

Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

Heather Patterson, holding a damp plastic-wrapped newspaper, waited outside the rear entrance to Hollingsworth Manor, wondering when she would be trusted enough to be given a key. At five-thirty in the morning, it was entirely too cold to stand outside begging to be let in.

Seeing Molly bustle up to the door, Heather smiled. Despite the maid's original reticence at having her around yesterday, the older woman had really warmed up as the day went on. She was an absolute joy to be around.

"Get yerself in here, girl," Molly ordered, standing aside of the opening. "It's freezin' out there."

The younger woman hurried in, immediately basking in the warmth of the house. "You're telling me. Good morning, Molly."

"Good mornin', honey. How are ya?"

Setting the newspaper down on a shelf, Heather began unbuttoning her coat. "I'm great. This is going to be a good day."

Molly smiled, enjoying the young woman's enthusiasm. She felt a little guilty about ever having reservations about the girl. "I hope ye're right. We could use a good day."

Heather hung up her coat and picked up the newspaper as both women moved into the kitchen. Molly already had several breakfast ingredients set out for preparation. The young woman was determined to learn all the ins and outs of meals at the Hollingsworths. Yesterday she'd learned the important rule that Constance did not take salt on any of her food. The more-experienced maid had also told her several other similar specifications, but they had escaped her mind overnight. Hopefully, with time, she could learn them all.

As Molly turned to the refrigerator to begin the meal in earnest, Heather momentarily wondered what she should do. "Should I take the paper into the dining room where you put it yesterday?"

"Oh, yes, dear, I'm sorry," Molly said, walking toward her. "I should have told ya. That's where the family likes to take the paper. That way everyone can take a turn at it. But let's take the plastic off first."

The older woman reached inside the open bag, grasping the paper with nimble fingers and holding it in place. Heather pulled the plastic over the rubber band and free of the paper, leaving it in Molly's hands. The maid slowly rolled the constricting device off.

"No one will tell ya this, but no one reads the paper before Miss Constance, so make sure ya don't go through it before the family does." The rubber band came off in Molly's hand, and the paper unrolled. "I don't know why, but she has a thing about seein' it before it gets—"

Heather watched in alarm as Molly's eyes got huge and her skin turned from its normal peach to stark white. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Molly opened her mouth, but no sound emerged. She simply stared at the newspaper as if it were the devil himself. Taking a step forward, Molly steadied her suddenly weak knees by leaning on the kitchen island.

The younger woman moved around the other maid to see what was so dumbfounding. Seeing the bold print, she immediately knew what was so upsetting about this morning's edition. She'd lived in Gossamer Falls long enough to know there were some topics from which reporters were smart to stay away. Apparently all the reporters didn't know about them.

The headline of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette* read: *Constance Hollingsworth's Hidden Heir?*



Abigayle's eyes flew open precisely at 5:35 a.m. Though the red numbers illuminated the room from the nightstand, she didn't need an alarm clock to ring in the new morning. She'd been waiting for this day her whole life.

Placing a small hand on Clifton's shoulder where he was lying beside her, the reporter whispered in his ear, blowing harder than needed. "Wake up, baby. It's time to get outta bed."

The older man stirred momentarily, but remained sleeping, his even, deep breaths disappointing his lover.

"Come on, Clifton. I need you to get up," she said louder, shaking his arm.

He grumbled for a moment, then turned to her and slowly opened his bleary eyes. "We just went to sleep, Abigayle. Give me a break. I'm only human."

She smiled evilly. "No breaks this morning, big man." Abigayle moved quickly, hovering over him for an instant before hopping off the bed and going toward the door. "Come into the kitchen and start some coffee. I have something I want to show you." She glared back at him one more time before leaving the bedroom.

Clifton growled, but got off the bed, ready to do as she'd ordered. Though he hated to admit it at this early hour, he was curious. Even if Abigayle could be a real bitch at times, the girl had spunk.

