

# Let's Get Ready To Rumble

"How are we going to teach Abigayle Nguyen that lesson?" Dominique Carpenter asked.

Constance Hollingsworth turned her back to her office's windowed wall and faced her daughter. Fierce green eyes met their reflection in Dominique's. "Is there a 'we,' Dominique?" Constance asked quietly.

"You bet your ass! I owe that little bitch for what she's done. I want in on whatever you're planning to do."

Constance nodded slightly. "Okay. But what I really wanted to know was is there a 'we' on a more personal level?"

Dominique inhaled deeply, then nodded, her long dreadlocks swaying with the motion. "I think we should take things slowly, but yes, I would like to know you better. And to have you know me."

Constance closed her eyes and smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way, Dominique." Constance's eyes were watery when she opened them.

Dominique acknowledged her mother's words with a slight nod, feeling too uncomfortable to address the subject. She cleared her throat. "So, do you have any ideas about how to deal with that annoying little snoop?"

Constance breathed deeply, composing herself before answering. "Not yet. I don't know anything about her other than her name. It's best to know your enemy's weaknesses if you wish to effectively destroy them."

"Would you have tried to destroy me if I had given the story to her, even though I'm your daughter?" Dominique asked quietly.

Constance's mouth tightened into a grim line. "No."

Dominique sighed, realizing only then that she'd been holding her breath.

"I wouldn't have 'tried' to destroy you, Dominique. I would have left you crumbled and bleeding and wondering what the hell had happened to you." Constance's glare was ice.

"I think I'll be going now," Dominique said.

"Dominique?"

"Yes?"

Constance spoke slowly, carefully choosing her words. "I'm a blunt woman, Dominique. Some people believe that makes me a bitch, and maybe there is merit to their words. I could have lied to you just then, but I chose to tell you the truth." Constance licked her lips. "I hope that counts for something."

Dominique stared at Constance a long moment, pondering the woman's words. "It does," she said.

Constance swallowed hard and nodded. "By now the media will either suspect or know you were in the limo that arrived earlier. I'll send the driver away from town in the direction opposite that of your hotel. We'll wait ten minutes, then the company limousines will begin leaving in two-minute intervals. Once the pack of camera-carrying jackals has dispersed, it'll be safe for you to return to your hotel."

Dominique nodded. "Sounds fine. You'll be in touch once you've learned more about Abigayle Nguyen?"

"Yes. I will."

Dominique nodded, and turned to walk out of Constance's office.

"Dominique?"

Dominique slowly turned to face her mother.

"You can call me here any time you like," Constance said softly. "Use the password system as we did today."

Dominique hesitated before saying, "I may do that."



Abigayle Nguyen strutted into the *Gossamer Falls Gazette* office and began looking for Donald Farraday, her editor. Her search was a short one, as she saw Donald charging toward her, wiping perspiration from his balding forehead with his ever-present white handkerchief as he neared.

"Abigayle! Thank God you're here!"

"Hi, Donald. Have a big assignment for me?" she asked cheerily.

"Where have you been? I've been fielding calls all morning!"

"Positive or negative calls?" Abigayle unshouldered her purse and dropped it beside her desk.

"Mostly positive," replied the editor. "A lot of people are asking a lot of questions. I've had calls from the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*. I'm sure it's just a matter of time before the story bypasses regional status and hits national. Maybe international."

"That's great!" Abigayle smiled.

Donald Farraday nodded, and patted his brow with the handkerchief. "It is great. But I'm so busy answering the phones I don't have time to do my job. For the rest of the afternoon, you can deal with the calls."

Abigayle was taken aback. "But what about my assignment?"

Donald pointed to her desk chair. "Right there's your assignment. Park your can, and answer the phone." He walked away from Abigayle's desk and toward his office.

Through narrowed eyes, Abigayle watched him walk away before folding her arms and plopping into her chair.



Stuart Hollingsworth sat at his desk, running his fingers through his thick brown hair. The conversation with William Devlin had shaken him. What would happen if the private investigator started investigating the Hollingsworths? Maybe Devlin would find so much on Edward he wouldn't have time to investigate the rest of the family. Then his own secrets would be safe.

Stuart sighed as the intercom buzzed. "Yes?"

"Stuart?" came Constance's voice.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Drop whatever you're doing, and come to my office. I need to speak with you."

