

Business Decisions

Standing with his hands on his hips, his back rigid, Edward Hollingsworth stared out at the waterfall, not seeing nature's intricate cycle at play. His mind was flashing back to his night with Heather, the powerful emotions she had evoked in him, and the upcoming night he hoped to share with her. Without even knowing what she was doing, the ever-boring Kris had played perfectly into his hands by leaving.

Kyle had given Edward a lame explanation that Kris had gone on an out-of-town shopping trip, but the slight tremor in the man's voice made the publisher doubt his truthfulness. Edward suspected that his wife might be cavorting somewhere with the brute, Bruce Dooley, imagining she was hurting him. Unfortunately for her, any action she could take would have no effect on Edward. Kris was nothing more than a pawn now, and she would be sacrificed to the game soon enough.

Silly girl, he thought, a devilish smile forming on his thin lips. Edward had been attracted to her innocence at first, her wide-eyed, childish beauty. Her stupidity had grown very tiring quickly enough. He almost welcomed the time he could be rid of her, even if it meant turbulence with his mother.

At least she would pay attention to me. His smile faded, visions of his mother with Dominique Carpenter and Morgan Pritchard filling his mind. Times had certainly changed in Hollingsworth Manor. Not long ago it had been he and his mother against the world, with only his bumbling brothers with whom to contend. Now he was under attack from all angles; a situation he highly detested.

Edward took a deep breath and clenched his jaw, trying to put the thoughts out of his mind. *Tonight should be relaxing, however. Heather might like—*

The shrill buzz of the phone crashed his thoughts. Regally striding to his desk, he pressed the phone's speaker button and leaned onto the polished desk surface. "Yes."

His assistant's soft voice put him through to the caller. "What do you want?" Edward said harshly, returning to a state of annoyance.

"Hello, Mr. Hollingsworth. This is Reed Monroe."

The dark-haired publisher briefly closed his eyes and twisted his tight neck muscles. He had not been entirely pleased with the Kirk Griffith situation, but

the attorney had done a respectable job. Bruce Dooley had not yet left town, and Kris did not react as he had expected, yet many of his goals had been achieved. "Yes, Mr. Monroe. I did not expect to hear from you."

The greasy attorney cleared his throat nervously. "No, no. I didn't expect this either. Really." He paused, and Edward simply waited. "Kirk Griffith is askin' for more money."

"And what did he do with the money I already paid him?" Edward asked, hanging his head. The overhead florescents glared back up at him from the desk's shiny surface.

Monroe laughed, his voice at an irregularly high pitch. "He said something about horses and Las Vegas, but who the hell knows."

"You told me this man was reliable, Mr. Monroe."

Static crackled across the line as the thick attorney moved. "I thought he was. At least as reliable as you can get with a man willing to break the law for money. You can't trust a crook, I guess." He laughed again.

Edward's chiseled face tightened into a grim mask, and he felt anything but amused. If Kirk Griffith thought he could manipulate Edward Hollingsworth, he was sadly mistaken. "How much does he want?"

The attorney sheepishly muttered a number larger than the publisher expected. "Perhaps that amount should come from the money I paid you. It appears the job was not performed as satisfactorily as I believed."

"I did what I could, Mr. Hollingsworth. I told the bastard he was crazy, but he wouldn't listen to me. He's gonna go to that Nguyen bitch at the paper if he's not paid." Monroe paused, shuffling the phone again. "And I don't have that much money."

Edward sighed heavily, his voice a growl. "The track too, I suppose?" As the attorney began to respond, the angry publisher cut him off. "Tell Mr. Griffith I need seventy-two hours to meet his demands."

Slamming the phone into its cradle, Edward turned back to the falls, his thoughts as turbulent as the water below.



Molly Crenshaw crossed herself as she knelt before the emblazoned bank of

candles, a life-sized Jesus staring down at her from his perch on the cathedral wall. She looked up to the figure, His bronze skin yellowed in the firelight, silently thanking Him for the blessings He had bestowed. Not long ago she'd feared God had abandoned her, but sitting in His sight now, she realized He'd been her strength all along.

Apart from the diagnosis of her lump, she had so much for which to be thankful with the expansion of her relationship with Leyland. Molly found it impossible, even to herself, to express how much it meant to have more time to spend with him.

Finishing her prayer, Molly stood from the altar and lit another candle. *This is for all the women who don't get a second chance*, she thought. When she turned, Father Greer was standing at the back of the church, his hands clasped serenely at his waist.

