

The Best-Laid Plans

The cold marble structure of the Calumet County Courthouse magnified the cool breeze circulating around the third-floor lobby. Rahne O'Connor sat regally on a wooden bench, her legs crossed, staring at the notepad on her lap. The uniformed man beside her slouched against the wall, studying her.

"Officer Blankenship, what did you observe when you arrived at the defendant's home on the night in question?"

He straightened slightly. "As I pulled my squad car to a stop, a young black man came from behind the apartment building. He saw me and fled."

"Did you follow?"

"Yes. The suspect ran north, and I followed on foot. Officer Goodin met us from the opposite direction, and the suspect slowed down," he responded. Ford Blankenship sat up straight and adjusted his hat.

Rahne waited for his muscular arms to settle, then continued. "Were you able to apprehend the suspect at that time?"

"Yes. I captured the suspect and immobilized him." He raised an eyebrow and grinned.

The woman pushed a lock of sandy brown hair behind an ear and squinted her eyes. Rahne hoped he was playing with her, because she didn't need a hothead on the stand. "Do you see the man you apprehended here today?"

A meaty hand pointed to the fictional defendant. "That's the bastard right there."

"Ford," she chastised, "you're going to be on the stand at nine. That's thirty minutes away. Let's get this guy, okay."

He smiled. "This one's already in the bag, Ms. O'Connor. Don't worry about it."

"I'm glad you think so, but I like to be prepared in any case." She shot him a fiery brown glare. He was a good cop, but he could be a pain on the stand at times.

"Ye're a hard woman to track down, darlin'," an unmistakable voice sounded from behind her.

She grimaced, but smiled in spite of herself. "Hello, Papa," she said, standing.

Clifton O'Connor gave his daughter a kiss on the cheek and looked to Ford Blankenship. "Ya in trouble, lass?"

"No, I'm doing my job. Maybe you should explore that concept." She smiled coyly. "What are you doing here?"

At almost six feet tall, Rahne was a physically intimidating woman. Clifton was glad she'd had that advantage in life, even though it didn't work on him. The handyman returned her smile. "I might need ya as a character witness at my trial."

She frowned at her father and glanced back to Ford, who was amusedly looking on. "What are you talking about? What trial?" she asked.

"The one I'm gonna have after I strangle the Hollingsworths. Those folks are nuts."

Rahne shook her head. "What have they done now?" She knew her father loved to joke about his famous employers, so she indulged him.

"They've sent me on ten wild-goose chases in the last two weeks, looking for phantom air conditioning leaks, holes in the roof, and several other things I'd not care to mention." He rolled his eyes. "I haven't found one thing wrong in that big house o' theirs, but they swear the place is a wreck. This morning I have ta go take a look at some damage they caused over the weekend. I can only imagine what it might be."

His daughter dismissed the rant with a wave. "They pay you well to chase geese, Papa. I figured your little woman had you in a bind."

Clifton gave her his best blank look, then shrugged his shoulders at Ford, who smiled as he watched their exchange.

Rahne raised an eyebrow. "You know. 'Abigail' with a 'y.'"

The officer laughed. "Says 'Rain' with an 'h.'"

Clifton laughed heartily, but the tall woman was unamused. She glared at the officer. "Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

Ford threw his hands up in surrender and moved away with a grin.

The prosecutor turned to her father. "I don't know what that woman of yours was thinking when she wrote that story about the Hollingsworths. She must be suicidal."

Eager to change the subject, the older man took his daughter's hand and purposefully rubbed her bare ring finger. "And speaking of minor annoyances, how is my son-in-law, the shrink?"

Pursing her lips, Rahne removed her hand from her father's grip. "Trent and I are not married."

"Oh. It's been so long since I've seen ya, I thought you two might have eloped to some third-world country and were off making me a grandpapa."

She shook her head. "Ha! Fat chance of that happening. In lieu of grandfatherhood, you're just gonna have to content yourself with your little reporter playmate." Clifton stepped back and clutched his chest, faking the 'big one.' "I'm wounded," he said, but they both smiled.