As he stumbled into the kitchen and began preparing a morning beverage, he heard the front screen door shut and his companion scamper out into the yard. Clifton couldn't fathom what she was doing, but he certainly hoped she had put some clothes on, or the old man across the street would probably call the cops. Or so he had threatened after the last similar event.

Moving sluggishly through the motions, the handyman barely acknowledged Abigayle as she sat down at the small kitchen table, newspaper in one hand and plastic bag in the other. Clifton continued fixing the coffee, though he could feel her eyes hot on his back.


Unable to resist her silent insistence any longer, he turned around and sat across from her. His tattered green bathrobe fell off one of her slender shoulders. She threw the paper in front of him so that it landed face up. His brown eyes continued to stare at her.

Abigayle shrugged, unconcerned, then looked down at the paper. "I thought '*Constance Hollingsworth's Darkest Secret*' would make a much better lead, but at least the byline is mine."

Finally letting his stormy gaze drift to the paper, Clifton took in the headline and the story, which took up the top half of the front page of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*. Remarkably clear color photos of two women were side-by-side in the page's center. The one on the right was a publicity shot of a younger Constance Hollingsworth in her normal, domineering scowl pose, her green eyes shining.

The picture on the left was of a lovely black woman, who Clifton immediately recognized from *The Blue Streak*. She looked to be wearing a graduation robe, and her hair lacked any gray, but it was definitely the same woman. And looking at her deep green eyes, mirrors of the ones beside them on the page, he knew exactly why he'd thought he knew her.

Clifton tore his eyes from the page to stare at the wildly grinning Abigayle Nguyen. "What the hell were you thinking?"



“Good mornin’, Stuart!” Molly managed to sound perky, though she felt far from it. “What’ll ya be havin’ this mornin’?”

Stuart Hollingsworth stood just inside the informal dining room’s door. He walked unsteadily toward his seat at the table. “Just some orange juice, Molly, thanks.”

“Ya look like ya could use a little hair o’ the dog that bit ya,” Molly said kindly.

Stuart groaned. “I look that bad?”

Molly pursed her mouth and shook her head. “I don’t think anyone will notice, dear.”

“I think you look fine, Mr. Hollingsworth.” Heather smiled, placing a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice before Stuart.

“Thank you, Heather.” Stuart managed a reciprocal smile. “But please call me Stuart. There are too many Mr. Hollingsworths in this house to be formal.”

“Okay, Stuart,” the young maid said.

Edward’s voice boomed nearby, causing Stuart to wince and grab his temples. “That one you can call ‘Mr. Hollingsworth,’” Stuart said.

“As soon as everyone’s served, I’m gonna make ya somethin’ for ya head,” Molly said. “It’ll be in the kitchen when ye’re ready for it.”

Stuart smiled and waved in lieu of nodding, preferring a moment of silence before the rest of the family arrived.

Nathan and Mark were first into the dining room, followed closely by Edward, still bellowing reprimands. Constance’s irritated voice silenced Edward as she and the rest of the family entered the room.

“I am not a porcelain doll, Edward. I was in no danger from the boys. They weren’t running down the stairs, but displaying the energy of youth. Drop the subject.”

“Good morning, Molly, Heather,” Lisa said, smiling to diffuse the tension.

“Good morning, Lisa,” Heather said brightly. “Tea this morning?”

"Please," Lisa smiled.

"Tea for me, too," Kris said.

"Coffee for me, please. Easy on the cream," said Harris.

"Coffee. Black," said Edward.

"Hand me the paper, please, Edward," Constance said.

Molly, placing a glass of orange juice before both Nathan and Mark, said, "What can I get for ya this mornin', Miss Constance?"

"I'll have a—"

"What is the meaning of this?" Edward roared, clutching the morning edition of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*.

"What is it?" Kris asked her husband.

Stuart cradled his head in his hands. "Obviously, it's the Apocalypse."

Edward slapped the paper onto the dining table, sloshing orange juice out of his nephews' glasses. "Read this," he stabbed the headline with his finger.