Stuart swallowed twice to dislodge the knot that had risen in his throat. "I'll be

right there.”

Stuart cradled the phone, and started toward Constance’s office, smoothing his hair into place as he walked. There had been something in his mother’s tone, a sense of urgency that made him think this meeting was nothing to do with business. Surely Devlin hadn’t contacted her, had he? Stuart’s stomach trembled at the thought.

“Hi, Jessie,” Stuart said to his mother’s secretary upon entering the outer office.

“Hi, Stuart,” Jessie smiled. “Go right on in. She’s expecting you.”

Stuart managed a smile though his insides were a quivering gelatinous mass.

“Stuart.” His mother’s green eyes were penetrating.

“Mother,” Stuart calmly acknowledged her. “You wanted to see me?”

“Sit down.”

Stuart sank into the chair opposite his mother’s desk, conscious of her keen gaze.

“Where did you get the folder of information about Dominique Carpenter?” Constance asked.

Stuart sighed inaudibly. So *that* was the purpose of this impromptu meeting. Seeing a thin line of hope, Stuart replied, “I got the information from a private investigator named William Devlin, who has submitted to us a manuscript about investigative techniques.”

“I see,” Constance said, steepling her fingers on the desk before her.

Stuart told himself to shut up, to not babble, but worry overrode his brain and took control of his mouth. “I wanted to test the effectiveness of his techniques before considering publishing the book. I gave him a very strict deadline to gather that information, though. I’m sure he can unearth more data on her if you’re interested.”

“No,” Constance waved off his suggestion. “That won’t be necessary.”

Stuart struggled to keep his hands still. Why was his mother asking where he had gotten the information on Dominique Carpenter if she didn’t intend to get more? Did she already know the truth about the black woman? Stuart’s

stomach sank as the questions rose.

"Do you think the man did an effective job of gathering information in the time frame you provided?" Constance asked.

"Oh, yes!" Stuart said, his spirits suddenly buoyed by the question. "And he provided documentation of which technique he used to gather each datum. I'm giving his book careful consideration based on his efficiency."

Constance nodded. "Be certain I receive a copy of the manuscript."

"I will," Stuart smiled. This meeting was going better than he'd imagined it would. Maybe he would yet find a way to keep Devlin from snooping around in the family's past.

"In the meantime, I wonder if you could have him do another investigation."

"I'm sure I could," Stuart said calmly.

"Be certain he understands that publication of his manuscript is not contingent on his supplying pertinent information; the manuscript will be graded on its own merit. I assume you told him that, and paid for his services, the first time."

"Of course," Stuart said, deriving pleasure from the look of satisfaction that appeared in his mother's eyes. "I'll phone him as soon as I return to my office, and have him immediately get started on the investigation." Stuart rose from the chair, almost giddy with the prospect of getting Devlin off his back.


Constance's eyes narrowed. "Don't you think having the name of the person I wish to have investigated would be helpful?"

Stuart froze. "I assumed you wanted more information on Dominique Carpenter."

Constance sighed heavily. "Were you not listening when I told you that wouldn't be necessary? Honestly, Stuart, pull your head out of your ass before you walk into a wall and cause collateral damage."

"Sorry, Mother." Stuart knew he was blushing at her chastisement. She had an uncanny knack of making him feel he were a four-year-old who'd just soiled his pants. "Who do you want investigated?"

Constance's green eyes filled with fire as she said, "Abigayle Nguyen."



Sun dappled Kris Hollingsworth's legs where she sat in the sun room, a brief respite from the ever-darkening autumn skies. When a terrible screech entered her ears, she looked up from her Maeve Binchy novel to see a red streak flashing toward the garage. Unmistakably, Edward was home.

She knew there were two choices for the night. Either it would be like so many others, silent and lonely, or it would be full of hateful argument. Strangely, she couldn't decide which she preferred. At least with a good fight, her husband would pay attention to her. Not to mention that he deserved it after what had happened earlier at the gym.

Kris walked calmly up the stairs toward their bedroom. She knew he would head there first, as he did every evening. He didn't seem to do much except leave his briefcase, but Edward was a creature of habit.

Coming off the top step, she heard the bedroom door slam abruptly. *Sounds like he's still in a fine mood*, she thought. *This should be fun*. Cautiously, the young woman pushed open the door and entered the room.

