

Episode 10: Picking Up the Pieces

"Why would you think I'd know anything about Constance Hollingsworth?" Dominique Carpenter asked, narrowing her green eyes at the young Oriental woman standing in her motel room's doorway.

Looking into those intense green eyes, Abigayle Nguyen felt a suffusion of energy, a supernova, exploding through her every cell. She had seen a quick glimpse of Dominique's hand when the woman had retrieved her handbag from the floor of the restaurant bathroom, had known she was black, but was stunned to see those magnificent eyes against dark skin and framed by long dreadlocks of interwoven ebony and silver. Abigayle had seen enough of Constance Hollingsworth's eyes on television to recognize the resemblance in Dominique. This was now more than rumor; this *was* a story. "May I come in?"

"You haven't answered my question," the tall black woman said, every bit as imperiously as Abigayle imagined Constance might.

Abigayle allowed a tiny smile. "I was at a nice seafood restaurant yesterday, and happened to overhear a conversation between you and your mother."

A look of irritation, and what might have been fear, briefly swept across Dominique's features like a cirrus cloud across the moon. But her voice was free of inflection when she spoke. "Come inside."

"Thank you." Abigayle smiled, and stepped into the room. She had barely cleared the threshold when the door slammed shut, and Dominique Carpenter whirled on her.

"What the hell do you want?"

Abigayle, startled by the woman's sudden change in demeanor, stepped back against the wall, holding the notebook computer before her like a shield. She wondered if she'd been smart to come alone. After all, if Dominique Carpenter could confront Constance Hollingsworth on her own terms, there was no knowing the acts of which she was capable.

Swallowing hard, Abigayle subdued her fear, and stepped forward, looking up into Dominique's eyes. "I heard you tell Ms. Hollingsworth you would go to the press at the end of the week if she hadn't met your demands."

Green eyes narrowed. "It's only Monday."

"Then consider this your lucky day," Abigayle said. "You don't have to decide which member of the press to contact. Instead of searching for a reporter, you have one here who's ready to do the story."

Dominique sneered. "I'll just bet you are. What are you getting out of this, cupcake? 'Cause I don't for one moment believe you searched for me out of the goodness of your heart."

Abigayle spoke loudly, substituting volume for bravery. "I get a story out of this. A big story. But I think the most important thing to consider, Ms. Carpenter, is what you'll be gaining from this."

"And that would be?"

"A chance to tell your side of the story. To have your voice heard. To expose Constance Hollingsworth's dirty laundry."

Dominique Carpenter burst into laughter.

Confused by the other woman's behavior, Abigayle asked, "What's so funny?"

"It's funny that you and my mother think this is going to work."

Abigayle shook her head. "That *what* is going to work?"

"This charade. She thinks I'm going to tell everything to you, then think I've accomplished what I said I'd do, and her secret will be safe. Don't think I'm not on to you."

Abigayle's almond-shaped eyes narrowed into slits. "I am not working for your mother, or anyone other than the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*. My sense of journalistic integrity doesn't allow it."

Dominique stared at the young Oriental woman for a long moment before laughing even louder than before. "Journalistic integrity? There's a good one! You supposedly hide in a restaurant's restroom, listen to a private conversation, track one of the conversation's parties, then offer your services as a writer?" Dominique's laughter faded. Voice tinged with bitterness, she said, "If that's true, you have no more integrity than an ambulance-chasing attorney."

A knock sounded at the door, interrupting the tension.

"You bring Mama along for the ride?" Green eyes blazed at Abigayle. Dominique opened the door, yelling, "What?"

A young acne-scarred man holding a pizza box, and wearing a silly-looking cap that featured a 3-D pepperoni, stood in the doorway. "That'll be \$13.74," he gulped.

Dominique's scowl vanished. "I'm sorry." She turned and walked toward the dresser. "Let me get my handbag...."

Abigayle watched the young man eye Dominique. Her outburst upon opening the door had obviously frightened him, and there was no way he was crossing the threshold. He would have tales to tell his co-workers, Abigayle was certain. Constance Hollingsworth's temper also was legendary. *Like mother, like daughter*, thought Abigayle, suppressing a smile.

"Shit," Dominique muttered. "I forgot to go to the ATM. Can you take my credit card?"

"No, ma'am," the young man squeaked. "We don't accept credit cards on delivery orders."

