

Fate Knows No Time

Dominique Carpenter winced as her brothers left their mother's office. "That didn't go over too well," she said.

Constance Hollingsworth eyed her daughter, who was still sitting behind her desk. "What do you mean?"

Dominique shrugged, sending ripples through her long dreadlocks. "First, there was the fact that you announced you're leaving, then there was the bit about putting Stuart in charge."

Constance shrugged, unconsciously replicating her daughter's gesture. "Stuart didn't seem the least bit disturbed by any of it."

"I don't know him well yet, but I get the impression that few things short of a direct hit from a nuclear warhead would disturb Stuart," Dominique said. "He seems pretty unflappable."

"Edward, on the other hand—" Dominique sniffed and shrugged.

"Edward will adjust," Constance said. "He had his turn behind this desk, and now it's Stuart's."

"What about Harris?" Dominique asked quickly.

Constance arched an eyebrow. "His day will come."

Dominique stared at her mother, uncertain if the vibes she felt emanating from Constance were her true feelings or if her own perceptions were off-target. There was no way to determine which was the case unless she voiced her thoughts. "If I didn't know better," Dominique said slowly, "I'd think you enjoyed pitting them against one another."

Constance narrowed her eyes. "It's not as if they need any encouragement in that department; they've competed against one another since they were born."

"But still—"

"It's not that I enjoy it, Dominique," Constance said, cutting her off. She turned to look out the windowed wall of her office, toward the graduated waterfall north of the city. "I don't enjoy it," she said, her voice low and husky, "but it's necessary for them to be able to behave in that manner if one of them is going

to be successful at running this company when I'm gone."

There was an edge to Constance's voice that worried Dominique. "When you're gone?" she asked quietly.

Constance, her face an unreadable mask, whirled to face Dominique. "When I'm away with you," she said quietly.

"How do you feel about that?" Dominique asked. "About your decision to go to Georgia with me? Back to Roseboro?"

Constance stared at Dominique for a moment before averting her gaze. "Terrified," she whispered.

Dominique stood from her mother's chair and walked over to her, placing her hands on Constance's shoulders. "Mama, I appreciate you doing this for me," she said.

Constance, her gaze directed below at the city of Gossamer Falls, raised her hands and placed them atop Dominique's. She gently squeezed them, then said, "Not just for you, Dominique. It's for your father, too. I wasn't the only one who was denied the right to watch you grow up." She released Dominique's hands and turned to face her. "Until recently, I never would've considered the idea that something like this could be important, but now I think we have to learn where your father is buried. We have to let him know you're okay," Constance's voice broke, and she lowered her head.

"That *we're* okay," Dominique said gently.

Constance wiped a tear off her cheek as she raised her head to look at Dominique. "I really have a lot to do before I can leave, and I'm sure you're still recovering from what happened last night," she said, "so maybe it would be a good idea if I called someone to drive you home so you can be rested for tomorrow's trip."

Dominique nodded slowly, sensing her mother's desire to not break down in front of her, yet not wanting to relinquish the closeness she felt to her at that moment. "I am a little tired," she admitted at last.

Constance reached for the phone. "I'll make the arrangements," she said.



The pen tapped against Edward's hand, the tender flesh blood-red, in a steady

beat to match his heart. The publisher did not notice the stinging pain, only the angry buzz in his head.

Stuart had no right to be placed at the head of Hollingsworth Publishing. Not for one day. Not for one minute. And his mother had placed the idiot there for what could possibly be weeks. Edward had been put in charge for a single day. It was not fair.

When he had taken over for his mother after the bathroom-mirror incident, he had had no preparation time, nor any expectations about what he might be able to accomplish. Edward had had no real power. Though he had known that, he had been happy with it at the time. It should have been a steppingstone to a more significant stay in the CEO's chair.

Instead, he had been stepped right over in exchange for his brother, the family clown. Edward could not fathom his mother's thinking. The only conclusion to which he could come was that Dominique Carpenter was somehow influencing her decisions. His mother was definitely her stern self again, but somehow, she was not the same powerful woman she had always been.

Edward could still see the stare Dominique had given him while Mother announced her trip. She should not have even been at a company meeting. The bitch should not be in their life at all.

She should not have even been alive.

The buzz of the intercom startled the publisher, angering him even further. "What?" he shouted.

"Your wife is on line five," his secretary said meekly, then quickly disconnected.

Fiery blue eyes stared at the blinking light. He snarled as he made a decision. If he was not going to be given the opportunity to display his leadership capabilities at Hollingsworth Publishing, no reason existed for him to continue playing the role of loving husband.

"Yes," he answered the phone brusquely.

