

Episode 6: The Weight of the World

Constance Hollingsworth stared into her bathroom mirror, unwilling to recognize the reflection of the hag before her as her own. At the corners of her green eyes were creases she was certain hadn't been there a few days ago. And she *knew* her hair hadn't been that gray before Dominique Carpenter had appeared on her doorstep last Sunday. But it was Friday now, and a lot had happened since then.

The room temperature seemed to suddenly drop, forcing a shiver from Constance and causing her to wrap her robe tightly around her sparse frame.

Constance opened the drawer containing her toothpaste and toothbrush, then filled the glass beside the sink with water. She stared at her reflection in the ornate mirror as she began brushing her teeth. She had come a long way from the little girl who'd had to brush her teeth before a dingy, cracked mirror that fronted a medicine cabinet.

She tried always to look to the future, to not think of those bad times, of those days of being dirt-poor and shabbily dressed. These days, Constance could afford to buy whatever she wanted, whether it was an ornate mirror or a mink coat. Her money was a buffer that protected her from those horrid memories of days long past.

But all Constance's money hadn't protected her past from finding her. Dominique had found her. Her illegitimate, half-black daughter had found her.

Constance spat into the sink and rinsed out her mouth.

After she'd told Dominique her conception was the result of rape, Constance hadn't known what to expect. After all, the woman had slapped her the first time they'd met as adults. But Dominique had walked out of Constance's office at Hollingsworth Publishing and hadn't returned.

Four days had now passed without hearing from the woman. Surely by now, Dominique Carpenter had left town and gone back to the place from where she'd come.

Constance paused in her morning ablutions. She suddenly wondered whether Carpenter was Dominique's married or adopted name.

A cold gust of air filled the room, causing Constance to close her eyes, lower her head, and pull her arms tightly around herself in an effort to block out the chill. Glass crashed, and cool water splashed onto the front of Constance's robe. She

opened her eyes to see her drinking glass smashed in the sink. In her haste to warm herself, apparently her robe's sleeve had caught on the glass and knocked it into the sink. She would have to tell Molly to clean the broken glass.

Constance looked up at the air vent. She vaguely recalled Molly Crenshaw saying something about a cold gust of wind in the hallway the previous Sunday. It had been the rattletrap maid's excuse for not answering the door. The woman had rambled something about the gust being related to the family photos falling from their hanging places along the hallway wall.

Maybe there was something wrong with the air conditioning. There was little use for the air conditioner in mid-September, but perhaps something was causing it to turn off and on. A short, perhaps. Or maybe there were squirrels in the attic. Constance resolved to call Clifton O'Connor and have him check it out. Though word around town made Clifton out to be a Lothario, he was a talented handyman with a knack for fixing things.

Constance turned on the shower, undressing hurriedly to stand beneath the warm spray in an attempt to wash away the chill that seemed to have crept beneath her skin.



Staring into the floor-to-ceiling mirror, Edward's eyes scanned his trim body, pausing at each part as he unabashedly flexed his muscles. He was in much better shape than the average forty-three-year-old, or at least he thought so. Like today, he usually made sure everyone could tell he was fit, wearing small tank tops that revealed as much as possible.

I will be far ahead of Stuart if he continues to skip our lunchtime workouts, Edward thought while resting between sets of shoulder presses, slowly tightening and relaxing his shoulder muscles as he admired himself. His younger brother was back at the office waiting for a phone call, from whom Edward had no idea. *Not from anyone important enough to miss a workout for, I am certain.*

He sat back down on the bench, sliding silently across the red vinyl cover and firmly placing his feet into position below. Three deep breaths and a clear mind later, he tugged two dumbbells off the floor, raising them to his shoulders. With complete concentration, he pressed the weights over his head, repeating the action eleven more times, finishing by noisily dropping the heavy dumbbells on the floor.