Dominique sighed and began rummaging through the dregs at the bottom of her handbag.

Seeing an opportunity, Abigayle opened her purse, pulled out her wallet, and withdrew a twenty. "Here you go," she said, handing the money to him. "Keep the change."

"Thanks," the young man nodded, sending the 3-D pepperoni atop his cap into a dancing frenzy.

Abigayle took the pizza from the deliveryman's outstretched hands, handed it to Dominique, then shut the door.

"Why did you do that?" Dominique demanded.

"Because I wanted to help you," Abigayle said, deciding it would be best to be truthful with Dominique Carpenter. "I thought if I scratched your back, you might scratch mine."

"To give you an exclusive," Dominique sneered.

"That's right."

Dominique stared intently at Abigayle. "How old are you? Nineteen?"

“Twenty-three.”

Dominique’s brows knit in concentration. “So you buy me a pizza, and I give you a story that will make you a household name at age twenty-three?”

Abigayle was determined not to be intimidated by the older woman. “Actually, Ms. Carpenter, I have enough information to proceed with the story. I just thought it best to hear your side of the story, because I’m sure Constance Hollingsworth will have no compunction about denying the truth. Your cooperation would only have ensured that both sides would be heard, but you’re by no means obligated to contribute to this article.” Abigayle shouldered her purse, shifted the notebook computer onto her hip, and reached for the doorknob.

“Wait,” Dominique grabbed Abigayle’s wrist. Peering into the young woman’s eyes, Dominique said, “I’ll cooperate on one condition.”

“That being?” Abigayle asked coolly.

“If I agree to tell you my side of the story, of how I discovered Constance Hollingsworth was my birth mother, I don’t want the news to see print until at least the end of the week. That’s how long I gave her to respond.”

“You’re assuming she’s going to be well enough to respond by the end of the week,” Abigayle said.

Dominique narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I thought you would have heard by now,” Abigayle said. “On the way over here, the radio newscaster said Constance Hollingsworth had been hospitalized following an accident at home this morning.”

“What hospital? Is she okay?” Dominique asked.

“Gossamer Falls General. The radio said her condition was stable.”

Dominique tossed the pizza box onto the dresser, and picked up her handbag. “Get out,” she ordered.

“Where are you going?” Abigayle asked.

“To the hospital,” Dominique snapped.

"You won't be able to see her. Even the press aren't allowed access. It's family only."

Green eyes flashed as a mocha-colored arm propelled Abigayle out the door. "What the hell do you think I am?" Dominique demanded, pushing her way past the reporter.

Abigayle smiled as Dominique's car's tires squealed away into traffic. It had been fortuitous that their conversation had ended before Abigayle had been forced to make a promise she had no intention of keeping. Dominique Carpenter had admitted Constance was her birth mother. There was no way Abigayle was going to sit on the story a moment longer than necessary.

With purposeful strides, Abigayle walked to her Jeep. It was time to find a place in which to use her notebook computer. She had a story to write.



Stuart entered the weight room through the spit-shined, double glass doors, eager to begin and end his workout. He looked around the area, hoping no one he knew was exercising. He wasn't in the best of moods.

People were scattered throughout the machines and free-weights, mostly hot, sweaty men wearing tank-tops and soccer shorts. The women looked delicate and unflustered in the heat of the room. Stuart wished they would all spontaneously vanish.

He walked absently to the incline bench station, laying his towel across the head portion. After placing his warm-up weight on the bar, the vice president seated himself on the apparatus.

The weight welcomed him as he pushed it off the rack, then lowered it in slow, controlled movements to his chest, then up again. His mind cleared while he performed the exercise, which was one of the main reasons he even bothered with lifting weights anymore. If for a brief moment, he usually obtained peace while doing it.

Stuart re-racked the bar and added another plate, before reseating himself on the bench. His mind drifted back to Hollingsworth Tower and Edward, who was probably still smugly sitting in their mother's chair with his feet propped on her polished desk. Stuart had come close to throwing his brother out the high-rise window earlier in the day, when Edward had gloated to him about an eventual rise to power. The older brother at 43, Edward was sure this was the beginning.

Constance had looked eager to go home when Stuart left her hospital room, but the doctor had recommended she stay longer because of the blood loss. The whole event had been extremely dramatic and strange, but appeared it would end without serious consequences. He just didn't understand why Edward got the chance to run the company simply because he had a room close enough to hear his mother's cries.