"Oh my God," said Harris, staring disbelievingly at the headline and, below, the side-by-side photographs of his mother and Dominique Carpenter.

"Is that the woman who came here?" Lisa asked, leaning forward to get a better look at the stranger's photograph.

"That's her," Harris said quietly, scanning the story.

Heather and Molly quietly wiped up the boys' spilled juice.

Across the table from Lisa, Kris craned her neck to get a better view of the paper.

Stuart looked from the newspaper to Constance, but said nothing.

Mark and Nathan exchanged clueless glances, then looked back to the adults.

"What does she want?" Edward yelled. "She comes here, accosts Mother, then

spreads this garbage to the press? What does she want?" he asked again.

Harris, having finished the story, looked questioningly to Constance. "Mother? What's going on?"

Having had a moment to recover from the shock, Constance cleared her throat. "Obviously this newspaper has ceased being a reputable publication and has stooped to tabloid level. I think it's time to cancel our subscription."

Nathan and Mark had stood from their chairs to join the adults at the other end of the table. Standing between his parents, Nathan pointed at Dominique's photo with his index finger. "Cool, Grandmother," he said. "That lady's eyes look just like yours."

No one else could find anything to say.



"I'll be goddamned!" William Devlin's raspy voice boomed in the apartment's small breakfast nook.

"Billy!" admonished Joyce Stevens. Cutting her eyes toward Tiffany, she said, "Not in front of my kid, okay?"

Devlin peered over the top of the morning paper. "Sorry," he said to Tiffany in a puff of Marlboro smoke.

Tiffany rolled her eyes and pushed back her chair from the table. "I'm going to take a shower. I need to wash my hair *again*."

"Don't use all the hot water," Joyce said, as Tiffany hurriedly left the room.

"Sorry about that, hon," Devlin said, his eyes returning to the paper. "I just can't believe this."

"Can't believe what, Billy?" Joyce asked, stepping behind Devlin and peering over his shoulder. "Holy shit!" Joyce whispered, flipping long blonde bangs out of her eyes as if doing so might clear the vision before her.

Constance Hollingsworth's Hidden Heir? read the headline. Beneath it were side-by-side color photos of a younger Constance Hollingsworth and a black woman named Dominique Carpenter. The most striking things about the photographs were the way each woman's head was held poised and erect, and the crystal clarity of each woman's brilliant green eyes. Were it not for the difference in skin color, the women could've easily been mistaken for sisters.

"I don't believe it," Joyce said.

"Why not?"

"Because the Hollingsworths are rich and famous, and when you're rich and famous, you always have someone wanting a piece of your pie." Joyce laughed. "Besides, can you imagine Constance Hollingsworth with a black man? Or any man, for that matter? She's so sexless I'm almost positive her sons are adopted."

Devlin grunted agreement, though his thoughts didn't match Joyce's. He wondered why Stuart Hollingsworth had really asked him to investigate Dominique Carpenter. He no longer believed the man's assertion that Carpenter was potentially a corporate mole sent to infiltrate Hollingsworth Publishing. Hollingsworth must've suspected the woman's identity and used him to get information trying to discredit the woman's claim. Maybe she'd been blackmailing the family, and that had been the reason behind Hollingsworth's strict deadline on retrieving her background information. But if Stuart Hollingsworth had lied to him about his reasons for wanting the information, had he also lied about the possibility of *How to Find Out the Truth About Anyone* being published? Just what was the publisher's agenda?

Devlin took a long drag on the cigarette. Maybe it was time to have a little talk with Stuart Hollingsworth.



Constance Hollingsworth slowly pulled her glasses off, placing them gently on the glossy-white eechwood chest beside her chair. She knew she hadn't comprehended the last two pages she'd read of the manuscript under consideration for next year's fall catalog, but she also realized putting it down would mean facing her real life. That prospect was not an intriguing idea at the moment.