"Hello, darling. Would you like to meet for lunch?" Kris' voice overflowed with joy.

Edward felt as if he might throw up. He'd been kissed and "honeyed" enough to last him the rest of his life. "I am too busy. I do not have time today."

"Oh," she said, not phased. "Why don't I bring something to your office, then?"

"No," he answered, sick of her voice. "I have to go." The phone slammed in the cradle as he hung up without another word.

He leaned back in his chair, picked up his pen, and allowed his mind to return to his mother and what he needed to do to stop her.



Taking a deep breath, Rahne O'Connor steeled herself for what she knew she must do. More nervous than she was before any trial, she pushed the door slightly open, poked her head in, and knocked. The nurse had said he wasn't busy, but Rahne almost wished he was.

Keeping his eyes glued to a report in his hand, Dr. Trent Beckham answered absently.

Rahne smiled, hoping this went better than had their conversation last night. "May I come in?"

The doctor looked up, a small, surprised grin on his lips. "Of course." Remaining seated, he pointed to the chair across from him.

Her heart sank. Normally, he would have greeted her with a warm hug and kiss. There were still shadows in his eyes, as well as traces of the profound hurt she'd seen there last night. "Thanks."

She gingerly took a seat in the comfortable leather chair and wondered what to do next. "How has your day been?"

"Fine. Yours?"

"Fine," she answered, silently berating herself for not being able to express herself now, when it was most important. Put her in front of a judge and she was a whiz kid, but ask her to speak about feelings, and Rahne felt as if she were three years old.

Forcing her eyes to meet his, she summoned her courage, blurting, "I'm sorry about last night."

"No apology is necessary, Rahne."

She sighed heavily. "Please don't do that."

Trent's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Be so damned understanding."

The doctor shrugged his sleek shoulders. "I'm not sure I can do that." He leaned on his elbows. "I'm sorry I upset you last night. I was wrong."

"No, you weren't. You were just expressing your love for me in a way I can't return. At least not right now," she responded. Butterflies flipped rampantly in her stomach. Rahne hated talking about this stuff.

She waited in silence until his brown gaze met hers, but when it did, his expression was unreadable. "But I do love you, Trent. Don't doubt that."

Trent closed his eyes and leaned his head forward, presenting her with his diminishing hairline. He took several deep breaths before looking at her again. "Do you know how rarely you say that?"

Air escaped her as she noticed a fine mist in her lover's eyes. It was amazing how much she overlooked when she was not willing to see. "Just because I don't express it verbally doesn't mean it's not true," Rahne said, rising and stepping into his embrace

"I love you so much," Trent answered, pulling her close. "I just want to be with you."

The attorney stepped backward, but remained in his embrace. "And I want to be with you, too. But why does that mean we have to get married?"

"Isn't that what people normally do?" he asked without accusation. "Make a commitment?"

Reaching up and running her fingers through his short hair, she said, "I don't understand why we can't have a commitment without a piece of paper that says we're married."

"Is that all marriage is to you? A piece of paper?"

Rahne's brow furrowed. "Yes. Does it mean more to you?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you just want to believe that because your parents were never married.

Maybe you have some sort of fantasy that if they'd been married, your life would have somehow been better." The attorney's voice was tinged with bitterness. "Let me tell you from experience that a marriage license doesn't guarantee anything. My father and mother had that bit of legal paper, and his womanizing and drinking still drove her away."

Trent pulled her closer until their foreheads lightly touched. "I'm not your father."

"I know that," she said, letting the love in his eyes calm her soul. "Can we just enjoy each other's company for now and not talk about marriage?"

His nod moved both their heads. "For now," he answered, smiling.

"Great." She sighed in relief. "Now that we've got that taken care of, why don't you treat me to lunch."

"I'd love to," the doctor answered, then leaned in to steal a kiss.



Stuart Hollingsworth sat behind his desk. Running his fingers back through his hair, he thought, *Something is seriously askew in the universe*. In less than twenty-four hours, his dead father's spirit had wrecked the manor on its way out, he'd gone to Mass for the first time in years, his half-black sister had appeared at the breakfast table without warning, and he'd been appointed CEO of Hollingsworth Publishing for the duration of his mother's upcoming absence.

Why? Why is Mother leaving with Dominique? Does she think she's going to recapture whatever she thinks she lost by not being there for Dominique? Or does she have some other reason? Stuart sighed heavily.

Mother wasn't the most approachable person under the best of circumstances. Asking her to explain her actions would get the same result as asking the wind why it blew. No. Seeking explanation from her was futile.

Stuart had to focus on the facts as he knew them. And what he knew was that his mother would likely be gone for at least a couple weeks. During that time, it was conceivable that he would have to make several large-scale decisions that could have immediate or future impact on the company.