Stuart expelled a powerful breath and leaned back for another set. He knew his mind was churning too fast to adequately concentrate on the workout, but he was hopeful he could shake his anger by pushing the weight to nowhere.

Sitting up, he shook his head. *It's not fair*, he thought. *Edward is one screw-up after another. He has no right to an opportunity like this.* Stuart pictured his own actions earlier in the week, handing Constance the folder of information he'd collected from William Devlin about Dominique Carpenter. Surely that had been worth something to his mother.

He wondered what she did with the information, if anything. The story had been very convincing, even to Stuart, who considered himself a natural skeptic. If giving his mother that kind of information on a potential enemy did not curry favor with her, Stuart had no idea what could. He doubted the ADA considered being the middle child a handicap.

Leaning back for another set, Stuart lifted the weight without thinking about it at all. His mind stayed on his mother with each heave, wishing he could convince her of his worth.

Stewy, you are scum, he told himself as he finished the set. *Here your mother is in the hospital and all you can think about is why you're not a figurehead for the day.* Deep down, Stuart knew that if anything important happened, Constance Hollingsworth would be out of the hospital and into the Tower in two minutes flat. He also knew that a well-adjusted person would be more concerned about his mother's condition at the moment than his own petty ambitions.

Disgustedly, he looked back at the bar and realized he failed to add weight before his last set. Circling behind the rack, he added both increments at once and prepared for the lift. Pushing the bar from the safety of its sturdy housing, Stuart knew immediately he'd added too much weight at once.

The bar began sinking horizontally toward his midsection and vertically toward his chest. His arms acted as if he'd been working out for four hours and provided very little assistance to stop the bar's rapid descent. Stuart did the only thing he knew to do: he held his breath, closed his eyes, and pushed as if his life depended on it.

For a moment, as the weight suddenly, mercifully raised, he thought he'd regained his strength and lifted the weight on his own. Then he opened his eyes to see a massive man standing over the bench, carefully re-racking the bar with seemingly little effort. Stuart sighed.

"Thanks, man. I don't know what happened," Stuart said.

"I'm glad I saw you when I did. Another minute and you may have exploded," the big man said, a smile slowly breaking through his goatee.

The publisher tried not to smile, but he couldn't help it. "It's one of those days, I guess."

"We all have 'em. Don't worry about it. Are you okay?"

Stuart stood from the incline bench and took a moment to shake out his overstrained muscles. "I think so. I didn't feel anything pop," he said, turning his arm down and over to flex his triceps. The last time he'd strained a muscle, that had been it.

"Looks like you've done some nice work there," his savior said, pointing at the flexing muscle group.

Looking up surprised, Stuart was speechless for a moment, unsure of how to take the compliment. "Thanks. I probably concentrate on them too much, but they're the hardest to develop for me. You look—developed—everywhere. I don't think I can pick a single place to make comment." Stuart examined the large man, wondering where he'd seen him before. Though he was a mountain of muscle, the publisher was fairly certain he'd not previously seen him in the gym.

The stranger blushed slightly and looked away. "Thank you, Mr. Hollingsworth. Lifting is one of my better habits." He turned to the weight bar and began removing the plates.

The dog tattoo on his left arm reminded Stuart of where he'd seen the man. He was tending bar at The Blue Streak when the publisher had met with Devlin. Stuart assumed the stranger knew his name simply on his family's endless notoriety in Gossamer Falls.

"Would you mind too terribly having a workout partner for the rest of the day? I may kill myself if I try it alone," Stuart said, almost shocking himself.

Kind brown eyes turned back to him. "I wouldn't mind that at all."



Mark Hollingsworth tried to focus on Mrs. Straub's words, but the science teacher's lecture on different types of rock, and how each was formed, went largely unheard. Mark's attention was on his grandmother's condition.

He had not known of the incident that morning until Kris had run in from the other wing and told everyone the news. His dad had immediately left for the hospital, and his mom had taken him and Nathan to school, despite their protests.

While his grandmother could be cranky and sometimes difficult to understand, Mark had no doubt that she loved him. And he loved her. If something should happen to her....

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. Mark rose slowly from his chair and trudged slowly behind his exiting classmates.

Head down, mind lost in thought, Mark was unaware of his surroundings until he collided with another person, sending them crashing to the floor.

