

Lunch On The Run

Molly Crenshaw launched the attack on Clifton O'Connor the instant he walked through the rear door of Hollingsworth Manor. "What in the world were ya thinkin', ya old coot?"

The handyman's eyebrows arched questioningly. "Lord, woman. What are ya goin' on about now?"

"Those workers—and I use the term loosely—that ya brought in ta dismantle the chandelier in the dinin' room are spending more time gawkin' at Heather than they are cleanin' up the mess!"

Clifton turned his palms upward in a gesture of helplessness. "And it's my fault they share my healthy appreciation of the female form?"

Molly swept an errant strand of wheat-blond hair off her forehead. Blue eyes glittering, she snorted, "With all the sharin' o' female forms that ye've done in yer day, I wouldn't lay odds on yer health."

"Ya wanna play doctor and give me an examination?" Clifton leered.

Narrowing her eyes, Molly replied, "Only if we're doin' a brain scan."

Clifton threw back his head and laughed heartily. He enjoyed the repartee he and Molly had developed over the years. "So does Ms. Hollingsworth want that beastly contraption repaired, then rehung in the dining room?"

"Go ahead and repair the chandelier, but Miss Constance said she doesn't want anythin' hung there right away; she wants the ceilin' inspected and repaired first."

"Fine," said Clifton.

"Do ya—do ya think ye'll be able ta tell what made the chandelier fall after ya check out the ceilin'?" Molly asked.

Clifton inhaled deeply and hitched up his jeans. "I'm sure we'll find some sort o' weakened support structure. Prob'ly one o' the crossbeams."

Molly's thoughts drifted back to the events of the previous Saturday night. With pristine clarity, she recalled the moment Nathan had suggested a ghost had caused the chandelier to fall. Unbidden, a shiver passed through Molly.

Clifton raised his eyebrows. "I like that action, my dear. Can I expect one o' yer mysterious breezes to come along and hike your skirt?"

Molly's face reddened, but before she could retort, Heather Patterson entered the hallway, carrying a basket of freshly folded towels and linens. "Hello, Mr. O'Connor." The young auburn-haired woman smiled in greeting.

Clifton returned the smile. "Hello, Heather," he said as she passed.

The telephone rang, and Heather quickened her step. "I'll get it, Molly."

As Clifton watched the young beauty walk away, Molly snorted indignantly.

"What?" Clifton asked innocently.

Molly shook her head and clicked her tongue as she turned and followed Heather toward the kitchen.

Heather, having already reached the kitchen, leaned across the counter to answer the phone, exposing a great length of well-toned leg as she did so.

"Have mercy," Clifton whispered. He jabbed Molly in the ribs. "Don't ya have something up high that needs cleanin'?"

Molly returned the rib-shot. "Ya just wanna see her atop a ladder again, ya old pervert."

"That's not all I'd like to see her atop of," Clifton replied, evading Molly's reach as she swatted at him.

Heather hung up the phone and turned around, smiling.

"Who was it, dear?" Molly asked.

"That was one of the guards," Heather replied. "He said he'd just received a delivery for Mrs. Edward Hollingsworth."

Molly's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes," Heather smiled. "I told him I could go down to the gate and get it. Unless you have something else you'd rather I do?" She looked inquisitively at Molly.

"No. That'll be fine, dear. Ya go ahead down ta the gate."

Clifton stepped forward. "I'd be happy to escort ya."

Molly halted Clifton's progress by pressing her hand against his chest. "Why don't ya go supervise yer workers and make sure they're doin' their jobs, and let other people do theirs?"

Heather smiled and walked away, carrying the basket of laundry.

Clifton turned to Molly and stuck out his tongue. "Spoilsport."



Heather Patterson stopped outside the sunroom entrance, staring longingly at the vase in her hand. A dozen deep-red roses flowed from the glass container, drops of water glistening on the soft petals. She brought them to her face and inhaled the sweet scent.

The suspense was killing her. She thought she knew who had sent the flowers, but there was only one way she could be sure. It wouldn't hurt anything to take a tiny peek.

She looked around the hallway and glanced into the sunroom. No one could see her. Heather opened the card and quickly glanced at the message scribbled on the white surface.

Sighing, she closed it. She'd learned long ago that, sometimes, life just wasn't fair. Not everyone got what they deserved, and Edward was apparently no different.

Steeling her shoulders, Heather walked into the bright room. Filtered sunrays streamed from the overhead windows, providing the comfortably furnished room a pleasantly natural atmosphere. Kris sat across from the door, lounging in a comfortable chair. The blonde woman appeared engrossed in the thick paperback she was reading.