"Good evening, dear," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Edward turned to face her from his position by the small desk on far side of the room, his nostrils flared and jaw muscles clenched tightly. "Ah, my obedient wife," he said.

"Cut the shit, Edward. What the hell is your problem today?"

He pursed his lips and took a moment before responding. Slowly, he loosened the red silk tie around his neck. "I think that is obvious. We do not often want to make the newspaper headlines this way."

"And how does that gives you reason to treat me like crap?"

"Let us not start this, Kris. It has been a long day," he said wearily, unbuttoning his black jacket.

His wife did not agree. "It has been one hell of a day but, I want to know what the real problem is. You being a jerk didn't start today."

"Perhaps I would not act that way if my wife did not cavort with lowlives."

She shook her head. "So that's what this is about. I was having a simple conversation with a nice man while we shared a machine. Nothing more," she responded calmly.

Her husband took a few steps across the room. "Kris, you have no idea what that man's intentions are. We are in a delicate situation right now, and I will not have you compromising our reputation."

Kris laughed bitterly. "Edward, I realize that by marrying into this family I have a certain standard to uphold, but I don't think that means I've got to cease all communication with the outside world."

"You had no reason to talk to that man. It was disgraceful."

The small woman moved toward him, stopping just inside his personal space. "Is your problem that I was speaking with some man after what happened this morning, or is it simply that I was talking to *some man*," she said loudly.

Looking at the opened door, Edward stepped around her and shut it. When he turned back to face her, his skin was flush with rage. "Bruce Dooley is not the caliber of citizen with whom you should be speaking at this point."

"Would you have preferred I carried on a conversation with one of those bimbos I saw you talking to?"

Edward threateningly pointed his finger at her. "You know it has nothing to do with that. A person like that man would sell your words to the highest bidder in a second. We are targets, Kris. You must realize that. Did he ask about Mother?"

Kris tried to calm herself, but there was no going back. She was furious. "It always comes back to your mother, doesn't it?" Her teeth ground together in anger. "He didn't ask about her, or you, or me, even. He was polite to a woman in a bad mood. Before you interrupted us, he'd actually managed to make me feel better. Perhaps you should take lessons."

He took a deep breath. "Kris, our concern should be bigger than you and I at the moment. We must protect the Hollingsworth name. What you see as a simple conversation could be a gold mine for a devious person. You have to be more careful."

"Don't you tell me what to do," she spat. "Contrary to popular belief, you don't own me. And neither does the Hollingsworth name. I won't be a slave to it, nor to you."

"I hardly think you live like a slave," he snorted. "More likely, you have the life of a queen."

"Ha! A queen imprisoned in the bell tower, maybe. Every so often you take me out and show me off to all your subjects. When I'm not useful to you, I'm expected to stay here in my cell and dream of the next time you need my services. I've had about enough of it."

"You are delusional," he said, glaring at her.

"I feel the sanest I've ever been. I only wish I had a husband who shared that quality," she responded.

Edward advanced on her, seizing her small hands in his. "You will not speak to me that way," he said loudly.

"I'll speak to you any way I want," she countered.

He drew her hands to his chest. "You have nothing without me, Kris; have no doubt. No job, no money, and no home. If you leave me, you will be on the streets with nothing. The prenuptial takes care of that."

Kris looked up at his close, contorted face, suddenly scared. "I don't need you," she said, her voice shaking.

"What will you do? Find some hunk to take care of you? I doubt it. I give you more than you could ever have with someone else," Edward said proudly.

"You give me a lot, Edward, except the things I really need."

"You need what I tell you to need," he said, releasing her and walking back to the dresser.

Kris watched him numbly as he removed the jacket and tie. "The hell I do."

"This conversation is over," Edward said coldly.

Advancing on her husband quickly, Kris took him by the shoulder and turned him around to face her. He stared at her with surprised, furious blue eyes. "You and all your money can jump off a bridge for all I care. I'm tired of being the only person trying to have a relationship here. Go fuck yourself, Edward."

The publisher reached for her, but Kris was already out of his grasp and opening the door. It banged loudly against the stopper as she disappeared through it, charging down the hall.

*I've got to get away from him.* Kris walked down the hall blindly, her mind swathed in rage until she collided with a solid object.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Hollingsworth," Heather, the new maid, said as she stumbled backward.

