

Cold Gusts Chill Warm Hearts

In his bathroom at Hollingsworth Manor, Stuart Hollingsworth finished toweling dry. He tossed the towel into the hamper, then slipped into a pair of briefs.

Stuart's mind slipped to the events of a half-hour ago, when his mother had announced she was retiring to her rooms for the evening. He'd asked her to wait a moment, then handed her the folder containing the information about Dominique Carpenter that had been given to him earlier that day by the private investigator. Constance's green eyes had narrowed as she'd stared at Stuart for a long moment before finally saying, "Thank you, Stuart," then going into her room and closing the door behind her.

Stuart had been astounded by what Devlin had found out about Dominique Carpenter. But what had most disturbed him was there was no information that disproved the woman's claim that Constance was her mother. Stuart wondered if it could be true. He wondered if Constance had read the folder's contents yet.

A sudden chill swept through Stuart, causing him to seek refuge beneath the comforter and between the combed Egyptian cotton sheets. He shivered for a moment before realizing he hadn't turned off the overhead light. Shit. Why couldn't Mother pretend they were white trash and let him install one of those silly Clappers?

He turned on the Tiffany lamp atop his bedside table, slipped out from between the covers just long enough to run to the opposite wall and turn off the light switch, then quickly returned to his bed.

From his bedside table, Stuart lifted the manuscript he'd been reading earlier at the office. It was so blue-penciled as to be almost unreadable, but Stuart persisted, trying to concentrate on evaluating the material before him instead of contemplating the contents of the folder he'd given to his mother.

A light knock on his bedroom door turned Stuart's attention away from the manuscript. He glanced at the digital clock on his bedside table. 11:10. Stuart sat up, adjusting the bedding to make certain he was covered before saying, "Yes?"

The door opened just wide enough to admit the head and bare shoulders of Mark. "Are you busy, Uncle Stuart?"

Stuart grinned at the brown-haired, blue-eyed boy. "Never too busy for my favorite thirteen-year-old nephew," he remarked.

Mark grinned and shook his head as he entered the room, closing the door behind him. "I'm your *only* thirteen-year-old nephew."

"I knew there was a reason you were my favorite," Stuart smiled.

Mark, wearing only paisley boxer shorts, stood just inside the now-closed door. Arms folded across his chest, he shifted his weight from one gangly leg to the other.

"I thought you had gone to bed," Stuart said gently, sensing something was on the boy's mind.

Mark shrugged. "I did, but I couldn't sleep."

Stuart set aside the manuscript he'd been reading. Patting the bed beside him, he asked, "Something on your mind?"

Slowly, Mark walked to the bed. He settled near the footboard, spindly legs crossed Indian-style. "I sort of have a problem." Mark's voice cracked mid-sentence, and he blushed before looking away.

Stuart, having an idea of what was to come, successfully repressed a smile. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Maybe," Mark said, nervously flexing his fingers and toes.

"Well, you know I'll be happy to do whatever I'm able."

Mark raised one corner of his mouth in a quirky grin, and nodded slowly. "See, there's this girl at school...."

"Uh-huh. Does she have a name?" Stuart coaxed gently when Mark presented no further information.

"Tiffany."

"Obviously a bright girl," Stuart remarked.

Mark stared at him. "She is, but how did you know?"

"Her parents named her after a lamp." Stuart pointed over his shoulder to the lamp atop his bedside table while Mark buried his face in his hands and groaned.

Placing his elbows on his shoulders, and peering over his knuckles, Mark said, "That was bad, Uncle Stuart."

"Sorry." Stuart smiled warmly. "So, you were saying something about Tiffany?"

Again, Mark blushed. "I sort of like her, but I don't know how to tell her."

"And you need some advice as to how to go about that?" Stuart asked.

Mark nodded.

"Mark, I'm flattered that you would ask me, but didn't your parents give you some good ideas?"

"I didn't ask them."

Stuart's mouth fell open in shock. Though he felt close to both his nephews, and made certain they knew they could come to him for anything, he knew they usually went to Harris and Lisa with all their problems. "I'm not trying to be judgmental," Stuart said slowly, "but may I ask why not?"

Mark rolled his eyes. "Mom and Dad have been married, like, since the Big Bang. They don't know anything about dating stuff."

Stuart grinned wickedly. "Then why didn't you ask your Uncle Edward?"

"Because he gets married and divorced more often than anyone else in the world," Mark snorted. "He obviously doesn't know much about dating either."

Stuart held his palms upward, spreading his arms to encompass the entire room. "So you ask the uncle who's home alone on a Friday night?"

Mark laughed. "Yeah, but you could get a girl if you wanted to, right?"