As she walked down the aisle, Molly noticed the shadow the archway cast on the priest, his weathered face obscured by the darkness. In conjunction with his black robes, he would have looked sinister if she didn't know of his good heart.

"Father," she greeted him with a big smile.

"You look well, Molly," he responded quietly with a complacent grin.

She moved into the shadows and reflexively took his hand. "I took your advice and told my family. Dominique and Morgan talked me into going for the lumpectomy."

The gray-haired man nodded solemnly. "You are very courageous."

"I had a lot of help. Leyland went with me to the appointment," she said shyly.

The priest waited patiently for her to continue. "And?"

"It wasn't malignant." The smile on her face was unbreakable.

"God provides for the faithful. Let this be a lesson, Molly."

She would have preferred to have been taught in a less stressful manner, but she had learned a lot about herself. "It has been. I've learned so much."

"Life is serving God, and to serve Him, we must face tests. I believe you've passed a very important one this time." He pulled them through the nearest door out into the morning sunshine of the courtyard.

Molly let the sun warm her face. If this hadn't happened, she doubted anything would have come of her friendship with Leyland. Nothing would stop her now, though, from chasing those experiences that it seemed everyone but her had. Before the lump, she'd survived day by day and passively took pleasure in each moment, lavishing each small thread of joy passed her way. Now she planned on living each day to the fullest, taking the chances that had frightened her before, and seeking out the love that she deserved.

"I'm thankful for yer faith in me, Father."

The priest smiled knowingly. "I have faith in the righteous. You've never let me down."

"I shouldn't have doubted my family. You were right about them."

As the black-robed man agreed, Molly wondered how awful it must be to have neither faith, nor family. God, the Hollingsworths, and Leyland had been so valuable to her, she had no idea how she could make it without them.



"Nguyen!"

Abigayle Nguyen hunched over her desk and prayed she'd been quick enough to avoid Donald Farraday's probing eyes.

"There you are!" the rotund editor proclaimed as he approached Abigayle's desk.

"What is it, Donald?" Abigayle barely restrained a groan.

"Got a job for ya." Donald leaned heavily on Abigayle's desk, his breath coming in ragged puffs. A little powdered sugar, remnants of a hastily devoured donut, lingered on his chin.

"Would this have anything to do with fetching your lunch?" Abigayle managed a saccharin smile.

"Actually, it would," Donald said, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing some bills from his wallet.

"Figures," Abigayle muttered, taking the money.

Bundled against the cold, Abigayle made her way to the Jeep. Despite her

grumbled protests, she really didn't mind running the errand. There were no major crime waves or even an isolated school shooting to keep her busy writing articles. At least getting Donald's lunch gave her something to do other than wonder how sour her parents' moods could be when she returned home, or think about how Clifton had abandoned her.

Clifton. Abigayle subconsciously tightened her grip on the steering wheel. *Bastard! If I could get my hands on you, someone would have a story to write. I could kill you for all you've put me through!*

A blaring car horn interrupted Abigayle's homicidal thoughts, and she straightened behind the wheel, concentrated on her driving, and contented herself with images of Donald Farraday exploding after eating one too many powdered donuts.



Kyle Curtis expertly cracked the lobster's claw and delicately extracted the luscious meat, wishing he could get Virginia Tucker to be as forthcoming. "So," Kyle said, "you were telling me about growing up in Austin."

Virginia shrugged slightly as she concentrated on chewing. Swallowing her food, she said, "There's not much to tell, really. It was just a normal childhood."

"Normal by the standards of the day, or by our time?" Kyle asked.

Virginia laughed. "You make me sound like a relic from a bygone age!"

Kyle almost choked. "I didn't mean to make you feel older than you are!" he protested.

Virginia arched one perfectly shaped and plucked eyebrow. Her blue eyes glittered mischievously. "So now you're implying that I'm old, but not as old as you can make me feel."

Kyle laughed, realizing he was getting nowhere. "Okay, let me start all over again."

"Would you like for me to hand you a shovel?" Virginia asked pleasantly.

"Are my table manners *that* bad?" Kyle grinned.

"They're wonderful," Virginia said. "I just thought you might want something to help you cover the hole you've dug yourself into, assuming you manage to get

out of it, of course.”