Heather clomped to a halt. When Kris failed to look up, the maid cleared her throat. "Mrs. Hollingsworth?"

Faraway green eyes looked up. "Yes?"

"I have something for you. They just came."

Kris seemed to notice the roses for the first time. She stared uncomprehendingly for a moment, then began to smile. "For me?" she asked, pointing to her own chest.

"Your name is on the card," Heather answered.

Standing, Kris laid down her book and relieved the maid of the bouquet. "Thank you, Heather." She stuck her nose in the arrangement. "Aren't they lovely?"

Heather's jaw clenched. "Yes, they are."

Kris didn't notice the reply. She could hardly believe she held a dozen roses in her hand. It seemed like forever since the last time she'd received any. Since she was a little girl she'd loved them. Her mother had raised a beautiful garden of flowers and plants, but the rose bushes were the most spectacular group, all dangerous thorns and beautiful petals. Young Kris had bled many a drop of blood on the plants in her quest for the special blooms.

"Someone is getting serious brownie points from me," she said, opening the card. As she read the short message, Kris felt the sudden emergence of hope spring into her breast.

"Who are they from?" Heather asked, unsure of why she was still standing there. Looking up at the maid as if she'd forgotten Heather was there, Kris closed the small card and picked up her book from the wicker end table. "I've got to go get ready," she said excitedly. "Thanks again."

Heather watched her go, her brown eyes focused on the exquisite roses. As Kris disappeared from site, the maid whispered, "You're welcome."

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The young Asian waitress handed Dominique Carpenter a menu and placed a glass of water on the table before her. The table, which was centrally located in the dining area of Nguyen's Vietnamese Cuisine, was draped by a brightly colored, checked tablecloth which fell almost to the floor.

"Thank you," Dominique said. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to order." As the waitress smiled and moved away, Dominique carefully adjusted the oversized purse in her lap.

Dominique checked her watch. Noon. *I hope you knew what you were talking about, Mama*, she thought.

As if on cue, a tall, balding man carrying a clipboard walked into the restaurant. Dominique reached for the glass of water, her ebony hand trembling, rattling the ice cubes. Her heart sped up as a middle-aged Asian couple, presumably the Nguyens, came from the rear of the restaurant to greet the man.

Dominique surreptitiously took the purse from her lap, leaned forward, and stuck the purse under the table. Her actions hidden by the long tablecloth, Dominique hurriedly unzipped the purse, then kicked it over onto its side.

When she'd arrived at the restaurant, Dominique had been grateful to see that the chairs were rung. Now, she hastily placed and settled her feet on the rung.

A moment later, a woman at a nearby table screamed. Her cry was picked up by another woman, who, pointing at the carpeted floor, leapt from her chair and ran outside. All eyes followed the direction of the retreating woman's extended index finger. There, in the middle of the dining room, were two large rats.

Dominique reached beneath the table, grabbed her purse, screamed with the other patrons, and ran out the door, long dreadlocks slinging around her. As she exited Nguyen's Vietnamese Cuisine, she glanced over her shoulder to see the restaurateurs and their visitor staring in mingled shock and disgust.

Getting to her car, Dominique unzipped the purse's side pocket, and withdrew her keys and wallet from inside. She unlocked the door and sat behind the wheel. Turning the oversized purse upside down, Dominique spilled rat droppings into the parking lot of Nguyen's Vietnamese Cuisine.

Closing the car door, Dominique burst into laughter. "Oh, Mama! You are one devious woman! I'm sure that inspector from the Department of Health ain't gonna like rodents running through the dining area!"



"I'm sorry, Edward. The traffic was horrible," Kris said, out of breath. She laid her handbag on the table-for-two and looked apprehensively to her husband.

Smiling, the publisher surveyed his wife. Her dark-blue dress hugged her body at all the right places, and its low neckline was positively tantalizing. Edward was glad that Kris had the fashion sense to know how to dress for all occasions.

Waving away the *matre de*, Edward stood and pulled out his wife's chair. "No need to worry. I only just arrived." He motioned for her to sit.

Surprised, Kris took the seat and allowed him to help her scoot the chair forward. The publisher looked especially handsome in his pinstriped navy suit. As always, Edward carried his power well. Not a small part of his might was the ability to get the best seats in restaurants like *Le Champignon*. The waiters seemed to hover about their table, waiting for Mr. Hollingsworth to need something.

