

# Your Attention, Please?

Constance Hollingsworth's somber mood was readily apparent to the other family members as they entered the informal dining room for Wednesday's breakfast. Her back was straight, her shoulders squared, and her eyes focused on the business section of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*.

"Good morning, Mother," Edward said.

Constance acknowledged his greeting with a curt nod, prompting the rest of the family to restrain their own greetings.

As the Hollingsworths took their places at the table, Molly and Heather entered the room. "Good mornin'," Molly said quietly, balancing a tray of cinnamon rolls.

"Good morning, Molly, Heather," Lisa said brightly, followed by the rest of the family except Constance.

"Here's your orange juice, Nathan," Heather smiled as she served the six-year-old.

"Why is it in this funny cup?" Nathan asked, indicating the Styrofoam container placed before him by the young maid.

Heather swallowed hard, her eyes flickering toward Constance.

The family matriarch cleared her throat. In a tone that indicated her decision was not to be questioned, Constance said, "I've instructed Heather and Molly that the family will henceforth be served meals and beverages in only non-glass containers."

Nathan opened his mouth to say something, but shut it when Lisa gently squeezed his knee.

No one else contemplated voicing an opinion.



Reading the contract provision for the third time, and still not comprehending one word of it, Constance tossed the papers down onto her desk in disgust. She knew trying to work was useless with all that was on her mind. After five decades of being driven near to destruction, she could hardly believe her ability to concentrate was gone.

*When did this business stop being my life?* she asked herself. If she was honest, though, she knew the answer: the day Dominique Carpenter knocked on her door.

Picking up the phone, Constance refused to feel guilty. Things were changing, indeed, but it was for the best, despite all that was happening at home.

"Hello?" Dominique answered after the switchboard connected her mother's call.

"Hi, Dominique," Constance responded, wondering when the awkwardness would dissipate.

"Hi, Mama. How are you?"

The older woman smiled and played with a pen. Her sons had never called her anything but 'Mother.' She was surprised she liked Dominique's nickname for her. "I'm fine. This is going to be a busy day."

"I wish I could say that. I'm about to go nuts from the boredom. I don't do well twiddling my thumbs." Dominique sounded distressed.


"I'm sorry, honey." Constance paused, trying to decide if she'd really called her daughter 'honey.' "I think things will get better for you soon."

Dominique snorted. "I hope so. I'm still geared up after yesterday's adventure."

The rats had been a stroke of genius, the publisher had to admit. And the objective had been well accomplished. "Today will be unpredictable as well. Make sure you're watching a local television station at 10 a.m."

"Why?"

"Oh, I just think they'll be showing something you'll be interested to see. Trust me," Constance said, a glint in her bright green eyes.



Abigayle Nguyen punched the keyboard a little harder than necessary as she typed her article. After what she'd done for the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*, she still couldn't understand why she'd been moved to the business beat. No matter what Clifton told her, it sucked.

Since being forced into the position, all she'd been doing was tons of research and boring interviews. If she had to type the word 'start-up' one more time, she thought she might explode. Nothing worth reporting ever happened in the Gossamer Falls business world.

A loud voice Abigayle recognized bellowed from across the room. "Hey, Nguyen! Stop what you're doin', and get ready to roll!"

She stopped writing while she waited for her editor, Donald Farraday, to get to her desk. If he was lucky, she wouldn't jump up and strangle him. "What?"

He clomped to a halt beside her cluttered desk. "You've got somewhere to be. Snap to it."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Abigayle pushed back from the desk and wrung her hands. Donald wasn't so bad, but on days like this, he could easily drive her insane.

The stocky man ran a hand through his thinning silver hair. "Get your things together, grab a photographer, and get your ass to Hollingsworth Tower. Can't you just listen to me for once?"

"No," she sassed. "I want to know why I'm being torn away from the stimulating article I'm writing." She smiled sweetly and cocked her head.