Standing, he surveyed the room, searching for his next exercise. Several Nautilus machines were free, but he had no interest in anything bolted to the

concrete. Almost all the free-weight stations had a sweating occupant, but the most important was available. He slowly moved to the center of the room, laying his white towel on an unoccupied bench press.

"Mind if I work in with you?" a smooth voice asked from behind.

Edward slowly turned, ready to tell the guy to wait his turn. The words caught in his throat as he took in the hulk of a man before him. Though the man was only an inch or two taller than Edward, his massive thickness doubled the smaller man.

Clearing his throat, Edward responded. "Not at all. I am just starting my first set."

"Great. I'll spot for you," the younger man answered, moving to put a forty-five-pound plate on the bar.

Both men lifted the weight for two sets, increasing it slightly after the first, and spotting for each other in case they needed any help, though it was doubtful given their obvious fitness and the relative lightness of the weight. The older man had no trouble keeping up. Though Edward wouldn't win any bodybuilding contests, he did enough lifting to have an impressive enough physique to look very good on the French Riviera.

The men talked sparsely as they lifted. The stranger appeared to be a little out of place in the upscale health club; his cut off and ragged T-shirt standing out amongst the Nike and Versace windpants so popular in the place.

When Edward stood from the bench after his second set, the man put another forty-five-pound weight on the bar, making the total weight over three hundred pounds. The older man didn't like the move, as he knew the newcomer would easily be lifting out of his range within one more set if he kept increasing the weight by such a large margin.

Sitting down on the bench, the man smoothed his mustache and goatee with a large hand before lying back. He placed his hands on the bar, his arms flexing as he prepared to lift. The torn sleeve of his shirt fell away to reveal his bulging muscles and a vividly colored tattoo of a police dog. Edward vaguely remembered an episode of *60 Minutes* featuring a gang in Los Angeles who wore similar adornments. The publisher was becoming sure that the man wasn't a regular at this gym.

He lifted the weight off the rack easily, pumping twelve reps in rapid succession with little evidence that the mass had increased at all.

Edward bristled internally. *Great. I get to lift with He-Man*, he thought. *This is the kind of guy who thinks he who has the biggest biceps rules the world.*

The smaller man moved around the bench and sat down.

"We could take this plate off and use another if you want," the younger man offered, his voice almost soft.

"No, I will do this," Edward responded.

Scooting his back into proper position, he laid on the bench, looking up at the stranger who was standing just behind. *Being a man is not measured only by the strength of your muscles*, he told himself. *Just ask Kris*. A vision of his young wife in the black teddy she'd donned the night before sprang to his mind.

The man shifted uncomfortably as the time passed, so Edward firmed his grip on the bar and lifted. His arms swayed slightly, but he had the weight under control quickly. After the third rep, he could feel the striations in his muscles burn. For the fifth rep, the weight lowered too quickly, his arms failing. The weight bounced off his sternum, but he used the momentum to attempt to raise the weight fully. He didn't want to need his spotter.

"I—have—it," he gurgled, struggling to get the weight up. The bar stalled three inches above his chest, his arms flexing hard, his face beet red.

The stranger stood over him, hands close to the bar, ready to help if needed.

Edward could feel the vibrations of every cell in his body as he strained against the weight. An internal pop signaled the end of his struggle, the weight rapidly descending toward his spent body.

"Okay, I got ya," the big man soothed quietly as he caught the bar before it crashed against Edward's chest. He racked it without another word, waiting for his partner to catch his breath.

After a moment, Edward stood from the bench, his teeth clenched in rage. "I do not know what happened," he growled. "I can usually get more than that."

"It's all right, man. I think maybe we went up too fast. Good thing you had a spotter," the man said.

"Yes, it was," Edward reluctantly agreed. "Do you need a job, because I may be able to use you full-time?" he said.

The stranger laughed, running a hand through his short hair. "You've got a deal, as long as you promise not to try that without me," he answered, pointing to the bench.