Kyle laughed. It felt right to be out with Virginia. He’d planned on spending the evening alone at Hollingsworth Manor, but when Virginia had phoned and said she wanted to thank him for helping her get the job at Hollingsworth Publishing, Kyle had found her offer of an evening out to be infinitely more preferable to spending the evening in the same house with his sister’s cheating husband and the slut of a housekeeper he was bedding.

Kyle felt his face color as mingled anger and sadness rushed through him. He had promised Kris that while she was away he wouldn’t confront either Edward or Heather, or reveal Edward’s indiscretion to the rest of the family. Kyle had found the promise hard to keep, especially since Kris planned on remaining incommunicado during her absence. He was worried about her, and a small part of him felt as if he was in some way betraying her by going out and having a good time with Virginia.

“I’m sorry,” Virginia said. “I didn’t mean to make you blush, but I’m glad I got to see it. Blushing is a very charming trait for a man to possess.”

“You have quite a few charming traits yourself,” Kyle said, deciding not to dispel her misconception.

Virginia took a long swallow of wine, then smiled at Kyle. “Keep talking, handsome. You may wiggle your way out of this one yet.”



“There’s nothing on TV,” Dominique Carpenter moaned as she let the remote control slip from her grasp.

“Never is,” said Morgan Pritchard. “Unless you care to watch the mentally deficient wrestle alligators or each other.”

“Hey! Don’t be talking bad about Steve Irwin!”

Morgan waved dismissively. “You’re just too infatuated with his accent to realize his state of mind.”

“Are you two at it again?” Constance Hollingsworth asked as she entered the den.

Morgan laughed. “Just trying to inject a little culture into this daughter of yours.”

"Your sister is a snob," Dominique told Constance, indignantly tossing her dreadlocks over her shoulder.

Morgan's eyes widened in mock surprise. She stood from the comfortably overstuffed chair. "Well, I certainly didn't come here to be insulted."

"Where do you usually go?" Dominique asked sweetly.

Constance rolled her eyes. "You two should take this act on the road."

"Think we'd make money?" Morgan asked.

Constance shook her head. "Not a hope in hell, but at least I wouldn't be the only one who has to suffer through it."

Morgan laughed. "Well, I'm heading upstairs for the night, ladies. I'm beat."

Dominique checked her watch. She shook her head in bewilderment. "Why on earth anyone would want to go to bed at 9 o'clock is beyond me."

Morgan leaned across Dominique's chair. "Because, my dear, I like to get up early, and if I don't get eight hours of sleep, I'm the crankiest bitch you've ever encountered."

Dominique turned to look at Constance.

"Don't say a word, Dominique." Constance wagged a finger in warning.

Morgan laughed as she left the room. "G'night, ladies."

"Good night," they called after her.

"Actually," Constance said to Dominique, "you may want to go to bed a little earlier than usual tonight."

Dominique raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Because I'd like for you to go somewhere with me in the morning."

Dominique searched her mother's green eyes for answers, but found none there. "Where?"

"That would be telling," Constance replied slyly.

Dominique sighed. It hadn't taken her long to realize her mother could be very stubborn when it came to letting you know only what she wanted you to know. "I guess you'll be up for a while yet?"

"Why would you think that?"

"You're not going to wait up for Edward?"

Constance shook her head. "I long ago stopped waiting up for Edward."

"You don't think he might be up to something—Dominique narrowed her emerald eyes, "untoward."

"What do you mean?"

Dominique carefully chose her words, so as not to break Kris' confidence. "Well, Kris is out of town, and you know the saying about the mouse playing while the cat is away."

Constance waved dismissively. "He knows better. I'm sure he's dealing with business matters."

Dominique nodded, knowing her mother's mind, once set, wasn't easily changed. Still, depending on what Kris decided to do while she was away, Constance might soon have to deal with the fact that her eldest son had broken his vows in yet another marriage. Dominique hoped their mother's heart was up to the strain.

"Okay, Mama. I'll go with you in the morning. But it better be good if I'm gonna drag my behind out of bed at the crack of dawn."

Constance smiled. "Trust me, Dominique. This will be something for which you'll be happy to get out of bed."



As *The Dance* flowed softly from the jukebox behind him, Bruce Dooley took a second sip of his full beer glass, listening to the poignant words of the song. Long one of his favorites, the meaning hit home today more than ever before. While Garth Brooks sang of the comfort he took in knowing that he'd truly lived by taking chances no matter the outcome, Bruce wished he'd had the opportunity. Or perhaps the courage.