Farraday narrowed his eyes. "I don't know why you're going there, but Constance Hollingsworth has called a press conference, and it's your job to be there. You've got about twenty minutes to get over there."

"Fine," she said, gathering her writing tools. "But if this is about some damned book they're publishing, your butt is mine when I get back." She shoved everything in a backpack and stormed off in the direction of the photography section.

The newsman stared after her, smiling. "No problem, girl, there's enough to go around."



Stuart hated going to Edward's office. It usually meant a dramatic fight was about to take place, and he had no reason to think this time would be any different. For some reason, he and his older brother were like oil and water together. He was glad Harris was with him.

Edward's reflection bounced off the shined, clear surface of his desk as he leaned over it, apparently waiting or listening. His older brother's expression less than pleasant, Stuart cringed.

Cold blue eyes looked up when the duo entered the tidy office. "Do either of you know the purpose of this press conference?" Edward asked accusingly. He stood abruptly, sending his chair rolling behind him.

"No," Harris answered, "I was told to show up at ten and not to ask any questions, so here I am."

Stuart leaned on the massive desk. "I wasn't informed of the reason, but I thought you would know. Since your office is closest to Mother's, I hoped you might be holding your Styrofoam cup to the wall."

Harris stifled a laugh and covered his mouth. Even in the worst of times, being with Stuart was fun.

Edward snorted in disgust, glaring at Stuart. "Can I take that to mean I am not the only one who thought Mother's behavior at breakfast was bizarre?"

"You're not the only one, because I was hoping for something more environmentally friendly than Styrofoam, and I just don't know what has happened to our mother's green spirit," Stuart responded, turning to Harris with a smile.

"Can you not be serious for five minutes?"

Harris ignored the question, knowing no answer was expected. They both knew Stuart too well. "I think Mother may be experiencing a mild case of post-

traumatic stress disorder, but I don't think it's anything we need to be concerned about. She simply needs some time."

Frowning, Edward moved around the desk, pausing between his brothers. "I am not so sure."

Stuart straightened, suddenly serious. "As much as I hate to admit it, I think I've got to go with Edward on this one. I think we may have a serious problem on our hands here. There's a difference between bizarre and disturbed."

Edward crossed his arms defiantly. "Exactly."

Sighing heavily and stroking his beard, Harris answered, "Mother isn't disturbed. She's been through a lot lately. We need to give her the benefit of the doubt." A moment of silence settled over the room, and the three brothers glanced back and forth at each other. "Besides, if that's the case, how do we get Mother to acknowledge it, much less do anything about it?"

"I don't know," Stuart said, looking at his watch and moving toward the door, "but we'd better hurry up and get downstairs to the media room before she starts serving the reporters drinks in Dixie Cups."



At precisely 10 a.m., Constance, her sons standing behind her and to her right, settled in behind the lectern in Hollingsworth Tower's media room. It was hot beneath the bright lights, but Constance suspected their harsh glare would conceal the thin scars left on her face following the encounter with her bathroom mirror. There was no hiding the gash she'd suffered to her scalp: the hair surrounding the wound had been shaved, and Constance refused to affect a new hairstyle in order to conceal the injury.

"Thank you all for coming." Constance used the lectern's stationary microphone, though her deep voice would have been audible without it. "As you all know, a week ago there was a story printed about me in a local newspaper. Today, I wish to address the contents of that article."

Except for the whirring of video cameras and the popping of camera flashes, the room was silent. Edward, Stuart, and Harris, sensing what was about to happen, struggled to maintain their posture and stoicism.

Constance inhaled deeply. "Dominique Carpenter *is* my daughter. She and I were recently reunited and hope to establish a relationship. I, my daughter, and the rest of my family would greatly appreciate our privacy during this time. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter."