With a snap of his fingers, Edward summoned one of the eager attendants. "Our champagne, please," he ordered, somehow politely. The waiter, dressed completely in blinding white, scurried away. Her husband's hard blue eyes remained on Kris.

She cleared her throat nervously. "Is this a special occasion?"

"No. I simply wanted to spend some time with you, Kris." He reached across the table and took her hand. His statement was true. After his mother's declaration that Dominique Carpenter was her daughter, Edward had realized how many things he stood to lose. He'd be damned if Kris would be one of them.

The younger woman smiled. "I'm glad. We don't do things like this enough."
"No, we do not." Edward smiled dazzlingly. "I took the liberty of ordering for us. I hope you approve."

Kris felt breathless. She briefly wondered if her husband had been replaced by an alien, but seeing his smile, the past few weeks of Edward's erratic behavior flew far from her mind. Suddenly, he was once again the gallant man she'd married two years ago, and his smile was worth a night, or a month, of tears.

"I don't mind at all. You know what I like," she responded. This lunch date reminded her of the daily romance of their courtship. She'd missed it so.

Two plates of stylish French cuisine were placed before them by a pandering waiter, ending their friendly chatter. In a way, Kris was glad. She was afraid she'd say

something to break the spell under which Edward seemed to be. So instead of talking, she ate the delicious, though sparse, food, and listened to the soft piano music in the background.

Edward watched Kris closely, noting the small grin that played at her lips even as she chewed. Her vibrance had originally attracted him and she still had every bit of it. He knew he was not always kind to his young wife, but he intended to make up for his actions. The world was full of unpredictable variables, but one thing he knew for sure was that he could take care of his wife.

As they finished the meal and their plates were whisked away, Edward again held his wife's hand. "What do you want, Kris?"

Confused, she asked, "What—what do you mean?"

"If you could go somewhere or do something, what would it be?"

Kris looked at him astounded. She couldn't remember the last time Edward had asked about her dreams. "I guess I would like for us to go to New Zealand. It looks like a beautiful country."

He nodded. "Then we will go."

"That simple?"

"You deserve everything you desire," he said seriously. Blue eyes cut to the small dance area near the piano. "Would you like to dance?"

Blonde eyebrows shot up into Kris' bangs. "Now?"

Edward laughed. "Yes, now."

Kris looked over toward the dance floor, which was empty. "Sure," she said, not willing to pass up the opportunity. If Edward had asked her if she wanted to skydive, she probably would have accepted.

The small dancing area was surrounded by tables on three sides and the piano on the fourth. Edward led her to it, then left her to talk to the pianist. Several of the people at the closest tables glanced at Kris and smiled. She tried to return the gesture, but the butterflies in her stomach made it hard to do so much as think.

Returning, Edward placed his arms around his wife just as the music began drifting from the piano. "I asked him to play our song," he said proudly.

As they danced, Kris laid her head on his shoulder and listened to the music. It had been at least a year since she'd heard the song, an instrumental composition that had no name in her mind. The deep, melodic tones had been written by a famous composer, possibly Brahms or Chopin, but she'd never learned the name. Opera and classical music were her husband's passions, not hers. Edward had loved to hear the particular song, so she had once declared it their song. She barely believed he remembered.

She concentrated on the feel of his arms around her. As if she might break away, he held her tightly, but gently. For the first time in ages, Kris felt needed by her husband and it amazed her.

When the music ended, Edward pulled slightly away and touched her face. "I must return to work. Let me walk you to your car."

Still in a daze, Kris agreed. With his hand on the small of her back, Edward guided his wife to the parking garage to wait for the car to be pulled around. "Will you be home when I get in from work?" he asked.

In the dim light, she thought she saw hope in Edward's face. "I should be. I have an appointment at the Community Club, but that won't take long."

"Wonderful."

Edward leaned down, taking Kris' face in his hands. Slowly, he placed a gentle kiss on her lips, lingering only long enough for the woman to close her eyes and bask in the glory of his affection. His touch was soft and caring, and made her temperature rise several degrees.

As he pulled away, he brushed her hair back with one large hand. "I cannot wait to return home."

Doing her best not to pass out, Kris smiled brightly and wondered what she'd done to turn her luck around.



As the minivan braked to a stop inside Hollingsworth Manor's garage, Tiffany Stevens felt as if she were being swallowed whole by a huge beast. She couldn't believe anyone could actually live in a house this big. It looked like it should be a museum or something.