The one thing he should have grasped tight with both hands and never released,

he'd let slip by without even touching. Now it was too late to even try. Kris was lost to him.

I can't believe she's pregnant, he thought. The bartender looked around the bar where he sat, one of his competitors, and wondered why he didn't feel at home. And why he couldn't enjoy his beer. Bruce had hoped a little trip away from The Blue Streak would help his mood. He'd imagined that he could come here and drink, losing himself in booze long enough to forget.

The truth wouldn't let him, however. The big man had been nursing the same beer for half an hour, knowing deep down that what it contained would do nothing but add to his problems. He'd been serving alcoholics too long to give in to the delusion that the alcohol would be a healing balm. Besides, he didn't want to lose what little of the dream he could still hold. Even though Kris had never been his, they had managed to make a few great memories.

He sighed and leaned back on the stool, turning to see the nearest television screen displaying recent sports scores. Club Scott was certainly a more upscale establishment than his place, hosting more of a rock-and-jock atmosphere than the rough biker set that The Blue Streak attracted. None of the seats were slashed and the sweet smell of sawdust was nowhere to be found. The lights were too bright and the waitresses too busty for Bruce's taste, but he was sure the owner had a much bigger bank account than his own.

Like I give a damn about that. He huffed silently, shaking his head at himself, angry for being angry. *All this is probably for the best,* his mind told him. Kris had a baby on the way, and she'd be an excellent mother. Though she didn't realize it, the young woman had the touch and soft sensibility of a born nurturer. Any child of hers would never want for love or attention.

Kris and her baby deserve a better life than they could ever have with me. All his life, Bruce had tried to do the right thing. But life had thrown a few curves his way. Now, Bruce couldn't remember a day he'd not been running. Or a time when he'd not wanted to run.

The brown-haired man ran a thick hand across his bearded face and squeezed his eyes shut. More than anything, he wanted to run from himself, only cruel fate keeping him in his skin.

"Hey, big guy." A friendly hand slapped his back.

The bartender cringed at the sound of his unwanted friend, Ford Blankenship. The cop was like a hungry stray, following Bruce around everywhere he went, begging for the sustenance of conversation.

"Hi, Ford," Bruce answered, his voice filled with monotone depression.

The officer squinted his brown eyes and shifted the gun on his hip. "Are you okay? I got a little worried when I saw The Blue Streak closed. I'm glad I saw your car."

The bartender shrugged his shoulders and forced himself to take a drink. "I needed a day off," he said, wiping his mouth.

Ford leaned on the bar beside him, his shoulders hunched under the weight of his fully muscled and well-equipped wardrobe. "I'm not sure you should be supporting your competition, but whatever suits you." The officer smiled, receiving a half-hearted one in return. "My shift is over. Do you mind if I join you after I make a call and change my shirt?"

Though he didn't feel like company, Bruce couldn't turn down the officer, who never stopped being friendly. He might be a cop, but he did have a good heart. That much was obvious. "Sure. I'll be here all night." He took another, bigger, drink of beer and set his mug down with a thump.

Bruce tried not to think about anything while he waited for Ford to return. He could have easily tried to plan his time with the cop, or worry about the consequences if he said the wrong words. No good would come from such pondering, he knew, so he simply emptied his mind and waited for the inevitable.

Ford sat down beside him and ordered a beer. He'd removed his blue uniform top and all the hardware on his pants, leaving an outfit at which most people wouldn't take a second look. The tall, dark-haired man was all cop, however, and Bruce allowed himself to take comfort in that for a moment, remembering a time when he didn't fear the law.

"So, do you want to talk about what's bothering you? I've never seen you so down," Ford commented.

Part of Bruce appreciated the directness. The remainder of him wished they could talk about football. "We all have our moments, I guess."

"Woman trouble, right?"

Bruce couldn't help but laugh, a depressed rumble. "Lack of woman trouble is more like it." He really didn't want to talk to the officer about it, or to anyone for that matter, but he could tell his heart wasn't going to listen to common sense.

"I hear ya. I have the same problem. It's always the one you can't have, isn't it?" Ford, his dark hair glistening in the track lighting, leaned his head back for a long draught.

"Kris Hollingsworth," Bruce said matter-of-factly. Ford nodded and the bigger man took a deep breath and continued. "I guess the realization has finally hit that a guy like me doesn't get a woman like that."

The officer nodded, slipping away in silent thought for a moment. "Rahne O'Connor. I'm not quite where you are, I suppose, but I'm getting there."