Constance turned and began walking away from the podium. Everything had gone perfectly. She had known her press conference would be broadcast live and had carefully chosen her words. She had said just enough to give the media members a story, but also to make people angry at the media if they broached her family's privacy. Her back to the gathered media members, Constance allowed a slight smile of satisfaction as she approached the exit.



Tears streamed steadily down Dominique Carpenter's face as she stared at the television, her mother standing boldly in the center of the screen. "Oh, Mama," she whispered.

She sank back in her plush chair, one hand over her mouth, wondering how things had gotten to this point. It seemed that only yesterday, her path had been set for Gossamer Falls and only revenge was on her mind. My, how that had changed.

Now her mother, Constance Hollingsworth, the publishing queen of the world, was on television revealing their relationship to the masses. Dominique had no further doubt in her mind that Constance loved her and wanted to be a part of her daughter's life. The announcement was solid proof of her commitment.

Dominique focused on the stoic men behind Constance. She still had no idea how she was going to deal with them. They surely saw her as an interloper, invading their territory and plundering their riches.

Stuart, supported by crutches, and Harris stood side by side, almost touching. Both of the dark-haired men looked concerned, but at the same time somehow confident.

Edward, on the other hand, looked as if he might explode at any moment. His jaw clenched and unclenched in a rapid cadence. Dominique couldn't see his hands, but she was sure they were doubled up in tight fists.

Looking at the men now, she was glad she had not taken Constance up on her offer to live in Hollingsworth Manor. For as far as she'd come with her mother in the past few weeks, she had even further to go to begin building a relationship with her brothers. In the end, she supposed, she hoped they could at least come to a tolerant understanding. Given the drastically different lives they'd led, developing anything more would be almost impossible.

On the television, Constance asked for privacy from the press and thanked them. Dominique laughed. The request was no better than asking the sun to stop shining. Constance had smartly worded the statement, but Dominique was still afraid the press would be all over them like a swarm of bees. There were a lot of Abigayle Nguyens out there.

As her mother began to leave the podium, Dominique saw a woman sporting a familiar sweep of long, dark hair moving toward the front of the room. "What the hell?" she asked, squinting her emerald eyes and leaning closer to the screen for a better look.



Abigayle Nguyen could hardly believe her fantastic luck. Constance Hollingsworth had just sent her career into the stratosphere by saying the article she'd written had been true! There was no way she'd be spending another minute on the business beat! She could tell Donald Farraday to stuff his shitty assignments, then move on to television news where she'd always wanted to be.

But that wasn't enough. No. For so long, Constance Hollingsworth had dominated this town just as her skyscraper dominated its skyline. Now, for the first time, someone had bested her. *She* had beaten Constance Hollingsworth. Abigayle wanted Constance to know who she was.

Leaving behind her photographer, Abigayle hurriedly stepped toward the front of the room as Constance and her sons neared the exit. "Mrs. Hollingsworth? Can you tell us anything about your granddaughter, Tessa?" Abigayle asked loudly.

Constance froze in her tracks, then slowly turned to face Abigayle. Her face unreadable, the older woman asked, "Who are you?"

Abigayle smiled. Tossing her long black hair over her shoulder, she said, "Abigayle Nguyen. *Gossamer Falls Gazette*." Abigayle was intensely aware of the cameras suddenly coming to focus on her.

"Ms. Nguyen, again, my family and I request our privacy in this matter," Constance said, before turning and leaving the room.



Constance, ignoring Jessie's greeting, entered her office and immediately picked up the telephone. She chose an outside line, then pressed the memorized number. She hurriedly spoke to the switchboard operator, then waited for the phone to ring.

"Yes?" a tearful voice answered.

"Dominique, are you okay?" Constance asked gently.

"How can I be okay?" Dominique shouted, then lapsed into tears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you."

"It's all right, Dominique. Just calm down. Everything will be fine."

"Everything *won't* be fine until I kill that skinny little bitch!"

"Don't say such things," Constance warned in a low voice. "Walls have ears, as we well know."