The ride from school had been a little awkward. Mark's mom seemed really nice but she was so *different* from her own mom that it was hard to talk to her. Mark's little brother had shown her all the worksheets he'd done at school that day. Mark had been a little quiet, and Tiffany wondered if he felt as weird as she did.

"Mark, why don't you and Tiffany get a snack and take it to the study?" Lisa Hollingsworth suggested. "I'll keep Nathan occupied so you two can work."

"Mom!" Nathan protested.

"Thanks, Mom," Mark said.

Tiffany tried not to gawk as Mark led her into the house. Everything looked so old and expensive. She was afraid her purse or backpack would bump into something and break it.

As they entered the kitchen, Mark said, "Hi, Molly!"

"Hi, dear," Molly said, loading finger sandwiches and pieces of fruit onto a tray. "Ah, I see ya brought yer friend home. Hello, dear," Molly smiled.

"Hi." Tiffany awkwardly returned the smile. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but she hadn't expected to see a maid. Or maybe she was just the cook and they had another maid.

"This is Tiffany," Mark said to Molly. "Tiffany, this is Molly."

"Hi, Tiffany," Molly smiled. "Would ya like some juice? Cocoa?"

"Juice, please."

"I'll have cocoa," Mark said.

"Me, too!" said Nathan, entering the room.

"I'm not the least bit surprised," Molly said. "The two o' ya are chocoholics like yer father."

Mark blushed at Molly's declaration.

Lisa entered the room and placed a hand on her youngest son's shoulder. "Nathan, let's go into the dining room and let Mark and Tiffany do their homework."

"I want to do homework, too," Nathan crossed his arms and pouted.

Lisa smiled as she steered him out the door. "One day I'll remind you of those words, sweetheart."

"I'll bring yer cocoa in just a minute, Nathan," Molly called after them.

Tiffany looked around the kitchen. Her and her mom's whole apartment almost could have fit into this one room. It was the first time she'd ever seen a double oven, and she couldn't imagine trying to cook on all those burners at once.

A moment later, Molly put their drinks on the tray. After thanking the woman, Tiffany turned to follow Mark out of the kitchen.

Mark led her down a long hallway. There were paintings and sculptures spaced at various intervals, and Tiffany was especially careful when passing the sculptures, most of which were placed atop marble or carved wooden pedestals.

Tiffany blushed as they passed a sculpture of a naked man and woman who were embracing. She knew it was art, but it still felt weird to be looking at it. The only boy she'd ever seen naked had been a neighbor's three-year-old for whom she'd once baby-sat. He'd left the bathroom door open when he went to pee. Guys looked so weird down there.

"Here we are," Mark turned and smiled, waiting for Tiffany to enter the room ahead of him.

Tiffany forced a smile and hoped her face wasn't still flushed. She entered the study and looked around. It was almost as big as the kitchen, and featured a fireplace and built-in bookshelves. An oversized desk sat opposite the fireplace, and it was there where Mark placed the snack-laden tray.

"Have a seat," Mark said, motioning to the chair behind the desk. He walked across the room and picked up an armchair.

"Thanks," Tiffany said. As Mark set down the armchair beside hers, she said, "You have a nice house."

"Thanks." Mark smiled awkwardly. "It's sort of big."

Tiffany's eyes widened. "It's *really* big."

Mark nodded.

Tiffany picked up an orange slice. She was hungry, but she wasn't really comfortable eating in front of Mark. She wasn't afraid that he'd think she was a pig, but it made her feel awkward. If he'd come to her apartment to study, the most she'd have been able to offer would have been a soda and chips.

They spent several minutes eating in silence until Mark spoke. "Do you like it quiet when you study, or do you listen to music?"

Tiffany shrugged. "It depends on what mood I'm in."

"Oh. Well, when you listen to music, who do you listen to?"

"Uh—right now I really like Stroke 9."

"Cool!" said Mark. "So do I!" He narrowed his eyes. "What about the Backstreet Boys?"

"Ugh," Tiffany grimaced. "Can't stand 'em."

"I can't either," Mark grinned. "So, do you want to listen to Stroke 9's CD while we do our homework?"

"I guess so," Tiffany said.

"Do you want to go up to my room with me?" Mark asked.

"I'll be fine here," Tiffany said. Then, noticing Mark's disappointed look, she added, "I'll set out the assignment while you're gone."

"Okay," Mark smiled. "I'll be right back." He left the study at a run.