A sad silence followed between the men as they sat at the bar, staring into forgotten drinks. Despite his reluctance and the danger, Bruce felt a little better. Not much, but at least he wasn't alone.

After a few minutes, Ford straightened up, seeming to awaken himself from a trance. Bruce welcomed the question when the officer asked, "You think the Patriots have a chance at the Super Bowl this year?"



Rahne O'Connor leaned to one side and pressed her head against Trent Beckham's chest. "Ready for bed?" she whispered.

"Absolutely," Trent said, stroking her hair.

As one, they rose from Rahne's living room sofa. "You know," Rahne said, "I've really enjoyed spending the evening with you. No cases, no patients, no ringing phone, no interruptions; just dinner, soft music, and candlelight."

"We should do this more often," Trent said, turning off the stereo, silencing the smooth jazz that had been playing.

"That's what I've been thinking," Rahne said.

Something in Rahne's tone caused Trent to pause in his task of extinguishing the candles and turn toward her. "What do you mean?"

"Why don't you give up your apartment and move in with me?"

Trent searched Rahne's face. "Are you sure?"

Rahne nodded. "I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

Trent smiled. "I'm sorry. You took me by surprise, that's all."

"Nice to know I'm still capable of doing that." It was Rahne's turn to smile.

Trent crossed the room and took her in his arms. He pressed his face against her hair and whispered, "I'd love to move in with you."

"Good," Rahne whispered in return.

"I love you," Trent said, moving his lips to Rahne's and hungrily kissing her.

Rahne put her hands flat on his chest and pushed him away.

Trent stared at her, wondering what he'd done wrong.

"Do you love me enough to marry me?" Rahne asked.

Trent felt as if his breath had been hammered out of him.

"If you'd rather not, I understand," Rahne said softly.

"No! It's not that," Trent said hurriedly. "I'm just wondering where this is coming from."

Rahne shrugged. "I guess I finally grew up and figured out what I wanted. And what I want, Trent, is you. I don't want to lose what we have. I've never felt it with anyone before you, and I don't think I'll ever feel it with anyone else."

Trent stared at her. He was sure her father's revelation about her mother had something to do with Rahne's sudden change of heart regarding marriage, but he didn't care to analyze the situation. All he wanted to do was make certain of what Rahne had said. "So, what you're saying—"

Rahne smiled. "What I'm *asking*, Trent, is for you to share a home, a life, and a family with me. Will you marry me?"

His eyes locked on those of the woman he loved, Trent slightly turned his head to one side, blew out the remaining candles, then gave her an answer in the dark.



"Y'all sure are ugly at seven in the morning," Dominique complained to the

gathered members of the Hollingsworth family.

"Ooh, somebody woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning," Morgan said, serving a hot plate of cinnamon rolls.

"Why are you so chipper?" Dominique grumped.

"Got all the sleep I needed, then I hit the kitchen and started cooking," Morgan said. "Baking always puts me in good spirits."

"Why don't you try baking some blueberry muffins, Aunt Dominique?" Nathan said.

Dominique and the rest of the gathered adults, with the exception of Edward, laughed. "Maybe I should try that sometime, Nathan," Dominique smiled.

"You want some blueberry muffins, young man?" Morgan asked.

Nathan nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, I think it's a little too close to you leaving for school for me to whip up a batch this morning," Morgan looked to Lisa for confirmation, "but I can make you some in the morning if you'd like."

"Or you could leave the cooking to the professionals and have breakfast with the rest of your family," Constance said.

"Phooey," Morgan spat. "I'd go crazy sitting on my behind, and you know it. Besides, Heather looks a little under the weather, so I was more than happy to lend a hand to Molly."

All eyes turned to Heather, who did, indeed, look tired and pale.

"Are you feeling poorly, Heather?" Lisa asked.

"I'm fine." Heather managed a wan smile. "I just didn't get much rest last night."

Edward, Dominique noticed, looked none too rested either. A glance at their mother revealed that she'd not noticed. It was obvious that Constance was having to struggle to keep from grinning like a madwoman, but Dominique knew it was no use trying to pry her mother's plans from her until she was ready to reveal them.

"Wipe that frown off your face, and eat your breakfast," Morgan growled in Dominique's ear as she refilled her coffee cup.

"Yes, ma'am," Dominique saluted dutifully and did as ordered.



