

Look Who's Coming to Breakfast

Repeatedly rubbing the silky slick bar of soap in his hands, Edward Hollingsworth let the hot water burn red across his tan skin, steam bellowing over the shower stall and into the bathroom proper. After yesterday, he needed to start the morning off right, fresh and energized, like a new plant from the earth, ignoring the craziness that seemed to abound from his family. The confident publisher knew that if matters were left in his capable hands, their world would be much different.

That day would come, he knew, but for now he had to be patient. Today would be an excellent day to practice patience. Dealing with the strange events of the previous night, things around the manor and the office would be hectic. His family never left business matters at the office, nor home matters at the house. It was all or nothing with them.

Though he hated to admit it, Edward could not dispute the claims being made by his mother and brother. His mind would not accept that his father was responsible for the explosion, but something extraordinary had certainly taken place. All the witnesses at the manor couldn't have suffered a mass delusion.

Still, he refused to acknowledge the possibility to anyone. Kris, who slept soundly in the bedroom, had pestered him all night with talk of ghosts and vampires, but he'd silenced her babble without confessing anything. A passionate kiss worked on her every time.

Turning to let a powerful stream of water massage his muscled back, Edward closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. No matter how hard he thought, he could not come up with a better explanation than what he'd been given. Of course, that didn't mean there wasn't one; he just hadn't thought of it yet.

An old pipe whined as he shut off the water, ready to get to the office and back in control. *At least in as much control as Mother will allow*, he thought bitterly. After they'd returned to the house last night, he'd noticed a dramatic change in his once-wavering mother. The firmness in her stride had returned, something she'd lost when Dominique Carpenter had interfered in their lives.

His mother had barked out instructions to the workers and her family alike, as commandingly as he'd ever seen her. The worry in her startling green eyes had turned to ashes among the flames there. Though part of him hated knowing this development set back his ultimate plan, another part relished seeing Mother in all her glory.

As he towed dry, delicately swiping water droplets from his skin, Edward realized he would never be able to have her declared incompetent. No judge would challenge her like this, when she was in full, frightening control. He would have to find another way to become the head of Hollingsworth Publishing.

I will need to cancel the meeting with my lawyer this afternoon, he reminded himself, wishing he had his recorder handy.

Tossing his towel into the laundry chute, a naked Edward strode from the bathroom, his steps precise on the lush green Berber carpet. He stopped at the edge of the bed, looking down at his young wife, her wild blonde hair the only visible portion of her body. They both had a date in court today regarding her stolen purse.

That certainly could have gone better. If Bruce Dooley hadn't interfered, the result would have been perfect. Edward would have followed the purse-snatcher, brought back Kris' purse, and played the hero, further ennobling himself in his gullible wife's eyes, as had been planned. But that stupid oaf of a bartender had intruded and ruined everything. Edward only hoped the case landed in the court of a judge he could easily bribe. Then there would be the trouble of paying the thief a little extra to keep his mouth shut about the whole affair.

Edward sat down on the bed, sinking into the soft surface. He briefly considered slipping beneath the covers and putting his privileges as a husband to use to satisfy his arousal, but he knew other, more important tasks were waiting.

"Wake up, Kris. We must be at the courthouse soon." He pulled back the covers, revealing a wealth of creamy skin, only partly hidden by her lacy black nightgown. Edward nudged her shoulder until bleary green eyes opened to slits.

The woman blinked several times, then said, "Do we have to?"

Clenching his jaw, Edward stood. "Yes, we do."

Kris groaned, but dragged herself from the bed and toward the bathroom. Her husband watched her go, wondering how he managed to not rid himself of her nonsensical ways, but realized the answer as he watched the sway of her round hips and firm buttocks. The fact that she was talented in bed did not drive him away, either.

Edward deliberately took a black suit from his closet, shifting his mind to pressing matters. Once dressed in his slick corporate attire, the publisher strode from his bedroom and down the staircase with purpose, his mind already

examining ways to adjust his strategy.

As his feet hit the landing, his steps lightened considerably. The weekend hadn't been a *total* loss, after all. He could feel the warmth of the small grin on his face as he entered the kitchen. "Hello, Mother, Stuart," he said, nodding in their direction..

Constance and Stuart looked up from their places at the table, both of them openly surprised. They stared at Edward as he took his seat across from them.

"You're certainly in a good mood," Stuart concluded. He looked at his mother and said, "Do you think we need to call Leyland Cross back over to see if Edward is possessed?"

Though she visibly tried not to, Constance chuckled. As Heather entered the room with a cup of coffee for Edward, the older woman quieted Stuart. Edward appreciated the gesture and waited for the maid to leave before replying. He fingered the china cup, tracing its cornflower-blue pattern, noting happily that the days of Styrofoam at the manor were over.

"Am I not entitled to occasionally be in a good mood?"

"Well, you're certainly entitled, Edward, but you rarely seize the opportunity," Harris said, entering the kitchen, his family trailing behind.

Edward smiled, rolling his crystal eyes to his youngest brother. "Perhaps that is about to change."