No need to worry, Edward thought. I would not be doing this unless you were around.

"We have a contract, then." He stuck his hand out and the big man took it, shaking it firmly.

The men finished up the bench press and parted ways. Edward covertly watched him on other exercises, mentally tallying up the different weights and critiquing any flaws in form he spotted. As the publisher did his last set and left for the locker room, the stranger remained, taciturnly moving from station to station.



Unfamiliar with the low-rent district surrounding the riverside, Stuart Hollingsworth almost bypassed The Blue Streak. As it was, he had to sharply turn his silver Lexus' steering wheel in order to get into the parking lot.

Stuart glanced at his Rolex: five-thirty. William Devlin should already be inside. He'd asked the private investigator for an out-of-the-way meeting place, and Stuart had to admit the man had done one hell of a job.

Surveying the already-crowded parking lot for an empty slot, Stuart settled for a space between a motorcycle and a battered station wagon. Stuart patted his car's steering wheel. "Well, Tinkerbelle, it looks like your presence has just raised property values a thousand percent."

Stuart exited the car, set the alarm, and walked around to the front of The Blue Streak. He stepped inside, and squinted through the dim light and cigarette smoke, trying to locate William Devlin.

When Stuart had agreed to meet the raspy-voiced man here, he'd asked how he would know Devlin. Devlin had replied that he would know Stuart. Sometimes, Stuart forgot the degree of visibility the Hollingsworths had in Gossamer Falls.

Against the far wall stood a jukebox that was blaring an Alan Jackson tune. In the center of the room was a group of billiard tables, around which were stationed a variety of working-class men and women with cues in hand and beers by their side, unwinding after a stressful week of working for The Man.

To Stuart's right were tables and booths. At one of the latter, a man waved his hand and slightly stood from his seat to get Stuart's attention. Stuart realized he had either been recognized or propositioned, and walked toward the man sitting at the booth.

"Mr. Devlin?" Stuart asked in his smooth baritone.

The man rose to meet Stuart. He was several inches shorter than Stuart's six-foot, graying, and heavysset with a broad, squat face that featured dark brown eyes, and a nose that looked to have been broken a time or two in his youth. Stuart estimated the man to be in his early fifties.

Shifting his cigarette from his right hand to his left, the man extended his hand to greet Stuart. "Call me Devlin, Mr. Hollingsworth."

"Sure thing, Devlin," Stuart replied. He was anxious to see what information about Dominique Carpenter the man had gathered, but didn't want to appear overly so. "May I buy you a drink?"

Devlin grinned broadly. "I wouldn't turn down a beer."

Stuart looked around for a waitress. Catching the young woman's attention, Stuart asked her to bring one beer.

"You're not drinking?" Devlin rasped.

Though the man's tone had been uninflected, Stuart had the distinct impression Devlin thought he was being a snob. Smiling awkwardly, Stuart said, "I'm afraid not. I worked through lunch today. A beer on an empty stomach wouldn't be a wise decision considering how far I have to drive."

Devlin laughed. He patted his own ample gut and said, "You get one of these, Mr. Hollingsworth, and a place to live here by the river, and you won't have to worry about that."

I wouldn't have to worry about getting laid again, either, Stuart thought, but merely said, "I'll keep that in mind."

The waitress arrived with the beer. "Thanks, darlin'," Devlin smiled at her.

"Thank you," Stuart nodded to the petite blonde handing Devlin his mug.

Once the waitress had gone, and Devlin had sipped his beer, Stuart said, "On the

phone you said you had the information I requested?"

"Yeah," the private investigator rummaged on the seat beside him and produced two file folders, which he placed on the table between them. "This one," he said, indicating the one to his right, "is the information I found on Dominique Carpenter." He touched the other folder. "This is the documentation of the techniques I used to gather the information."

"Very good," Stuart said, reaching for the folders. "I'll read the contents and be in touch."