Despite a night full of useless tossing and turning, the older woman considered lying back down and attempting sleep. In the last few days, she'd had little and therefore been subjected to entirely too much reality. Like the newspaper this morning. If nothing else in the world did, it had shown the true nature of humans. Constance looked at her big, comfortable bed, knowing that beneath the covers, in slumber, all the nightmares of this world would fail to compare. She could easily forget in her dreams, if only she could enter that state.

With a deep sigh, the publisher set down the book and arose from her chair. Sleep or no, it was time to get ready for work and another day of running one of the most powerful publishing houses in the country. She didn't have time for self-pity and all of its trappings.

The publisher walked to the closet and removed a silk robe.

Everyone had problems and simply had to deal with them. Constance knew she was no different. Granted, most people didn't have three bumbling sons vying for power in the family business, long-lost daughters who showed up out of nowhere and stabbed them in the back, or exploding bathroom mirrors, but problems were problems. Her difficulties merely matched the scale of her life.

Constance stepped slowly into the bathroom, thinking of the adversities she'd had in the last few days. The blank space above the sink reminded her of one event she couldn't seem to forget. She still could not reconcile what her heart told her had happened when the mirror shattered with what her mind said was impossible.

Shaking her head, Constance pulled a towel from the linen closet and placed it on the sink, within reach from the shower. Green eyes concentrated on the barren wall as she undressed. She was actually glad the mirror wasn't there. After a night of very heavy thoughts and practically no sleep, Constance imagined she looked like hell. After a night of practically no sleep and very heavy thoughts, Constance imagined she looked like hell.

But she didn't really care who noticed. Everyone would be looking at her today, expecting something. She may as well give it to them. *What I'd like to give them is a newspaper shoved sideways up their—* Constance stopped herself mid-thought. Rehashing the headline over and over in her mind would do no good.

She stepped underneath the warm spray of water, hoping it would settle her. Today was a day for strength, and she felt far from strong at the moment.

"Damn," she said lowly, placing both hands on the tile in front of her and leaning heavily on them, letting the water slide down her breasts and stomach.

In spite of her normal stoic constitution, she'd actually begun believing Dominique had been sincere. She'd actually let herself care about the woman, about the little baby she'd pushed out of her mind so many years before. What had she been thinking?

Constance Hollingsworth's Hidden Heir? The words seemed to be imprinted on the inside of her eyelids.

"How could you do this to me?" she asked the emptiness enveloping her.

Constance didn't know what the future would hold for her or her daughter, but she knew one thing for certain: on some perfect day, at the perfect place, before the perfect people, she would have revenge.



"Bye, Mom," Mark Hollingsworth slid out of his seat and kissed Lisa's cheek as the minivan stopped in front of Gossamer Falls Junior High School.

"Bye, honey," Lisa said. "I love you."

"Love you, too," Mark said. "See ya, Nathan," he told his younger brother, gently slapping the boy's palm with his own.

"Bye, Mark!" Nathan waved cheerily as he and Lisa drove away.

Mark stood and waved until they were out of sight, then turned to see a couple of his friends, Jeff Davis and Michael Hawthorne, approaching. "Hey, guys! What's up?" Mark asked.

Jeff and Michael exchanged looks. "That's kind of what we were wondering."

Mark sighed inwardly. His parents had debated this morning over whether or not to send him and Nathan to school. They were worried that the morning's headline might provoke embarrassing questions or unwanted attention directed toward their sons. Mark had argued in favor of going to school, primarily because he wanted to see Tiffany more than he cared about what anyone might say about what they'd read in the newspaper. Now, he realized how much he'd been hoping his parents' concerns were unfounded.

"Not much," Mark said, walking toward the school.

"What about that stuff in the paper?" Jeff, a chubby, freckled redhead asked.

"Yeah. Is it true?" asked the curly-haired blond Michael.

Mark snorted, and shook his head. "You can't believe everything you read, guys."

"Hey blood! What up? What up?"

"Oh, shit. Here comes trouble," Michael said.