It's a great opportunity, definitely more of one than Edward was given when Mother was hospitalized.

Stuart leaned back in his chair and scratched absentmindedly at the cast just below his right knee. He chuckled, thinking that it had been only earlier that morning when he'd wished for a vacation. Now he wanted anything but.

"You'd better brace yourself, Eddie," he said quietly. "This is my chance, and I'm not going to screw it up. If I prove myself to Mother, everything I've ever wanted will be attainable." Stuart's blue eyes glittered. "Everything."



Standing in front of the imposing wooden door, Dominique Carpenter licked her lips nervously and wondered what she was supposed to do now. Her mother had told her just to go in the house and make herself at home, but actually doing that was entirely another thing. Her hand refused to grip the doorknob.

Though she was shaded from the sun, beads of sweat covered her forehead as she contemplated her next move. Part of her wanted to turn and run from the massive house as fast as she could. But that part seemed to be losing strength all the time. A larger piece of Dominique wanted to take refuge in the comfort her mother offered.

The manor was meant to be only a temporary solution, but she feared it would become something more. After she went back to Georgia and took care of her business, where did she really have to go? There was nothing left at home for her. But could she leave her former life completely behind? She had raised Tessa in that home. Loved Ellis there. So many memories lived in the shadows deep within that simple brick house.

Dominique supposed she could come back to Gossamer Falls and rent an apartment or buy a home, but what then? Could she really just get a job and start a new life here, amongst the pain and hostility? There was so little she really knew about what her future held. The uncertainty profoundly frightened her.

With a deep sigh, the dark woman finally took a step forward and crashed the knocker against the sturdy wooden surface. The sound reverberated in her ears as she waited, hoping she could handle the consequences of this choice. It seemed so long ago that she'd arrived on this same doorstep full of rage and pushed the doorbell with vengeance on her mind. She briefly wondered how the uncertainty she felt now could be so much more oppressive.

As the door opened, Dominique expected to be greeted by one of the maids. Instead, a familiar face greeted her, a cocky smile shining through his beard.

Dominique laughed. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't I tell ya?" Clifton O'Connor grinned. "I'm the handyman around here."

"And I think ya better keep those hands ta yerself," Molly said, joining them at the door. She stepped in front of Clifton, smiling at the new arrival. "Miss Constance just called and asked me ta fix ya a little lunch, Miss Dominique."

"Did she say anything about me?" Clifton teased, giving Dominique a raised eyebrow.

With a scowl, Molly said, "Yer name didn't enter the conversation."

Clifton sniffed in mock offense. "Ya see how well regarded I am around here?" he asked Dominique.

Molly shot him a glare before turning and walking away.

"Mm-hmm," Dominique grinned as she followed Molly toward the kitchen.



Lisa Hollingsworth entered her husband's outer office. His secretary was intently focused on her computer monitor. "Hello, Joyce," Lisa said cheerfully. "Is Harris busy?"

Lisa waited for a response. When none was forthcoming, she stepped nearer to Joyce Stevens' desk. "Joyce?"

The blonde secretary glanced up, obviously startled. "Oh! Hi, Lisa. I didn't hear you come in."

"That's okay," Lisa smiled, tucking a stray brunette curl behind one ear. "Is Harris in a meeting?"

"No, he isn't," Joyce smiled.

"Great. Thanks." Lisa walked past Joyce's desk and toward Harris' door.

"Oh, Lisa," Joyce said, causing her to stop short of her goal. "I just wanted to say how nice it was for you and Harris to let me, Tiffany, and Billy join your family for the picnic in the park on Saturday."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," Lisa said. "I had a nice time, too."

"So did Tiffany," Joyce smiled.

"That's good. I'm happy to hear that," Lisa said.

"Did Mark say whether he enjoyed it?" Joyce asked.

There was something in the blonde woman's tone and expression—eagerness, perhaps?—that Lisa found disconcerting. "Yes. Yes, he did, actually. He said he had a great time."

"You know," Joyce's pewter-colored eyes lit with enthusiasm, "there's been a noticeable change in Tiffany since Mark started tutoring her." Her voice lowered confidentially. "I think he's really good for her."

Lisa smiled awkwardly. "Well, I'm glad that he seems to be helping her. From what I understand, she gets her test results back today, so I guess we'll learn this afternoon how well she did."

The light in Joyce's eyes dimmed, and she smiled uncertainly. "Was that today?"

"I believe so," Lisa said quickly. Eager to be rid of Joyce's presence, Lisa said, "Well, it was nice chatting with you, but I'm going to go see if I can entice my husband into having lunch with me."