"I think Stuart should've stayed home today, Harris," Lisa Hollingsworth said to her husband as they approached his office on the thirtieth floor of Hollingsworth Tower. "He's acting like he's still in pain."

"He is," Harris said, opening the door to the outer office occupied by his secretary, Joyce Stevens. "And he probably should have taken it easy for a few days, but you know Stuart."

"Yes," Lisa sighed, entering the room. "I know all three of you Hollingsworth brothers. You're all exactly like your mother."

"Strong as oxen and tough as nails?" Harris smiled.

"Stubborn as mules," Lisa countered.

Harris' bearded face settled into a pout.

"You are so cute when you do that." Lisa pinched Harris' cheeks.

"Ow!"

"Not so tough now, are you?" Lisa grinned.

"You don't play fair." Harris lightly stroked his wounds.

"All's fair in love and war, right, Joyce?" Lisa peered around her husband and smiled at his secretary, who was concentrating on her computer screen and didn't seem to have

noticed their entrance.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" Joyce asked, hurriedly clicking the mouse, fingers flying across the keyboard.

"Oh, it was nothing important," Lisa said. "I'm sorry to disturb your work."

"Speaking of work, I'd better get to it," Harris said.

"I'm going to talk to Joyce for a few minutes, then I'll be going. I promised Stuart I'd buy him some new slacks he can get into," Lisa said. "Give me a kiss."

Harris raised a dark eyebrow. "That sounded suspiciously like an order."

"Give me a kiss *or else*. That's an option, not an order," Lisa smiled.

Joyce laughed as her boss covered his cheeks and leaned forward to kiss his dark-haired wife. As Harris disappeared into his office, Joyce turned to Lisa and smiled. "Lisa, it was so great of Mark to offer to tutor Tiffany. Thank you so much for letting him do this."

"It was Mark's idea," Lisa smiled. "We've always encouraged him to help others whenever he's able."

"So considerate! And so cute! He's going to be a heartbreaker, for sure." Joyce's gray eyes sparkled as she smiled.

There was something in Joyce's voice that made Lisa feel a little uneasy. "Does Tiffany have a crush on Mark?" Lisa asked.

"Oh, I'm sure she does!" Joyce grinned. Leaning forward over her desk, she asked, "Does Mark have a thing for Tiffany, too?"

"I think he may, but I don't really know."

"Wouldn't it be great if they got together?" Joyce's full mouth stretched into a Cheshire cat grin.

Lisa chuckled. "Well, maybe in a few years. Right now, they're too young to be thinking of committing their lives to another person."

"Oh, of course!" Joyce hastily agreed.

"So how did you want to work the tutoring schedule?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know. What would work best for you?"

"Well, since I pick up Mark and Nathan from school in the afternoon, it wouldn't be a problem to pick up Tiffany, too. Why don't you tell her tonight to wait with Mark after school on the days that she needs help? I'll pick them up, take them back to the house, and let them study."

Joyce nodded thoughtfully. "Sounds good, but how will Tiffany get home?"

"I can have her phone you from the manor on the days she's there and let you know to drop by and pick her up after work."

"Hollingsworth Manor's a little out of my way since I live on the east side of town, across the river," Joyce said. Hastily, she added, "But since you're being so nice by doing this for Tiffany, going a few extra miles is the least I can do."

"Good," Lisa smiled. "I'll be waiting outside the main entrance tomorrow afternoon if she needs a ride."



"This is the address you gave me, Stuart," the limousine driver said. "Are you sure you want me to let you out here?"

"Yeah, Benny. I do." Stuart surveyed the red brick building that housed Devlin Investigations, then turned to take in the surrounding neighborhood. This near the Gossamer River, the city was a dump. Dilapidated buildings with bare or tattered awnings lined the litter-strewn, narrow-sidewalked streets. "But if you see anyone kick my crutches out from under me, you'd better save me."

Benny smiled into the rearview mirror. "I got your back, boss."

