motioning Dominique around to the end of the table.

"He did." Dominique pushed against her end of the table, causing it to enclose the newly added leaf.

"And that's the reason for the new leaf bein' added?"

Dominique shook her head. "His author isn't coming to dinner if that's what you're asking."

"Of course not," Clifton scoffed. "I was just wonderin' if Edward's ego now needed a place of its own at the table."

Dominique laughed. "And you said *I* woke up wicked."

Clifton grinned. "Ya did. I just woke up honest."

Dominique laughed again.

Watching her, Clifton smiled. Dominique was a beauty, no doubt about it. But there was something other than her appearance that Clifton found intriguing about the woman. Something in her eyes.

"I imagine he's become hard to live with," Clifton said.

Dominique snorted, then glanced around the room as if to make certain they were alone. "Don't you mean 'harder' to live with?"

Clifton grinned. "Don't know. Never lived with him."

"Lucky you," Dominique whispered conspiratorially.

"Ye're a strong woman."

"Oh, I have my moments," Dominique admitted. "He was so insufferable while we were in New York that I had to escape in a glass of wine."

Clifton chuckled. "Couldn't have been that bad if it only took a glass."

Dominique ruefully shook her head. "Wish it had only been one. I think it was more like one too many."

Clifton grinned. "Yeah, I noticed from our run-ins at The Blue Streak that ye're

not much of a drinker.”

Dominique smiled. “I try to leave that to you professionals.”

The sense of levity which Clifton had felt dissipated and was replaced by something darker. “Whatta ya mean by that?” His voice held more edge than he’d intended.

“Only that you’re preceded by your reputation as a man who can hold his liquor.” Dominique smiled. “I’ve never met a living legend before.”

An unfamiliar pain took residence beneath Clifton’s ribs. Not only did his daughter think he was a drunk, but apparently half the town did as well. Had Dominique really just referred to his liquor capacity as legendary?

Dominique must have sensed his change in mood, because she hastily began backpedaling. “I honestly wasn’t condemning you or your choices. I’m sorry if it sounded like I was.”

A choice? It’s more a bloody compulsion than it is a choice, Clifton thought. “Not a problem,” Clifton said brusquely. “Thanks for yer help with the table.” He turned and walked out of the room.



“I cannot understand what is taking Mother so long,” Edward Hollingsworth said to no one in particular. “It is not like her to miss family dinners.”

“You think it has something to do with the new leaf that’s been added to the table?” Kyle Curtis asked.

“That’d be my guess,” Stuart Hollingsworth answered.

“That her absence is related to a dinner guest is obvious,” Edward retorted. “Why she did not inform any of us as to this person’s identity is not.”

Dominique tried not to smile as she chewed a mouthful of roast beef, but her subterfuge was apparently noticed by Stuart.

“Do you know anything about this, Dominique?” Stuart asked.

“About what?” Dominique asked innocently.

Edward’s angry expression intensified. “I suspect you know very well what is

happening here, and I suggest you let the rest of us know as well.”

Dominique sipped from a glass of iced tea, then looked to her left past Harris, Lisa, and Nathan to Edward. “Even if I did know something, Edward—and I’m not saying that I do—it’s entirely possible that I wouldn’t be able to tell you.”

“That is bull!” Edward snarled.

“No, this is bull,” Stuart said, hoisting a forkful of beef and causing Mark and Nathan to giggle.

Edward glared at Stuart, but it was Lisa who spoke. “Look, Edward. Even if Dominique knows our guest’s identity, it’s obvious that she’s been asked to not reveal it to the rest of us. So why don’t you stop making her uncomfortable and try to have a little patience?”

Edward said nothing, but he settled into a silence that almost seemed respectful. Dominique marveled that he would listen to Lisa. After all, Edward didn’t seem to listen to anyone except his mother. Dominique smiled thankfully at her sister-in-law, who winked in return.

“Miss Constance is on her way up, and she’s bringin’ a guest,” Molly Crenshaw said as she entered the dining room. “The guard said she said ta tell us that they’re gonna freshen up and will join us shortly.”

“Thank you, Molly,” Lisa smiled.

“Does this have anything to do with the phone call you received during dinner the other night?” Kris, looking interested for the first time that evening, asked Dominique.

Dominique smiled coyly. The girl was sharper than Edward thought. “Maybe.”

“I wonder who it could be?” Kris pondered.

“Undoubtedly, it is someone in the publishing industry.” Edward spoke as if he were attempting to explain physics to a toddler. “Perhaps someone who wishes to join Hollingsworth Publishing after our win at the National Book Awards.”

Dominique resisted the urge to roll her eyes, then fought to stifle a giggle as she remembered Clifton’s earlier question about Edward’s ego needing a separate place at the table. The old coot hadn’t been far off the mark.

Kris snorted. “Well, it’s definitely a woman.”

"Why would you think that?" Edward asked.

"You ever hear of a guy 'freshening up?'" Kris retorted.

No one spoke, though Dominique saw several quickly hidden smiles as Kris' barb jabbed home.

Dinner continued in silence for several minutes, until Constance entered the room and every head rose and turned to greet her and their guest. Dominique smiled broadly as a nervous-looking Morgan followed Constance into the room and stood just inside the doorway. "Everyone, we have a guest who'll be staying with us for awhile, and I hope each of you will do your best to make her feel at home, because she is," Constance said. "This is my sister, Morgan."



"That was a blast," Lisa said, settling on the bed in her blue silk nightgown.

Harris wearily pulled his eyes from the television and nodded. "You can say that. I'm not sure I've ever seen a bigger woman."

Lisa elbowed him playfully. "And she's so funny. My sides still hurt. If your mother had grown up with Morgan, Constance would be a different person."

Harris shrugged. "Or Morgan would. No one has a stronger will than my mother. She always gets her way," he said, a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

Her brow furrowed. Lisa was worried about her husband. For the past several weeks, Harris had been more depressed than she'd ever seen him. Everyone had their highs and lows, so she knew he wasn't in trouble, but she hated seeing him so deflated. She scooted closer and leaned into him, appreciating his comforting warmth.

After a few moments of silence, she looked up to his kind, bearded face, curious as to what could be troubling him so. "I think I'll like Morgan. Another unexpected delight."

"She seems okay. I'm not sure I can take any more long-lost relatives, though."

Lisa chuckled, acknowledging the bizarre nature of the situation. "It has been strange. I never could have imagined this happening."

Harris' cool blue eyes stared through the TV. "I don't even recognize my family

anymore.”

His haunted expression disturbed Lisa. “You’ll adjust to it.” He turned to her, his face disbelieving. “You’ve got to admit, this family needed something to shake it up.”

Thinking, Harris took a deep breath. “I don’t know. Things had been going well.” He exhaled slowly. “I suppose success can’t last forever.”

“This isn’t going to make you fail, Harris. We’ll simply have more people to share our triumphs with.”

Harris looked at her and seemed to see her for the first time, a glint of hope on his face. “I haven’t thought of it like that.”

“See, it’s not so bad.”

“Except I’ve lost my brother,” he said quietly.

Lisa wished she understood why Harris felt so betrayed by Stuart, but for the life of her she couldn’t. “Your relationship with Stuart will iron out, too,” she said brightly.

He shook his head, light from the television bouncing blue off his hair. “I don’t know.”

“I do. You can’t love your brother for thirty-five years, then stop overnight. Give it time.”

Harris didn’t speak for several minutes, and Lisa knew enough to leave him alone with his thoughts. She slid down onto the waterbed, pulled the comforter to her chest, and snuggled into his firm shoulder.