"I don't care," Dominique sobbed. "I want her dead."

"No, you don't," Constance said softly.

"You don't know how I feel right now," Dominique said coldly.

"I know *exactly* how you're feeling, Dominique. It's the same way I felt that day you appeared at the manor, told me who you were, and reminded me of what I'd lost."

Dominique was silent for a moment. "You hated me this much?"

"I didn't hate *you*, Dominique," Constance said softly. "I didn't want to believe you were my daughter, didn't want to remember how it felt to have to give you up. It wasn't you I hated but the memories of pain and loss that were stirred by your words."

"I didn't know that would happen," Dominique said. "But she knew exactly what she was doing today. She said it to be hurtful."

"Of course she did," Constance said. "She wanted me to know who she was—the little fool."

Dominique sniffed. Her voice now calm, she said, "I still hate the bitch, and I wish she were dead."

Constance's voice turned to ice. "What I have in store for her is going to be much more painful than death."

"What are you going to do?"

"From what she told you when the two of you met, she hoped to use the story to build her career. Instead, she's building a house of cards," Constance smiled. "I'm simply going to strike a match and see how long her construct can withstand the heat."



Stuart and Harris silently followed their older brother, hoping he could make it to his office before he erupted. Every fiber in Edward's body was visibly thrumming. His normally calm, pale face was a deep and twisted red.

As the door closed behind the trio, Edward continued across the room, stopping in front of the closed curtains. He slowly turned to his companions, his teeth clenched tightly.

"Do you believe me now?" he asked, obviously strained.

Harris glanced to Stuart apprehensively, hoping the middle brother would choose now as one of those times he was serious. The smirk on Stuart's face told Harris he would not.

"I believe congratulations are in order. We have another fatherless child for you to raise," Stuart rocked on his crutches and waited for an answer.

"Not now, Stuart. We have a major problem on our hands and you need to act like an adult for once," Edward bellowed, pointing at Stuart. "Something is very wrong with Mother. Do you two not see it?"

Harris sighed heavily and sat in a nearby chair, the leather creaking under his weight. "I don't know. I'm still trying to deal with that fact we have a half-sister. Not only that, but apparently a niece, too. I don't know what to think about any of this."

Stuart, having read the file of information about Dominique Carpenter that he'd had William Devlin gather, knew their niece, Tessa, was dead, but didn't share the knowledge with his brothers.

"Do not be stupid, Harris," Edward snapped. "We have no sister. That woman—that Dominique Carpenter is simply a piece of trash who has run a scam on our mother. Somehow, Mother has been brainwashed."

Skeptically looking up to Stuart, Harris ran a hand over his beard. "I don't think Mother can be so easily manipulated, Edward. She's too strong for that."

"I agree with Harris on this. Mother is as sharp as she ever was, and she didn't build Hollingsworth Publishing by being soft in the head. She would know whether or not she had a baby," Stuart said, readily accepting the beady stare of his older brother.

Edward raised his hands to shoulder height, palms up. "You think that our mother had a fling with a black man in 1950? The family would not stand for it," he snorted.

"Maybe that's why she gave her up," Harris said, drawing Edward's stare.

"At any rate, Edward, we know nothing of Mother's family. Who is to say what they would tolerate and what they wouldn't? She wasn't a Hollingsworth then, remember?" Stuart posed.

Edward glared at him, his eyes ice cold, his muscles tense. "I know my mother," he said, an index finger pointing to his own chest and his voice strained with rage. "She would *never* do something like this. It is beneath her."

Harris shook his head. "It's okay, Edward. We don't know very much about her from back then. I think we've got to accept the possibility that—"

Advancing on his youngest brother, Edward screamed, "No!"

A surprised Stuart stepped between the two, halting Edward's progress. The older man appeared to come to his senses and stopped in his tracks. Stuart thanked whoever was responsible that he had not continued, though he imagined it might have been pretty satisfying to punch Edward in the face. Especially at a time like this.