Kris helped steady the woman, then moved on without a word.

Heather swallowed any further comment as she watched the young Mrs. Hollingsworth stalk away. She'd heard the last of the argument between Kris and Edward as she'd dusted the hall table.

She looked back in the direction of the bedroom to see Edward standing in the corridor, his jaw set and eyes ablaze. He looked like he needed a friend.

"Mr. Hollingsworth," she said, walking to him, "is there anything I can help you with? Is she all right?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

Edward cut his eyes to focus on the young servant. "She will be fine."

"Could I get you something to drink?"

He sighed heavily and glanced back down the hall. "I could use a scotch," he said quietly.

She put a small hand on his shoulder and guided him back in the bedroom. "You sit down Mr. Hollingsworth. I'll bring your drink right up."

Edward did so, lowering himself into the black leather chair near the door and watching Heather bustle out of the room. Unbuttoning his shirt, he wondered where Kris thought she was going.



"Molly, could you start Nathan's bath?" Lisa asked as the Hollingsworth family finished a silent dinner during which a sullen Edward's mood had seemed to hang over the room.

"Aw, Mom," the tow-headed six-year-old whined, his eyes pleading.

"Certainly," Molly smiled. "Come along, Nathan. I'll race ya upstairs."

"Okay," Nathan giggled, dashing from the dining room.

"Thank you, Molly," Lisa smiled.

Molly winked in return. "Heather, dear, can ya finish clearin' the dishes?" Molly asked as she followed Nathan.

"Sure," Heather smiled.

Mark stood from his chair. "I'm going to my room."

Harris gently placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "Your mother and I would like to speak to you first, Mark. Let's step into the den for a moment."

"Okay." Mark walked to the den with his parents, wondering why they felt the sudden need to hold conversation.

Once in the den, Harris and Lisa sat on the black leather sofa, and Mark sank into an upholstered wingback chair, the burgundy shade of which complimented the Persian rug on which it stood.

"Is this about the newspaper article?" Mark asked.

Harris and Lisa exchanged glances. "We were kind of hoping that's what you'd tell us," Harris said.

"Huh?"

"Mark," his mother smiled, "I received a phone call this morning from Principal Douglas."

Mark groaned. "What did he say?"

"He was a little concerned about you, Mark. He said he'd encountered a confrontation between you and a group of boys."

"They're just a bunch of punks," Mark said. "They don't usually bother me."

"Do you know why they chose today to pick on you?" Harris asked.

Mark rolled his eyes. "They were smarter than I'd figured and actually knew how to read a newspaper. Or maybe they just looked at the pictures."

"So the incident was about the article?" Lisa asked.

Mark nodded.

"Did they hurt you?" she asked.

"Nobody was hurt," Mark said. "But they were insulting Grandmother and ticking me off."

"Don't let people like that get to you, Mark," Harris said. "Some people use any excuse to look for trouble, and if you give it to them you're only feeding them what they want, then the trouble escalates. Someone has to be responsible and break the cycle, and the sooner it's broken, the better it is for all concerned."

"Mark, your grandmother's a very strong lady. I know you love her, but there's no reason you should have to defend her," Lisa said.

"I didn't say anything to them about Grandmother," Mark said.

"Well, it's good that you didn't respond to their goading. I'm proud of you, son," Harris said.

Mark felt guilty for not admitting he had confronted Jerome Taylor when the boy had called Tiffany a bitch, but reasoned that he wasn't really telling a lie. He hadn't confronted Jerome regarding what the jerk had said about his grandmother. "Thanks, Dad," he said uncomfortably.

"Do you feel comfortable going back to school there, Mark?" Lisa asked.

"Yes." Mark's guts crept a little. There was something in his parents' voices and faces that made him nervous. "Why are you asking?"

Again, Harris and Lisa exchanged glances.

"We were wondering—" Lisa paused, catching a glimpse of movement outside the den's open door.

Harris, taking his wife's pause as her providing an opportunity for him to speak, said, "We wanted to talk to you about whether you wanted to consider leaving public school and entering a private one."

Mark's mouth fell open. They wanted to know whether he wanted to leave his friends behind? Leave Tiffany behind? Were they nuts?

"I think it's an excellent idea," Constance said, stepping into the den.

Mark determinedly shook his head. "I don't want to go to private school."