"I'm sorry." Mark extended a hand toward the disheveled girl sitting on the floor before him.

The girl shook her head, blonde hair flying away from pewter-colored eyes that seemed to bore through Mark.

"Tiffany?" he asked weakly.

Ignoring his outstretched hand, she gathered her fallen books, and stood. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry. My grandmother's in the hospital. I was thinking about her and not watching where I was walking. I'm sorry," Mark said again, confused by the range of emotions displayed on Tiffany Stevens' face as he spoke.

"Oh, Mark. I'm sorry," Tiffany said. "I just got out of Mr. Mann's algebra class, and I'm in a lousy mood. I shouldn't take it out on you."

Before Mark could move, Tiffany stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, pinning his right arm between their bodies. For a moment, the world stopped turning. All Mark could feel was the warmth of her embrace, and the

slight curve of her right breast as it pressed against the back of his hand. He was afraid to move, afraid to breathe.

Then Tiffany broke contact and lightly touched his shoulder. "I hope your grandmother will be okay," she said, before walking away.

"Thanks," Mark whispered. He turned to watch her go. Suddenly self-conscious, Mark surreptitiously glanced around the hallway before moving his notebook to shield his arousal, and awkwardly walking toward his locker.



"Hi, Joyce," Lisa Hollingsworth called to Harris' secretary, who was intently focused on the computer monitor before her.

The blonde woman jerked in her chair, hitting her desk and knocking a stack of folders into a framed photograph which fell to the floor.

"I'm sorry," Lisa said. "I didn't mean to startle you." She bent to retrieve the fallen photograph, which was of Joyce and a young girl around Mark's age.

Joyce smiled. "That's okay, Lisa. I was just a little preoccupied."

"So I noticed," Lisa smiled. "Is Harris in?" she nodded toward his office.

"He'll be back in a few minutes," the gray-eyed woman replied cheerfully. "There was a problem with a cover illustration." Her voice taking on a more serious tone, Joyce asked, "Have you heard anything further about Ms. Hollingsworth's condition?"

"From what I've heard, she'll be fine," Lisa said. "They're keeping her overnight as a precautionary measure, but she's doing pretty well."

"That's good," said Joyce, her attention diverting back to the monitor. "I was worried when I heard the news. I didn't want to upset Harris by questioning him so much, but how did the accident happen?"

"Above her sink was an antique mirror which apparently fell out of its frame and shattered. I saw the bathroom, and it was a mess. She was lucky not to get glass in her eyes."

"Oh, that would have been a tragedy! I know how Ms. Hollingsworth likes to read every book published by the company. It would be horrible for her not to be able to do so," Joyce said.

Lisa smiled wryly. "Knowing Mother Hollingsworth, she'd manage to find a way to continue reading every book, even if it meant learning Braille, and having assistants transcribe the books from standard print to Braille."

Joyce laughed, silver eyes glittering. "That sounds like Ms. Hollingsworth!"

"Exactly."

"What sounds like Mother?" Harris asked as he entered the office, a thick manila folder in his hand.

"Hi, honey," Lisa kissed Harris on his bearded cheek. "We were discussing your mother's resiliency."

"She has that," Harris agreed. "Coming into my office?" he asked, opening the door.

"Best invitation I've had all day," Lisa winked over her shoulder at Joyce, as she walked into Harris' office. "What's wrong?" Lisa asked, when Harris closed the door behind them.

"Is it that obvious?" Harris rolled his eyes.

Lisa spread her fingers, and placed her hand on Harris' chest, rubbing it gently. "Probably not to everyone, but I know you."

Harris clasped her hand over his heart, then raised it to his lips and tenderly kissed her fingers. Looking into his wife's brown eyes, he whispered, "I love you."

"I love you, too," Lisa smiled. "Now, are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

Harris disgustedly shook his head. "Edward's being a jerk."

Lisa sighed. "Honey, I know he's your brother, and you love him, but how is today different from any other day?"

"Because today he's in charge. And he's making certain everyone knows Mother handed the reins of power to him instead of me or Stuart."

"Harris, that doesn't mean anything. You know how your mother is about business. Edward was with her at the hospital, and I'm sure she just wanted to

make certain that business would continue without her. If it had been you who'd taken her, she would've left you in charge. The same goes for Stuart."

Harris sighed. He wrapped his arms around Lisa, taking comfort in her arms. "I know you're right, but that doesn't make it any easier when Edward's walking around with a swollen ego."