Lisa sat down beside him and patted his arm. "We can only hope."

Keeping the smile on his face, Edward thought, *If you only knew what I've done, you cow. Though she might not have been the cause behind Mother's recent behavioral changes, I've made certain Dominique Carpenter will never again have the opportunity to influence Mother.*

Raising the Limoges cup to his lips, the publisher covered his predatory snarl. He pulled a draught of strong black coffee into his mouth, silently reveling in his accomplishment at making Dominique Carpenter a nonthreat. Suddenly, a strange voice caught his regard.

"Lord, I wasn't sure I was gonna be able to find my way around this big ol' house. I thought I was either gonna have to start yelling for help or call 911 and request a rescue squad."

Edward raised his glare to find the statement's source. Dominique Carpenter, one hand firmly on her hip, stood in the open doorway behind his mother. Edward's eyes went wide as he spewed an impressive amount of coffee onto the table.



Tiffany Stevens shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other outside the bathroom door. From inside, the sound of water running in the shower heightened her discomfort, as did the sound of her mother's giggling. No doubt, Billy was in there with her.

Making a fist, Tiffany knocked loudly on the door. "Mom!"

A moment later, the bathroom door inched open and Joyce Stevens' head popped into view. "What do you want, Tiff?" she asked, her blonde hair dripping wet.

"To use the bathroom." Tiffany rolled her eyes. "And to take a shower before school."

Joyce looked befuddled.

"It's six o'clock, Mom."


"Oh. Okay. I didn't realize what time it was." Closing the door, Joyce said, "We'll be out in a minute."

"No problem. I can wait," Tiffany said sarcastically, crossing her arms to ward off the shivering that accompanied her sudden outbreak of goose flesh.

Inside the bathroom, the shower was turned off, though that did little to improve Tiffany's situation. Her mother's hushed giggles reached Tiffany's ears, and she tried not to imagine what could be happening inside the room.

The bathroom door suddenly opened, and Joyce and Devlin, each wrapped in a towel, emerged. Tiffany shook her head in disgust at Billy's nearly naked body and wondered where he'd found a towel long enough to wrap around his wide butt. As the two adults walked toward Joyce's bedroom, Tiffany entered the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

I can't wait to get to school, Tiffany thought as her body at last found relief. Even algebra class has to be better than this.



"Aunt Dominique!" Nathan Hollingsworth exclaimed as he spotted his new family member. The six-year-old sat up in his chair, almost on top of the table. Lisa put a hand on his shoulder to hold him down.

"Hi, honey," the black woman greeted him with a smile, then acknowledged the rest of the family.

Wrapped in one of her mother's robes that was too short on her taller frame, Dominique stood awkwardly in the doorway and wondered what she was supposed to do next. The spotless dining room was filled with Hollingsworths—her family—a sight she had been sure she would never see.

Despite the friendly, genuine smiles of her mother, Harris, and his wife and children, Dominique could not settle the butterflies somersaulting in her stomach. Two additional pairs of cold blue eyes penetrated her. Stuart, with his dark good looks in full effect, was unreadable. And even if Edward had not just spit coffee all over the room, she would have easily been able to see he was unhappy.

Doing her best to smile at the brother nearest her age, Dominique said, "I think you need a napkin."

Narrowing his eyes, Edward turned to his mother. "*What* is she doing here?" he asked, his voice just below a yell.

Dominique felt the slight to her core, her temper immediately boiling. Nothing angered her more than being ignored. "I was—"

Constance's commanding voice cut off her rebuttal. "A situation arose and Dominique needed a place to stay. I offered her a guestroom for the night. Do you have a problem with that, Edward?"

"Besides, it's only temporary," Dominique added, "I have to get back to Georgia soon to take care of some business."

Stuart remained impassive, but Edward nodded slightly, obviously relieved, not eager to confront his mother, or sister, about the accommodations. Dominique was very glad the scene had not escalated, especially with the kids present. Though she hadn't known them long, she could already tell they were well-rounded, sensitive children.

Trying to disperse the room's tension, Constance said, "After last night, I didn't

think you would be up in time for breakfast." She stood and looked to her oldest son. "Edward, why don't you and Harris get the extra leaf for the table so your sister can sit down?"

Edward stared at her emotionlessly. "I need to change clothes." His chair slid silently across the floor as he rose.

Molly and Heather entered the room, the dishes in their arms filled with delectable food. The older maid paused for a moment, her eyes round in recognition as she took in Dominique, who still stood in the opposite doorway.

"Oh, my," Molly whispered as she resumed her path to the table, her head lowered.

"I am sure Harris and Mark can handle the job," Edward said, turning from the table.

Dominique thought he might have growled as he brushed past her, charging angrily through the doorway.



As Harris' minivan exited Hollingsworth Manor's east gate, Stuart's mind began to wander. On the way back from Mass the previous day, Harris had told Stuart that he, Lisa, and the boys had encountered Dominique Carpenter at the Gossamer Falls Downtown Art Fair, but the last thing Stuart had expected was to see her in the house that morning.