"Okay. Good luck!" Joyce said, then turned her attention back to the computer monitor.

Lisa restrained herself from shaking her head in wonder as she entered Harris' office. She paused inside the open doorway, the expression on her husband's bearded face saying more than a hundred words could have. "What's wrong?" she asked, hurriedly walking toward his desk.

"Mother's going to Georgia tomorrow with Dominique," he said as Lisa hugged him.

Lisa pulled back, her warm brown eyes found Harris' blue ones, saw the hurt beneath their calm exterior. "That's surprising, but is that what's bothering you?"

He shook his head. "Mother put Stuart in charge while she's away."

"Oh," Lisa said softly. She sat on Harris' lap and lightly stroked his beard. "You're disappointed that it wasn't your turn?"

"Not really," Harris said thoughtfully. "I'm more upset by Edward's reaction."

Lisa's eyes widened. "I can imagine his response to the news. Was it that bad?"

Harris nodded slowly. "Bad enough to make me wonder if Edward will be tolerable to live with for the next few weeks."

"Well, maybe he won't hold onto it," Lisa said pleasantly.

Harris stared pointedly at her.

Lisa laughed. "Yeah, you're right," she said, leaning forward to kiss him. "We *are* talking about Edward."

"And why are we doing that?" Harris asked, returning her kiss.

"I don't know," Lisa said. "There are a million other things I'd rather be discussing right now."

"What's first on the list?" Harris asked, gently kissing her neck.

"Lunch?" Lisa suggested coyly.

"Mmm." Harris kissed the hollow at the base of her throat, knowing the reaction it would provoke from her. "Now we're talking."

"And why are we doing that?" Lisa asked breathlessly.



Constance entered the small pharmacy in downtown Gossamer Falls. It wasn't her usual pharmacy, but it was close enough to Hollingsworth Publishing that she would be able to get there and back during her lunch break. She hoped her doctor had phoned in her prescription to the correct place.

Constance made her way to the pick-up counter at the rear of the pharmacy. "I believe you have a prescription ready for me. My last name's Hollingsworth." Of all the things she had to do to prepare for tomorrow's trip, this was one of the most important.

Constance received and paid for the prescription with no fanfare, put the package into her purse, and left the store. Outside, her thoughts turned to the days ahead.

It probably wouldn't be easy to maintain a regular medication schedule while traveling with Dominique, but there had to be some way to manage it so she wasn't uncomfortable. It had been easy enough to sidestep Dominique's question earlier in the day when she'd made the faux pas regarding one of the boys having to take over when she was gone, but, should she encounter difficulty during the trip, it would be considerably more difficult to have to explain her health condition to her daughter. Constance knew it was simply a matter of time before her heart failed. *The important thing now is to spend as much time with her as I'm able,* Constance thought as she walked to her car.



The Germans built Porsches to go fast. The engineers who'd designed the streetscape of Gossamer Falls, however, were not quite so understanding of the human need for speed. As he sped from one stoplight to the next, Edward Hollingsworth considered talking to the city manager about how the street layout could be altered to accommodate his desires.

The publisher revved the engine as he waited for the light to turn green. The late-model Lexus in front of him slowly inched toward the busy intersection, the woman behind the wheel glaring at Edward through her rearview mirror. He simply stared at the glowing red bulb, willing it to change.

Skyscrapers surrounded the street like giants, each apparently contributing lunch-break contestants to the driving melee. The bottom floors of many of the buildings contained shops of various wares, ranging from computers to cosmetics and more, their signs staunchly competing for attention.

Edward barely noticed, his mind reflecting the angry red glow of the signal. He could not get what his mother had done to him out of his head.

She had no right, he repeated over and over. He had been so confident that his mother saw his true dominance that her appointment of Stuart as temporary CEO had rocked him to his core.

There must be some way I can gain the advantage in this. He gunned the sportscar forward as the light finally changed. He switched to the right lane, which conveniently cleared for him.

Edward shook his head as no ideas readily came. With his blood still pumping in an acrimonious cycle, he hoped a hard workout would help settle his thoughts. He needed to get his wits about him so an appropriate revenge plan could materialize.

He growled as he pulled to a stop at another red light. Cold blue eyes glanced to his right in irritation, wondering if he needed to join a new gym closer to Hollingsworth Tower.

Startled, Edward blinked as he saw his mother emerge from a pharmacy near the intersection, a small white bag in her hand.

She is rarely sick. What in the world could be wrong with her? he asked himself.

A car horn blared behind him, so Edward reluctantly put the Porsche in gear and continued on his journey, his confused thoughts whirling faster than the car's wheels.