Lisa nestled her head against Harris' chest. "Try to look at the bright side, honey. Maybe she gave him just enough rope to hang himself."

Harris laughed. "That would be nice, but I don't think that's the case. Edward's too smart to do anything to screw up his chances of becoming CEO. He'll take the safe route of maintaining status quo in Mother's absence."

"Then why let it bother you?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know," Harris admitted. "I know I shouldn't, but I can't help it. Mother's sole motivation for building and maintaining Hollingsworth Publishing was her family, and for her to leave Edward in charge is just bewildering to me. He may be my brother, but he has no concept of family. If he did, he never would've allowed his daughters to be raised elsewhere, and he wouldn't have treated them and their mother as he has."

"Oh, Harris," Lisa pulled back, and looked into his deep blue eyes. "You know that no matter what your mother eventually decides in regard to the company's operation, you are a wonderful provider, both financially and emotionally, to your sons. And to me. You don't have to be CEO to prove your worth to us."

Harris stared into Lisa's dark brown eyes. "I don't want control of Hollingsworth Publishing to prove my worth. I want to leave a legacy for my sons, should they choose to be a part of the business."

Lisa spoke gently. "Like your mother?"

Harris considered her words a moment before slowly nodding. "I guess you do know me," he smiled awkwardly.

Lisa smiled brightly, and wrapped her arms around her husband. "And I still love you."

Harris gently slapped her bottom.

"Ooh!" she cried. Leaning back, looking into Harris' eyes, Lisa said, "Don't start something you're not going to finish."

Laughing, Harris said, "I wish I could. Believe me."

"That's okay," Lisa said, gently stroking Harris' jaw line, ruffling the whiskers lining his chin. "There's always tonight. We can work on relieving some of your tension then."

"It's a date," Harris grinned.

"And now I have to be going," Lisa said.

"You have plans for the afternoon?"

"I'm going to a domestic service, to interview some candidates for Molly's assistant."

"That's right. With all that happened this morning, I forgot you'd said Mother approved of the idea," Harris said.

"Yes, and the service I called said they'd let me view their employees' resume, and have them prepared to come in for an interview this afternoon."

"Wow! Moving fast! Mother would be impressed," Harris grinned.

"I hope so."

"So what did Molly say when you told her?" Harris asked.

"I haven't yet," Lisa said slowly.


"Why not?"

"I wasn't sure how to," she explained. "I don't want her to feel like she's not important to the family, or that she's obsolete. I'll have to give some thought to how to bring up the subject."

Harris kissed her. "I'm sure you'll think of the perfect thing to say. You always do."

Lisa smiled. "Don't work too hard, you sweet-talker. We have a date, remember?"

"I won't forget," Harris promised.



Under the watchful eye of a security officer, Dominique knocked softly on the door to the hospital room. When no response was forthcoming, Dominique turned the handle and stepped inside the room.

Constance Hollingsworth lay in the room's sole bed, her face and head a patchwork quilt of bandages. A heart monitor lead was attached to the sleeping woman's right index finger, and an intravenous line inserted into the back of the same hand. Dominique stepped cautiously toward the bed, and, as she did so, Constance's eyes popped open.

"You came," Constance said softly.

Dominique stopped by the bedside. "I'd been prepared to buy a nurse's uniform and try to find a way past the big bruiser lurking outside your door. Imagine my surprise at being on the list of approved visitors."

"I thought you might come," Constance smiled weakly. "I'm glad you did."

Dominique scanned her mother's eyes, searching for signs of deceit, but found none. Could the woman be telling the truth? Dominique felt a glimmer of hope. "How are you feeling?"

Constance rolled her eyes. "I'm fine as long as I don't try to move my face too much."

"What happened?" Dominique asked softly.

Constance looked away, toward the window, and said, "My bathroom mirror broke. The glass went into my face, cut my scalp." She turned her gaze back to her daughter.

Dominique said nothing. Constance wasn't being completely truthful. But for what reason, Dominique didn't know. Could one of Constance's sons have done this? Clearing her throat, Dominique said, "Are you going to be okay?"

Constance laughed harshly, causing her to wince in pain. "I'll be fine. The scalp wound bled a lot, and they had to give me a transfusion, so they're keeping me here until tomorrow."

"What about your face? Are you going to have surgery?"