Tiffany shook her head. Boys were so weird. But at least Mark seemed different than most of the guys she'd been around. The ones her mom brought home seemed either to burp, fart, or scratch themselves every five minutes.

Looking around the room, Tiffany wondered what her mom would say if she were there. She really hoped her mother didn't come inside Hollingsworth Manor when she came to take her home.

Clutching *Nasty Little Thoughts*, Mark ran back into the study as Tiffany finished laying her homework on the desk. He put the CD in the player, then sat down in the chair next to Tiffany's as the music began. "Is this what you have to do?" Mark asked, pointing at the page on the open algebra book.

"That's it," Tiffany said glumly. "Do you know how to do it?"

"Yeah," Mark said. "Algebra's really not that hard once you can remember which formula to use to solve a problem."

Tiffany snorted. "I'm not so sure about that."

Mark leaned toward her; his blue-eyed gaze piercing. "Trust me."

Meeting his gaze, Tiffany hesitated only a moment before speaking. "Okay."



Bruce Dooley leaned against the bar, watching the interaction around him. The night was young enough for the customers to still be carefully feeling each other out, rather than plunging headlong into drunken escapades. The part he liked least about his job was seeing so many people trying to escape from reality through alcohol.

He smoothed his newly grown beard and eyed a young couple seated in a nearby booth. The woman had ordered Coca-Cola, and the man had reluctantly asked for the same. He was sipping at his straw while she happily rattled on. Bruce couldn't hear her words, but the glint in her eye showed a large amount of hope. She was dreaming about what her life, or the night, with the man might hold. The bartender missed seeing that in a woman's eyes.

The front door opened with a squeak, emitting a broad man wearing a leather jacket. Short black hair was cropped close to his head, and his face was cleanly shaven. When the door closed, he stood for a moment to get a sense of the room he was entering. He took long, confident strides toward the bar.

Watching the patron from the corner of his eye, Bruce held his breath as the man took a stool. He had no doubt the newcomer was a policeman. The bartender didn't need a badge to see that fact. His heartbeat picked up slightly, though his demeanor remained calm. Slowly, he approached the man.

"What can I get ya?"

Ford Blankenship leaned on the bar. "I'll take a beer."

Bruce began filling a mug at the closest tap. The stranger closely studied him, particularly his sleeveless arms. Bruce concentrated on the task at hand and tried not to think about the scrutiny.

"Nice tattoo," the man said. "Where'd you get it?"

Handing over the beverage, the bartender glanced to the boxer etched on his upper arm. *Why do you have to be wearing a police uniform?* he thought. "Back home," Bruce replied shortly.

"Back home, huh? Why the dog?"

Swallowing hard, Bruce concentrated on coming up with something good. *Shit.* "I think tequila picked that one out." He smiled at the policeman. "We've all got to be young once."

The dark-haired cop laughed. "Yeah, ain't that the truth. No tattoos for me, but the stories I could tell from those days." Ford shook his head, remembering.

The bartender laughed, happy that the man didn't seem to be at The Blue Streak on a case. A man down the counter asked for a beer and Bruce obliged, glad to have someone else to serve. He noticed the cop observing the crowd with trained eyes, but as long as he wasn't looking behind the bar, Bruce didn't really care.

When the policeman's mug was empty, the bartender reluctantly returned to serve him another beer.

"Thanks," Ford said as he took the glass. His meaty thumb pointed to the busier part of the barroom. "They're a calmer sort than you usually see this close to the river."

Bruce looked at them thoughtfully. "I try to keep an eye on things," he responded.

Ford smiled thinly. "You don't see too many bartender/bouncer combos these days. It must be hectic."

"I'm an old-fashioned kind of guy, I guess."

The policemen studied him again, his brown eyes squinted. "Where are you from?"

Picking up a mug, Bruce began vigorously cleaning it. "Down South."

Just as the cop's mouth opened for another question, the bartender caught sight of his waitress waving him down from the other end of the bar. "Excuse me. Duty calls."

Ford nodded to him amicably as Bruce hurriedly walked away. He filled drink after drink as customers picked up, ignoring the friendly policeman and hoping he would leave. No matter how nice, a cop was always a cop, and Bruce needed anything but a nose sticking in his business.

After a few minutes, the bartender noticed his unwanted patron stand. Relieved, Bruce smiled politely and raised a hand to send the man off. The policeman waved in return and placed several bills on the bar. Moving to collect the money, Bruce's soft brown eyes bored into the man's back and remained fixed on the door long after Ford Blankenship was gone.