"Don't you think this is a great opportunity for us to get to know her better, Stuart?" Harris asked.

Stuart mumbled affirmatively, thinking that, sometimes, Harris' easygoing nature was a colossal pain in the ass. He never seemed to consider the possible negative consequences surrounding any given situation.

Sometimes, Stuart wished he could be more like Harris.

Earlier that morning, Dominique had sat between Harris and Nathan once the extra leaf had been added to the table. Molly and Heather had entered the room and been introduced to Dominique, then Stuart felt her piercing green eyes, so like their mother's, fall upon him. He'd said hello, more because he felt it was expected than because he'd felt in a welcoming mood, and Dominique had quietly returned his greeting.

Edward's storming out of the room had left an uncomfortable feeling in the air. Conversation had rapidly stilled, and breakfast had been eaten in silence. Things had livened when the phone rang and Molly entered the room to tell Dominique the Gossamer Falls Police Department was calling for her.

Lisa, perhaps uncertain of what would be said in their presence, had ushered the boys upstairs to brush their teeth and get ready for school. Meanwhile, Dominique revealed that the police had found her purse, driver's license, and some photos. Her keys, checkbook, credit cards, and cash were missing, but she'd said that the photos were the most important thing to her. Stuart had assumed they were of Tessa.

At that point, Constance had announced she would drive Dominique to the police station to pick up her things, then to her hotel, and she would see them later at the office. Getting up and placing her hand on Dominique's back, Constance had left the room.

Stuart had stared after them a long moment. He'd tried to remember the last time his mother had touched him in so casually a manner—or at all—and had failed.

Stuart adjusted his cast-bound leg and closed his eyes. The task of making sense out of the events of the past few days was overwhelming. Between a mugged sister-in-law, a restless spirit, exploding windows, a return to the confessional, a newfound sister, and a pod-person mother, Stuart found it difficult to link two coherent thoughts. He sighed audibly and, for the first time in memory, wished he could take a long vacation.



Upon learning of her ordeal, the hotel manager had expressed his sincere concern for Dominique's well-being. He'd given her a spare key to her room and assured her he'd immediately send someone up to change the lock.

"Thank you, Mama," Dominique said as they rode up in the hotel elevator.

"For what?"

"For letting me stay at your house, for lending me a robe while my clothes were in the laundry." Dominique shrugged. "For everything."

"You're welcome, Dominique. Though I do wish you would accept my offer," Constance said.

"Of footing my hotel bill? I don't think so," Dominique shook her head. "I'll just get my things, take them to your house, then go home in the morning and take care of things there. The bank said they'd freeze my account, but I need to get back so I can sign papers."

"There are ways to get around having to do that. Modern technology is a wonderful thing," Constance said lightly as the elevator stopped on Dominique's floor.

Dominique glared at Constance. "Mama, I appreciate what you're doing, but I really do need to go home. Now that I have my driver's license back, there's nothing stopping me. Well, except for not having the new car keys yet."

"I—I understand, Dominique. And I'll do whatever you'll let me to help you. But that doesn't mean I have to be happy with it." Constance followed Dominique out of the elevator.

Dominique, smiling, turned to Constance. "I'll be coming back, Mama. I promise."

"I'll hold you to that," Constance smiled thinly.

Dominique stopped in front of her room and inserted the key into the lock. She opened the door and gasped at the sight that greeted her.

Peering around Dominique, Constance said, "Looks like their housekeepers could use a bit of training."

The room was a disaster area. Drawers had been opened and upended, their contents strewn upon the floor. A long coat's lining had been slashed open, its filler spread across the bed.

"Sons of bitches! They were in my stuff!" Dominique started into the room, but Constance grabbed her elbow.

"Let's go, Dominique."

"*What?* Are you nuts?"

"Let's not touch anything," Constance said calmly. "Let's just go downstairs and phone the police."

"I wanna check my things," Dominique insisted.

"Dominique," Constance hissed, "was the door locked when you opened it?"

Dominique looked at her mother, realizing what Constance was inferring. "I don't know," she said quietly, taking a step away from the door.

"You ladies having trouble with a lock?" a male voice behind them asked.

"Shit!" Dominique said.

"Oh. You havin' more problems than with just a lock," the maintenance man said, seeing the wreckage inside the room.

"My daughter's room has been burglarized, and we're not certain the persons responsible aren't still inside," Constance said.

"You ladies run downstairs, tell the manager to send security up here, and call the police. I'll stand guard and make sure no one goes in or comes out." The short, mustached man crossed his arms and assumed a sentry pose opposite the open door.

Dominique turned to Constance. "Who the hell's gonna watch him?" she whispered.

A maid pushing a cleaning cart came out of a room two doors down from Dominique's.

"Why don't you ask her if she's seen or heard anything unusual?" Constance suggested. "Engage her in conversation and keep her in the hall."

Dominique nodded. "While you alert the hotel manager and the police?"

"Yes," Constance said, narrowing her eyes. "They're already becoming familiar with the sound of my voice."

Dominique stared after her departing mother. *What the hell did she mean by that?*