Holding one manuscript back, Lisa Hollingsworth placed her most recent stack of reviewed submissions on her boss' desk. "The reports to these are attached. They're all good quality."

Clarice Turner grunted, barely lifting her eyes to acknowledge her charge.

Lisa smiled, a little unsure of herself, and waited until the editor looked at her. "This manuscript is the best I've read yet. I think you'll really enjoy it."

"I'm sure," Clarice said, pointing to the manuscripts already on the desk.

Surrendering the last submission, Lisa left the office, shutting the door behind as it had been when she entered. The same bump she'd heard from Clarice in the past, like books falling to the floor, sounded from the office.

Frowning, the brunette turned to the assistant manning the outer office. The woman, whose platinum-blonde hair spiked above a long forehead, grimaced guiltily and averted contact-tinted blue eyes. Her tanned cheeks deepened beneath a deep red blush.

Sudden anger filled the publisher's wife as she realized the nature of the curious sound. Turning swiftly on her heels, Lisa strode back into the office. Clarice raised her head, a startled and cross expression on her round face. Lisa's cold brown eyes took in the manuscripts piled in the trash can.

"Is there a problem with my submissions?" She was unable to hold the emotion from her voice.

The editor tracked Lisa's gaze to the wastebasket. "Oh, are those yours?" She removed them slowly, reading the first cover page.

Lisa narrowed her eyes, doubting the conclusion she'd drawn that had brought her running. She hated to think the worst of people. "Yes."

"I'm sorry. Thanks for catching that error. I'd hate to lose those," Clarice said, placing the stack on another group of documents. The terse woman returned her attention to her computer.

As Lisa exited the office, she again closed the door, looking the red-faced assistant in the eye. The set in the woman's jaw, or the grim expression on her overly made-up face, drew in the publisher's wife.

"Is she throwing away the manuscripts I give her?" Lisa asked softly, pointing back to her supervisor with a crooked thumb. The angry woman leaned on the assistant's desk with both hands, her shoulders looming above, stressfully tightened.

"I—I don't know," the assistant stammered.

"Listen, I won't get you in trouble. I just need to know if she's trashing my submissions."

The blonde looked toward her boss' door and sighed. "Yeah, she is."

Lisa gasped. "Why? I've given her some excellent books."

"She doesn't even read them. She's just mad," the assistant whispered.

"What did I do? I've always been very respectful of her." Lisa couldn't imagine what she could have done to offend the editor.

The blonde shook her head. "It's not you, Lisa. She's never liked the fact that Stuart gave you the job. You didn't have a chance."

A sinking feeling in her gut, Lisa thanked the assistant and went to the elevator. She needed to think, then give her brother-in-law a piece of her mind.



Heather Patterson moved sluggishly through Hollingsworth Manor's east wing. While her hands were occupied with the menial task of dusting the frames of the photos that lined the walls, her mind was occupied with thoughts of the spectacular delights Edward had performed on her body the previous night.

He had taken the initiative and been the dominant partner during their lovemaking—at least the first few times. Heather was still sleepy and a little sore from their nocturnal romp, but she thought that the pleasure she'd felt at being with Edward, at sleeping by his side after they were spent, had been well worth her present sense of discomfort.

Heather's smile evaporated, and she paused in her duties as she realized she

was dusting a photo of Edward and Kris that had been taken on their wedding day. He looked so happy then, as happy as he had looked the previous night after he'd stripped her bare and placed her in bed.

Pushing away the momentary twinge of guilt, Heather resumed dusting.



Scanning through his most recent batch of lurid photographs, Stuart contrasted the offensive contents with the comical look his assistant had shown when she'd handed the envelope to him. He wasn't any more used to being mailed suggestive pictures than she was, of course. He simply tried to avoid any sort of reaction, which is what he supposed his benefactor desired.

Then again, he reasoned getting pornography through the mail was better than the alternative. Some people got bombs.

Shortly before his door burst open, his assistant's frantic voice perked his attention. Stuart was surprised to see his sister-in-law pull to a screeching halt in front of his desk, her normally pallid face a radiant red.

"I'm disappointed in you Stuart." The door loudly slammed shut behind Lisa, an exclamation to her statement.

"Excuse me?" he asked, immediately scanning his brain for any untoward actions he might have perpetrated. "Did I leave the toilet seat up again?"

Her eyes squinted, the upset woman ignored his attempt at levity. "What kind of position did you put me in here? Did you order everyone to pander to me because I'm Harris' wife, or are they simply to ignore me with a smile?"