Mark turned to see Jerome Taylor and a small group of his friends approaching. Jerome was one of the school bullies, and to draw his attention was something no one wished to do. "Let's go inside," Mark said, turning to realize Jeff and Michael had already left.

"Yo, Hollingsworth! I want to talk to you, man," Jerome yelled as his friends hooted encouragement.

Mark took a deep breath, then turned to face the approaching group. "What's up, Jerome?"

Jerome grinned broadly, white teeth gleaming against his dark skin. "Is it true your granny did the wild thang with a brutha?" Jerome punctuated the question with exaggerated hip-thrusting. Behind Jerome, his friends laughed and exchanged high-fives.

Mark's face felt flushed as anger rose within him. He stepped forward, intent on telling Jerome to shut up, but before he could say anything, someone stepped between them.

"Shut up, Jerome," Tiffany Stevens said. "Leave him alone."

Jerome's mouth fell open at the sight of the slim blonde girl standing between him and Mark. Behind him, his friends burst into raucous laughter, stirring his anger. "You shut up, bitch," Jerome retorted.

Mark stepped around Tiffany, getting into Jerome's face. "Don't you call her that!"

"What are you going to do about it?" Jerome sneered.

"What's going on here?" a deep male voice asked.

Mark turned to see the imposing figure of Principal Douglas standing behind him.

Jerome sniffed, and straightened as tall as he could. "Me and Hollingsworth were just having a friendly discussion, that's all."

Principal Douglas put his left hand on Mark's shoulder, his right hand on Tiffany's shoulder. "Well, see that it stays 'friendly.' Now why don't you boys go to your lockers and get ready for class?" Principal Douglas suggested, using his tone and height to fullest effect.

Jerome glared at Principal Douglas, then turned to walk away. His dark eyes met Mark's bright blue ones. "Later, blood," he said over his shoulder.



Dominique Carpenter stretched beneath the hotel sheets. Light glaring around the edges of the mini-blinds stabbed her eyes as she opened them. She knew she shouldn't have drunk that much wine the previous night. She closed her eyes and pulled the cover over her head.

At least this bed was more comfortable than that she'd slept in at the last motel. After being discovered by that reporter, Abigayle Nguyen, and following the conversation with her mother, Dominique had recognized the need for both anonymity and distance. She'd withdrawn enough from the ATM to pay cash for several days' hotel stay, and had moved from the Holiday Inn to a nicer hotel on the outskirts of Gossamer Falls, registering under an assumed name.

Dominique needed time and space to think, and believed she wasn't likely to get either with that irritating reporter underfoot. She needed time to consider what Constance had told her and whether she wanted to be a part of the woman's life.

But lying in bed wasn't accomplishing anything. Sighing reluctantly, Dominique pushed back the cover, squinting against the invasion of light. Maybe a shower would help her get going.

Dominique took her time in the shower, depleting the hot water supply, then toweling dry before putting on the hotel's complimentary bathrobe, tying it around her waist. When she stepped out of the bathroom, feeling refreshed, she was startled to realize it was almost 10 a.m.

Feeling hungry, Dominique called room service and ordered black coffee and a blueberry muffin.

Her breakfast arrived a few minutes later. The young man delivering the tray stared at Dominique as he poured the first cup of coffee from a thermal carafe. Dominique hurriedly paid the bill and tip just to get the creep out of her room.

Her stomach rumbled, and Dominique took a bite of the muffin, relishing the taste of fresh blueberries as they popped. She chased the muffin with a mouthful of coffee, and noticed a newspaper lying folded on the tray beside the cup. She opened the newspaper to see the headline, and spewed coffee all over her own photograph.

“What the hell?”

Dominique hurriedly wiped off the paper and read the smeared newsprint as best she could, her anger growing with each read sentence. She finished the story and looked at its byline: Abigayle Nguyen.

Dominique crumpled the paper in her hands, her eyes narrowed to slits. “Don’t think this is over, you little bitch.”