Stuart smiled. "If I wanted to, yes, I think I could."

"That's what I thought. And since I sort of look like you in those old pictures hanging on the east wing's walls, I thought maybe what worked for you when you were my age might work for me."

Stuart chuckled. "I hate to destroy the mental image of me you've formed, but I wasn't exactly a ladies' man when I was your age."

Mark's piercing blue eyes searched Stuart's own. "But you've been in love

before, right?"

Stuart nodded slowly.

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen," Stuart replied. As he spoke the word, the thought occurred to him that sixteen would've been the age at which his mother would've conceived if Dominique Carpenter's claims were true.

Simultaneously, Stuart and Mark shivered. Mark's bare legs broke out with goose flesh.

"It's cold in here!" Mark said.

Stuart nodded. "I think there's something wrong with the thermostat. You're welcome to get under the covers if you want."

Mark unfolded his long legs, and scrambled toward the carved headboard. Stuart pulled back the cover on the opposite side of the bed so Mark could more easily get in.

Mark pulled the cover up to his chin and shivered, sending vibrations through the mattress.

"Are you okay?" Stuart asked, as he slid lower in the bed, turning on his side to face his nephew.

"I will be in a minute."

Propping himself up on an elbow, Stuart said, "You were saying something about Tiffany?"

Mark smiled awkwardly. "How can I let her know I like her?"

"Ever try using your mouth?" Stuart grinned.

Mark's eyes widened. "You mean just tell her?"

"No," Stuart said. "I mean kiss her."

Mark almost levitated out of bed. "I can't do that!"

Stuart creased his brow, and frowned. Shaking his head, he said, "Of course

not. If the schools suspend first-graders for kissing a member of the opposite sex, they'd probably put you in the state penitentiary."

Mark laughed, and shook his head. "Seriously, Uncle Stuart, what should I do?"

"Do you really like her?"

Mark nodded solemnly.

"Then I think you have to be honest and tell her how you feel," Stuart said.

"I don't think I can do that."

Stuart fixed Mark with his blue-eyed gaze. "If you truly care for her, if you love her, you can do it."

"Is that what you did the first time you were in love?"

Stuart nodded slowly.

"What happened?"

"I was shot down in flames," Stuart grinned thinly.

"Aw, man," Mark said, pulling the cover over his head.



The actors bowed one last time as the audience continued its sincere applause. Kris stood to join the crowd, a happy smile on her face, sorry the play was over. It had been too long since she and Edward had been out for a night on the town and she didn't want it to end so soon. Although he had been quiet all night, it felt good for them to be out together.

Placing his hand on the small of her back, Edward gently moved his wife into the aisle, toward the theater lobby. She could feel the heat of his skin through the thin silk of her dress and was finally sure it had been a good purchase. In the dress shop, she'd been afraid the spaghetti straps and low-cut neckline were too revealing. Seeing the way Edward had been looking at her all night, however, she had the impression it was fine with him.

The lobby was quickly filling with other men in black tuxedos and women in expensive dresses, all sipping wine and talking the talk of the rich. Kris could be sure of that, considering that each seat to the night's event had cost two

thousand dollars. Edward had only agreed to go after she'd convinced him other publishing companies would have a presence there. She had no idea if the ploy was true, but she had run out of ideas and she'd wanted to go. Not to mention that donating that amount of money to AIDS charities appealed to her.

Edward asked what she wanted to drink, then sauntered to the elaborate wet bar at the far end of the pristinely white room and procured two beverages for them. His image followed him in the intricately carved mirrors on the west wall as he returned.

"Here," he said, handing her the champagne, his eyes scanning the room.

"Thank you, Edward. The play was lovely, wasn't it?" she asked.

He failed to answer, still looking through the group surrounding them. His eyes landed on a particularly tight cluster of penguins, a slight smile gracing his lips.

"I see someone with whom I wish to speak," he said, taking her elbow as he began to traverse the room. On a night he thought would be a total waste of his valuable time, the publisher saw an important networking opportunity.

Most of the men in the group were silver-haired and looked completely too serious for Kris' tastes. They all sipped from stemmed glasses, careful not to spill any liquid on their freshly pressed tuxedos. For the first time all night, Edward's eyes lit with keen interest.

"Edward, nice to see you," one of the men said as they mingled into the sophisticated bunch.

"It has been too long, Jonathan," Edward responded. "How has business been?"

Kris tuned out of the conversation after a moment or two, as she had no interest in the politics of the publishing business. Her interest was limited strictly to the content of the material Hollingsworth Publishing produced. A good book was often the only entertainment she had.