"I think the wrinkles will conceal any scars," Constance said.

"Well," Dominique said, "I don't want to tire you. I just heard the news and wanted to see how you were. I'll be going now."

"No," Constance said, her tone more command than request. She cleared her throat and softened her voice. "Please, stay. We need to talk."

Dominique looked with compassion at the woman lying in the hospital bed, intravenous line inserted in the back of one hand. An hour ago, she would have been ecstatic at hearing those words from her mother. Now, strangely, the desire to immediately know everything was no longer as strong. "This can wait until you're feeling better."

"No. Please," Constance said, reaching to take one of Dominique's hands in her own. "Stay. I want to do this. I *need* to do this. It's time you know the truth." Dominique looked at Constance's pale skin against her darkness, then deep into her mother's green eyes. So different, yet so alike. She sighed, and sat in the chair at bedside, Constance's hand still grasping hers.

An awkward silence settled between the two women, and Constance pulled her hand away, folding her arms beneath her breasts. "I don't know where to begin," she admitted.

"Why don't you start with why you told me I was the child of rape?" Dominique suggested, with more edge than she'd intended.

Constance inhaled deeply, then briefly glanced at Dominique before turning away. "I wasn't raped. What happened between your father and I was consensual." She met Dominique's eyes. "It was loving."

Despite her mother's condition, Dominique couldn't quell the angry surge within her. "Then why did you lie to me? Why did you try to hurt me?"

Constance's eyes looked pained, but whether physically or emotionally, Dominique wasn't certain.

"I never meant to hurt you, Dominique. That was not the intent of the lie. I'd told it to protect myself many years before."

"Then why tell it again?"

Constance tightly closed her eyes. "Because it was so much easier to admit than the truth."

"I don't understand," Dominique said bluntly.

Constance sighed heavily. "When I married Edward Hollingsworth Sr., times were different. In the 1950s, it was socially unacceptable for a woman to not be a virgin on her wedding night."

Dominique nodded slowly, rage beginning to build. "So you told him a black man had raped you to spare your precious reputation? I'm sure that helped racial relations."

"No," Constance shook her head, then grunted from pain. "Race was never a factor. I merely told him I'd been raped."

"And he believed you?" Dominique snorted.

"He had no reason not to," Constance said. "When he first met me, I was living on the New York City streets."

"What?" Dominique was stunned. "That wasn't in any of the information I read about you."

Constance nodded slowly. "That was due to Edward feeling the need to protect me. In those times, homelessness and rape were social stigmas almost as difficult to overcome as an interracial affair."

"Thank goodness times have changed," Dominique replied sarcastically, getting a weak smile from Constance in response.

"They're better now than they were," Constance said.

"Perhaps," Dominique nodded.

A silence settled in the room, then was broken by Dominique. "How did you get from Roseboro, Georgia, to New York City?"

Constance closed her eyes, and kept them closed so long Dominique thought the woman had fallen asleep. When Constance opened her eyes, their emerald depths were obscured by tears. "I left after you were born," she whispered.

"How could you?" Dominique asked. "How could you give me away and leave? Didn't you love me? You said I was conceived in love. What happened? Did you stop loving my father, and think getting rid of me would solve that problem?"

"No! That wasn't it!" Constance replied forcefully. "You don't understand!"

"Then explain it to me," Dominique urged.

Constance's eyes grew distant, focusing on something only she could see, as she began to speak. "I met your father when he was working on my father's farm. I was fifteen; he was sixteen. Haywood Johnson was unlike any boy or man I'd ever known before or since."

"How so?" Dominique asked.

"He had dreams," Constance said. "He had visions of his life beyond being a simple field laborer. He was so motivated, so intense, that I had no doubt he would escape the poverty that held him in Roseboro."

"I'd been raised to believe Negroes were stupid, and otherwise inferior to Whites. Haywood proved different. Getting to know him was an eye-opening experience for me. Not only did it change the way I viewed other people, it changed the way I viewed myself, my future, my hopes and dreams."

"I'm surprised your father allowed you to speak to him," Dominique said.

"He didn't," Constance grinned slightly. "I sneaked into the hayloft and watched your father work below. He was stripped to the waist, and his back had such long, powerful muscles, especially for a teenager, that I almost swooned and fell out of my hiding spot."

Dominique grinned, imagining a younger version of her mother peering down at a sweaty black farmhand. "How did you strike up a conversation with him?"