Devlin laid a broad, stubby hand atop each folder. Stuart looked up from the folders and met the older man's dark eyes.

"There was something peculiar about Mrs. Carpenter," Devlin said.

"Mrs.?" Stuart said. "She's married?"

"Divorced, actually," Devlin said. "I guess that makes her a Ms. or whatever them liberated women are calling themselves these days."

Stuart managed a thin smile. "You said there was something peculiar about her?"

Devlin took a long drag on his cigarette then blew the smoke out his nostrils. "I did the best I could with the time limit you gave me, Mr. Hollingsworth, but there were a few unexpected problems."

"Such as?"

"Well, you were right that there was something odd about the information on the woman's employment application."

"You found out the truth about her?" Stuart asked.

"I found out a lot, if this is the same Dominique Carpenter who applied to your company, Mr. Hollingsworth."

"But you're not certain it's the same woman?"

Devlin shrugged. "She fits the same basic description as what you gave me. She's an African-American woman; certain records have her date of birth as April 22, 1951."

Stuart tried to keep the surprise he felt from registering on his face. The date Devlin had just named had been his mother's seventeenth birthday. He fought to keep his voice level. "And other records?"

"That's the odd thing," Devlin said. "I wasn't able to locate her birth certificate, or any information about her childhood. There is no record of Dominique Carpenter's existence until she went to college."

"Did you research her maiden name?" Stuart asked.

From above his half-empty mug, Devlin smiled at Stuart like he might've at a simple child. "Of course. I found out that information from her marriage license, but it didn't help. There's some sort of restriction placed on her records."

"What does that mean?"

"It could mean several things. Most likely it means she was adopted and her records were sealed."

Stuart felt a cold pit of uncertainty settle in his gut. "Any other possibilities?"

Devlin leaned forward over the table, whispering conspiratorially, "Someone could have gone through a lot of trouble and expense to have them disappear."

If Devlin's first response hadn't caused such an intense reaction to his intestines, Stuart would have been tempted to laugh. Devlin really had believed Stuart's story that Dominique had been a potential plant from a competing publishing house!

Meeting Devlin's dark brown eyes, Stuart nodded solemnly. "I thank you for the information, Devlin. I'm sure it will prove as interesting to read as will your documentation."

Devlin slid the folders toward Stuart. "So when will you know if this will help my book get published?"

"First, I'll have to read the material," Stuart explained. "If it clarifies some of the questions I had in the beginning, then I'll personally edit the book, return it to you for the appropriate changes, then submit it for approval once you've returned the manuscript."

"Who do you have to submit it to?" Devlin asked. "I thought you were head of the nonfiction department."

Stuart smiled thinly. "I am. But my mother is the one who makes the final decision on whether or not to publish all our material."

Devlin stubbed out his cigarette in a tiny ashtray. "Are you a good salesman?"

Oh, you have no idea. "Absolutely," Stuart smiled.

"Good," Devlin grinned broadly. "Then I'll be looking forward to hearing from you again."

"I guess I should be on my way," Stuart rose from the table. "Why don't you stay here and enjoy another beer? I'll take care of the tab."

Devlin nodded briskly. "Don't mind if I do. Thank you much, Mr. Hollingsworth," he extended his hand, which Stuart shook.

Stuart picked up the folders and walked toward the bar. The bartender, a swarthy, unshaven fellow sporting on his left arm the tattoo of a dog dressed in police uniform, complete with handgun and baton, looked up as Stuart approached. Stuart opened his wallet. He had nothing smaller than a twenty inside. Taking out two twenties, Stuart handed one to the bartender, turned to point out Devlin to him, told him to send the man another beer and keep the change for himself. Stuart then handed the other twenty to the waitress who'd served Devlin before.

He was moderately relieved to see Tinkerbelle remained undamaged in her parking space. He turned off the alarm, got behind the wheel, locked the doors, then opened the folder containing the information about Dominique Carpenter and began to read.