"We don't want to force you to do something you don't want to do, Mark, but we would like for you to consider the possibility, especially if things escalate." Ignoring her mother-in-law's intrusion, Lisa nodded reassuringly at her son.

In his mother's dark brown eyes, Mark saw the unspoken words to overlook his grandmother's opinion. "Okay," he nodded. "I'll think about it."

"You should do more than think about it, Mark," Constance said. "Your father and uncles all attended private schools. They provide a much better education than what you're currently receiving."

"Mother, please," Harris said.

"Don't try to stifle me, Harris," Constance said. "The boy is a Hollingsworth and it's high time he learn to behave like one."

"We're quite proud of Mark and the way he handles himself, Mother Hollingsworth," Lisa said. "We believe in his ability to help determine what's best for him."

Constance snorted. "I don't understand today's parents. In my estimation, putting children in control of their own life is like putting the inmates in charge of the asylum."

Lisa, bristling at Constance's insult, said "I'm certain it was much easier for you to leave a nanny in charge of your children, Mother Hollingsworth." Immediately, she wished she could take back the words.

Constance raised an index finger into the air, slightly shaking it at Lisa before seeming to remember Mark was present. She shook her head, turned, and left the room.



Kris tried to let the vibration of the road calm her, but the angry shell surrounding her refused to let her feelings subside. She was tired of the struggle her marriage had become.

*Damn him*, she thought bitterly. Since the beginning of their marriage, she'd done nothing but try to please Edward, which was no small feat considering how much of a perfectionist he'd turned out to be. Early on, it had been difficult for Kris to do anything correctly, from the amount of makeup she wore to the cut of her dresses.

After the first year, she'd discovered many of his secrets and learned how to predict his desires. By the time she really had his routines down pat and knew exactly how to please him, Edward seemed to lose interest in her. Despite being a vibrant young woman, around her husband, Kris felt like a useless old crone.

"What happened to us, Edward?" she whispered to no one.

She knew she'd never get her husband to talk about the real problem, even if he knew what it was. Edward certainly told her he loved her, but feelings weren't something about which they talked. Looking back on his declarations of love, Kris wasn't sure she believed him.

*Oh God, what am I going to do?*

Turning off the highway, Kris realized she didn't know exactly where she was. It didn't really matter, though. Getting lost for a while would probably be good for her.

She'd had no idea where she was going when she left the manor. Anywhere was better than being in *that* house with *that* man. She still couldn't believe he was telling her to whom she could and couldn't talk. Edward had always been on the possessive side, but the scene today was a stretch even for him.

"Should I not trust anyone? Am I not supposed to have any friends?" she asked as she turned another unfamiliar corner, passing house after house.

The man to whom she'd talked in the gym—Edward had called him "Bruce"—hadn't wanted anything from her. She was sure of it. Sadly enough, her conversation with the big guy had been better than any with her husband in the last six months.

Kris refused to believe that everyone was out to get them. Being Hollingsworths made them a target to some people, but not the whole population of Gossamer Falls. Despite Constance's overbearing nature and toughness, she did so many good things for the community that the town would stand behind her no matter what.

Stopping the black Mercedes at a stoplight, the young woman suddenly noticed a change in her surroundings. Her rambling route had changed from well-to-do neighborhoods to a seedy business district. Strip malls lined the streets to either side. Signs hung askew from some businesses and many buildings seemed to be empty shells.

*Great. Getting carjacked and raped would really top off my day.* She continued driving down the four-lane road wondering which direction she was traveling.

She surveyed all the establishments along the road, hoping to find some place that looked safe enough to ask directions. She didn't really want to get out of her car, but she thought wandering aimlessly in this part of town might not be such a good idea.

A neon sign in the distance caught her attention. With a name like The Blue Streak and a windowless building, she could only guess the place was a bar. As she got closer, Kris could hardly believe her eyes. In the space closest to the road sat Stuart's Lexus.

The young woman smiled. Though his younger brother was much more relaxed than Edward, she still could not see Stuart hanging out in a dive like this. It was harder to imagine that he would leave his precious car unattended in the parking lot.

Sighing with relief, Kris pulled in the lot and searched for a parking spot. She could really use a friendly face, and, judging from his choice of establishments, Stuart might like to talk as well. In the least, he could tell her how to safely get out of this part of town. But more importantly, she could find out what the heck he was doing in a place like this.