"I didn't," Constance admitted. "He initiated conversation. He knew I was hiding in the loft. How, I don't know, since he never looked my direction, or gave any indication he knew I was there, until he walked outside. As he left, he said, 'I'm going to go get a drink now, Miss Constance, but I'll be back in a few minutes if you want to watch some more.' I was horrified."

"That he knew you were there?"

"And that he knew my name. Oh, I knew his, of course, having heard some of the older workers call him, but it had never occurred to me that he would know mine."

Dominique smiled. It was difficult to imagine Constance as a flighty teenager. "Did you wait for him to return?"

"Of course!" Constance replied. "I wanted to know how he knew my name, how he knew I'd been hiding in the loft."

"And did he answer?"

"Not exactly. All he would admit was that he had good ears. He was the most infuriating man that way."

"So that's how you met."

"Yes."

"When did you fall in love?" Dominique asked softly.

"I don't know the exact moment. I just remember waking one day and realizing I wanted to be with Haywood more than anything else in the world."

"I don't suppose you told your father of your affection, so how did you find time to meet?"

"I didn't tell my father or mother anything of how I felt," Constance said. "As a matter of fact, for the first few months, my conversations with Haywood entirely occurred in the barns. I would hide and keep an eye out for anyone's approach, and Haywood would work below, and talk to me while doing so."

"When I returned to school that autumn, I found I missed him terribly. He had to work, and couldn't attend school, and wouldn't have been allowed into the same school as I, in any case. So I mainly saw him on weekends, but that soon proved to be not enough. I was so taken with his words, with the dreams he had of seeing faraway places, that I would sometimes ache from not hearing his voice. Before long, I suggested we sneak out of our houses and meet after dark."

"And he agreed."

"Yes, but not at first. He wasn't afraid of what would happen to him, though it was common knowledge what fate he'd meet if we were found together, but he was afraid I would get caught, and he didn't want me getting into trouble with my parents because of him."

"He sounds very compassionate," Dominique said.

"He was," Constance said, turning to look at Dominique, "and that's only one of the reasons why I gave myself to him the following summer."

"When I was conceived," Dominique said.

Constance nodded. "I couldn't believe it when I learned I was pregnant."

"How did you find out?"

"Actually, it was Haywood who first discovered it and told me. I'd told him I was feeling sick, and he'd mentioned my symptoms to one of the Negro midwives. She knew immediately what was wrong, and chewed him out for getting a girl in trouble."

"I imagine he felt badly," Dominique remarked.

"Oh, he did. He was so afraid to tell me. But I wasn't angry. Actually, I was rather happy. And so was he."

"Then what happened?" Dominique said.

Constance's voice slipped into monotone. "I wore loose-fitting dresses to hide my growing belly. Haywood and I planned on running away together after you were born. I had been holding back a little of the egg money we received each week, and we'd planned that I would head to Shantytown, which is what everyone called the part of Roseboro in which the Negroes lived, as soon as I went into labor, have the baby there, then he and I would take our baby somewhere else and begin a new life, just as he'd always talked about during the afternoons spent in those stifling barns." Constance's voice trailed off, and a tear slipped from her eye.

Dominique was surprised to find she, too, was crying. "What went wrong?" "I never suspected the labor pains to be so intense. I thought there would be a series of gradually increasing pains, but that wasn't the case. It was on my seventeenth birthday that my water broke while I was washing dishes in our kitchen, and it was followed by a severe cramp. I screamed, and my mother came running to see what was the matter. She found me in the floor, skirt hiked up over my heaving belly as I tried to determine what was happening.

"She called my father, and he carried me to my bed. He was livid, demanding to know with whom I'd lay. I resolved not to tell him anything, but, during delivery, I called your father's name." Constance reached up, and wiped away her tears.

"What about my father? Did he ever see me? Were you able to keep in contact with him?" Dominique asked.

Constance shook her head slowly. "He never saw you, and I never spoke to him again."

"How could you?" Dominique cried. "How could you say you loved someone, have their baby, then never speak to them again?"

"I had no choice," Constance said.

"Why not?" Dominique demanded bitterly. "Your daddy forbade you to see him?"

Constance shook her head. Tears flowed freely, disappearing beneath her bandages. "You don't understand. I couldn't talk to Haywood again. On my seventeenth birthday, my father killed yours."