Straightening his jacket, Edward took a deep breath. "Both of you are delusional as well. It is obvious I am the only one still thinking rationally." He stiffly walked back to his desk. "I will plot a course of action to correct this situation."

Stuart and Harris stared at him for a moment, baffled. "High maintenance" was a kind term for Edward, but it was normally correct. At the moment, though, he was bordering on demented.

"You need to take a drive down Reality Lane, Edward, or the men in little white coats might make a special trip to come see you," Stuart said.

A burning pair of blue eyes shot to him. "Get out of my office!"



As Edward, Stuart, and Harris Hollingsworth followed their mother into the house, each man thought Constance looked weary. To them, her steps appeared slow and reluctant, which wasn't that surprising considering that had been the same pace at which each of them had worked since that morning's press conference.

Molly, sticking her head out of the kitchen, greeted them as they entered the house from the attached garage. "Dinner'll be ready in ten minutes!" she cried.

"Sounds great, Molly. I'm starved," Harris said.

"I'm shocked," Stuart said, rolling his eyes.

"Better watch it, Stuart," Harris grinned. "Remember who's playing the role of your chauffeur until the cast is off your leg."

"Point taken," said Stuart, as he hobbled into the formal dining room where his accident had occurred. Kris and Lisa were quietly talking to an irritated-looking Edward as Constance walked ahead.

"What's up?" Harris asked Lisa as he and Stuart approached the threesome.

"Follow your mother upstairs, and see," Lisa smiled.

Stuart, on his crutches, lagged behind as his brothers and their spouses moved into the entry parlor. When he arrived, Mark and Nathan were yelling and waving out the open front door.

"Goodbye, Tiffany!"

Stuart grinned. "Hi, guys."

"Hi!" Nathan chirped.

"Hey, Uncle Stuart," Mark said, closing the front door.

"Looks like you have competition," Stuart said to Mark, tilting his head slightly toward Nathan.

Mark laughed. "I'm not worried about it."

Stuart grinned. "That's good. How are things going?"

"Great," Mark smiled.

"Mark's helping Tiffany with her algae bra," Nathan said.

Stuart raised an inquisitive eyebrow at Mark, who burst into laughter.

"It's *algebra*, Nathan. Algebra," Mark repeated.

"That's what I said," Nathan replied.

At that moment, a feminine scream echoed through the upstairs hallway. Stuart, not knowing what to expect, told Mark to stay with Nathan, then tried as best he could to use his crutches to quickly ascend the stairs closest to the east wing.

When Stuart reached the head of the stairs, he saw his brothers and their wives gathered around his mother outside her bedroom.

"Get it out of there! Get it out of there!" Constance kept screaming.

Edward and Harris rushed into their mother's room, while Kris and Lisa remained in the hallway, trying to soothe their mother-in-law.

"What's wrong?" Stuart called as he approached.

Lisa shrugged helplessly.

A moment later, Edward appeared in the doorway. "Mother? What do you wish us to remove? Where is it?"

Her hands held to her temples, Constance said, "The bathroom. In the bathroom."

Lisa and Kris exchanged glances as Stuart hobbled past them, eager to join his brothers.

When Stuart approached the bathroom, he immediately saw the problem. It was hanging on the wall above the sink. "Guys?" he said, pointing when his brothers, who'd been inspecting the ceiling and floor in apparent search of insects or vermin, turned to look at him.

The three of them stared at it for a long moment, until Harris cried out. "Mother? Are you talking about the mirror?"

"Yes," came the weak reply from the hallway.

Lisa entered the room. Her dark brown eyes soft with regret, she said, "I'm sorry. Kris and I thought it would be nice to have a new glass put into the frame."

"It's okay," Harris assured her.

"Get it out," Constance begged from the hall. "Please, just get it out of there."

Edward glared silently at his brothers. In his eyes, they both read the same message: *I told you so.*