Stuart's eyebrows raised as he realized Lisa was truly angry with him. He'd never seen her so flustered, other than in relation to her children. "What are you talking about, Lisa?"

"I just figured out that Clarice Turner has been throwing away all my manuscripts out of spite."

Remembering the fleeting thought that he'd had when reviewing Clarice's workload, Stuart nodded. Apparently she hadn't been screening more harshly, as he'd told himself. "Those certainly weren't my instructions."

Lisa detailed her confrontation with the editor, almost coming to tears several times. She wasn't a weepy woman, but the frustration and humiliation were

evident in her fervor.

"I sincerely apologize, Lisa. I did bypass some of our normal protocols with you, but I felt, and still feel, your talent warrants the adjustment," the publisher responded, already formulating his next conversation with Clarice Turner.

"What do you mean?"

Stuart sighed, second-guessing his tactics in bringing Lisa into the company. "Normally, someone with your lack of formal experience would report to an editor under Ms. Turner. But I know you and your abilities, so I decided to have only one buffer between your work product and myself. Apparently Ms. Turner did not appreciate that."

"Apparently not. I appreciate your faith, Stuart, but now my direct supervisor hates me and I doubt our relationship can be repaired. And all the work I've been doing for Hollingsworth Publishing has been for nothing, other than to get a number of authors' submissions tossed in the trash can." Lisa shook her head and sat down in the nearest chair, defeated.

"Obviously, Ms. Turner and myself need to have a talk."

Barging into the office, the editor in question, her polyester pantsuit scratching rhythmically against her skin, stopped beside Lisa, looking down on her scornfully. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Hollingsworth. I quit."



"You have reached The Blue Streak. We're too busy to pick up the phone, so either leave a message or come on down."

Edward softly returned the receiver and let out a frustrated breath. Bruce Dooley was not yet at work, or perhaps the bar would remain closed another day. The publisher had driven by the night before, partly because it was on his way, and partly because he wanted to see if Kris' Mercedes was there. The trashy little bar had not been open during peak business hours, which was quite an unpleasant—or pleasant—surprise, depending on how he looked at it. Either he had run the slug out of town as he'd hoped, or the bastard was with Kris.

Shaking his head, Edward pushed the thought out of his mind. Kris' philandering, or lack thereof, no longer concerned him. His immediate attention was on the events he'd set into motion with his excursion of the previous night. With just a few calls, an envelope full of one hundred dollar bills, and a clandestine meeting, two of the annoyances in his life were soon to be

eliminated. He wished all of his problems could be solved so easily and effectively.

In addition to Kris' disappearance, he had to determine how to deal with Reed Monroe and Kirk Griffith. While he'd thought they had done their jobs, it was becoming apparent that neither had the capability of any sort of success. Edward didn't know if Monroe was stupid, gullible, or both, but whatever his failings, they would cost him significantly. In a way, the overweight lawyer reminded him of Kris. While he appeared to have the necessary skills to close a deal, in actuality, he was a soft, bumbling fool who was more trouble than he was worth.

If Kris thought she and Dooley could fool him, she had another thing coming. And if she thought getting back at him would provide satisfaction of any import, she would soon find out how wrong that assumption had been. Edward had long prided himself that one of his best qualities was that he didn't get mad, he got even.

Lifting the phone and dialing a number, the publisher again marveled at the ease in which his problems would be solved, and relished the time when he could make the same call for Bruce Dooley.



"Just tell me where we're going," Dominique demanded, not for the first time.

"You'll find out soon enough. Have patience," Constance said as she drove through the streets of downtown Gossamer Falls.

"Easy for you to say," Dominique grumbled, wanting to reach across the space between them and slap the smile off her mother's face. When they'd left the manor, Constance had placed a locked briefcase on Dominique's lap. Dominique had asked what was in the briefcase, but Constance had only smiled and said to wait and see. Dominique was tired of waiting, and she was ready to see.

Dominique abandoned trying to guess their destination, leaned back in the seat, and closed her eyes. She wasn't sure how long she'd dozed, but she was abruptly awakened by Constance cheerfully saying, "We're here!"

Dominique opened her eyes and felt momentarily disoriented. "Why are we here?" she asked when her vision had cleared enough to distinguish that they were parked in front of the offices of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*.

"Because, my dear," Constance smiled, "you're the proud new owner of this fine

newspaper.”