As Edward spoke, he noticed the men looking at Kris, though she seemed not to notice. Their eyes scanned her short frame, stopping at the most delicious parts. He could not blame them. She looked great, which was one reason he'd married her. It never hurt to have business associates lusting after the wife. Anything to distract them.

The conversation lasted almost an hour, jumping from one topic the young woman didn't understand, or care about, to another. As she latched the seat belt in her husband's red Porsche, she was thankful to be out of that stuffy world and back on turf she knew.

"What did you think about the play?" she asked again as the car pulled onto the road.

"It was fine," Edward answered.

She put her hand over his on the gearshift. "Thank you for taking me. I had fun."

He pulled his hand away and placed it on the steering wheel. "You should have for that much money."

Kris stared at him for a moment, hurt, then turned to watch the dark land speed by through the passenger window. Sometimes she didn't understand how he could be so cold. It seemed lately that one moment he was a million miles away from her, then in the next minute he was taking her to bed. They had never been best friends, but in the beginning of the marriage he had at least treated her to meaningful conversation.

Her husband was married to his job, and Kris understood that. It had been observable from the start. Still, she needed some attention and flattery to assure her that he was satisfied with her.

Edward looked at his young bride. The back of her short blonde hair faced him as she looked out the window. A string of shiny pearls stood out in the dark just below her hairline, a long stretch of neck and back visible above her dress-covered skin. She'd been the envy of every man in the theater tonight.

"You look beautiful tonight," he said.

Surprised green eyes turned his way, suddenly glistening. "Thank you," she whispered.

"No other woman in the theater matched your elegance."

Kris briefly wondered if she'd fallen asleep and was having a very nice dream. When the car turned into the long drive and Edward stopped at the wrought-iron gates, she could tell this was indeed reality. She felt almost as if he'd read her mind.

In the garage, the older man opened the car door for his wife, taking her hand as she exited. The couple walked quietly into the huge house through the inside door.

"I will be up after I check my messages," Edward said pointedly, his eyes telling her he didn't mean to sleep.

The young woman bolted up the stairs, frantically trying to decide what to put on. Wearing nothing was her first option, but Edward had really liked her new lingerie. Of course, she didn't want to let him get tired of that outfit too soon.

She burst through the door to their bedroom, sending it flying into the stopper with a loud crack. Figuring her husband preferred her to be more docile than forward, she decided to go with the black, silky teddy. She barely stopped in front of the dresser as she retrieved the garment and dashed into the master-bathroom.

Slipping into the fancy underwear, she heard Edward enter the room, closing the door behind him as he always did. Her hair was in relatively good shape, especially considering how long the evening out had been. She closely examined her face, making sure her makeup didn't need any touchups and desperately hoping she would please the man waiting for her.

With a deep breath, she left the spacious bathroom, walking as casually as she could into the more expansive bedroom. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as if this were the first time she'd ever been alone with a man.

Edward stood busily unbuttoning his white tux shirt, his head bent to the task. He looked up when she entered, his eyes fixating on several points below her face. His wife immediately recognized the hunger in his eyes.

I knew he still loved me, she thought, smiling as he determinedly crossed the room. *It was only a matter of time.*

The older man swept Kris into a fierce embrace, his mouth savagely capturing hers. He thought back to the theater and all the men who'd longed to hold his wife in this manner. *The best man always wins*, he laughed internally, pulling the young woman toward the bed.



Constance Hollingsworth lay back in bed, closing and setting aside the folder Stuart had given her earlier. At first, she had been leery to read its contents, but curiosity overcame her reluctance, and she'd begun to read.

She wasn't certain what she'd hoped to glean from the information, but what she'd read had given her a glimpse into the mind of Dominique Carpenter, and Constance now thought she understood the purpose of the woman's visit.

Constance's chest ached, but not with the pain that signaled an attack's onset. Now her heart ached with an emotion so long absent from her as to have been almost forgotten: compassion.

Constance was surprised at the degree to which she'd been affected by what she'd read. But she felt a bond now, between herself and Dominique; a bond that was something more than merely blood. It was a bond of loss.

Damn, but it was cold in her bedroom! Constance pulled the bedcovers higher, and slid down between the silk sheets. She would have to remember to call Clifton O'Connor tomorrow, and have him check the thermostats.

As she shivered, Constance's thoughts turned to Dominique. It had been four days since Constance had told her daughter that her existence was the result of a rape, four days since Dominique had walked out of Constance's office. Had she walked out of her life as well? And why did that prospect hurt worse than Constance could ever have imagined?

Her chest aching uncomfortably and unfamiliarly, Constance turned off her lamp, and waited for sleep to claim her.