"Make sure you get the rest of me, too," Stuart said.

Benny chuckled as he got out of the limo to open the door for Stuart.

"Maybe you'd better keep this thing rolling," Stuart said as he maneuvered his cast-bound leg out of the vehicle and steadied himself on his crutches. "Makes it harder to steal, I'm told."

As Stuart made his way toward the low, squatty building that somehow reminded him of its occupant, he could hear Benny still chuckling behind him, no doubt amused by the numerous Pokemon characters drawn on his cast by Mark and Nathan.

If he'd not preferred wearing tapered slacks, Stuart wouldn't have had to have Molly cut this pair off at the knee, thereby exposing his nephews' artwork. At least Lisa had volunteered to shop for some wide-legged slacks for him today, thereby limiting the extent of his public humiliation.

He hadn't planned on going anywhere other than his office in Hollingsworth Tower, but William Devlin had called to tell him he'd readied the file on Abigayle Nguyen for Stuart to pick up. Knowing his mother's urgent desire to have the information on the reporter, Stuart had decided to immediately meet the private investigator and retrieve the file. It was only ten-thirty a.m., too early for The Blue Streak, their usual meeting place, to be open, so Stuart had told Devlin he would meet him at his office.

The front door of Devlin Investigations was heavy, metal, and painted the same dull maroon as the face of the brick building in which it was centered. Stuart leaned against the bulky door, opening it a crack. Inserting one of his crutches into the narrow gap in an effort to gain leverage, Stuart lost his balance and almost tumbled inside when the door suddenly opened.

William Devlin's broad face creased into a smile as Stuart, regaining his balance, hobbled into the room. "Get hit by a bus?" the white-haired investigator asked, his wry grin giving way to a smirk.

Stuart laughed, remembering himself asking Devlin a similar question the last time they'd met at The Blue Streak. "Actually, it was a dining table."

Devlin looked at Stuart's right leg, which was in a cast reaching from just below the knee to just above his toes. The private investigator whistled lowly. "Shit! And I thought *my* furniture was cheap."

Stuart surveyed the waiting room in which he stood. The furniture consisted of a rickety coffee table that seemed in danger of imminent collapse from the weight of the back issues of *Sports Illustrated* and *People* that topped it, and three chairs, their seats upholstered in avocado green vinyl which appeared to have been cracked since the 1970s. Cheap furniture, indeed.

"Nice artwork, by the way," Devlin said, pointing to Nathan and Mark's handiwork adorning Stuart's cast. "Gauguin, is it?" he asked as he walked into his office.

"Starving artists," Stuart said, following Devlin. "My nephews decorated it while I slept."

The barrel-chested investigator chuckled as he seated himself behind his desk and motioned for Stuart to sit in the opposite chair. "Kids are like that. Always into

something or other." Devlin's gaze flitted across a framed photograph perched on the edge of his desk.

Stuart, finding Devlin's statement and wistful expression incongruous with what he knew of the man, leaned forward to get a glimpse of the photograph at which Devlin had glanced. "May I?" Stuart asked, open hand poised beside the frame.

Devlin's dark brown eyes momentarily bored through Stuart's blue ones. Then, lighting a Marlboro from a package on his desk, Devlin nodded assent.

Stuart lifted the frame off the desk and turned the photograph toward himself. He saw a smiling and much-younger Devlin seated beside a young blonde woman. A toddler, a blond boy of no older than two, straddled their laps. "Cute kid. Reminds me of my youngest nephew," Stuart smiled.

"Thanks," Devlin's thick voice rasped. "He still takes after his mom."

"She's a nice-looking lady," Stuart smiled again, replacing the frame on Devlin's desk.

"What is it?" Devlin asked, when Stuart's smile didn't dissipate.

"Nothing. I just didn't imagine you being a married man."

Devlin exhaled a thick cloud of smoke, obscuring his eyes. "I'm not. Not anymore."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Stuart said, momentarily taken aback. "But I guess you were in the lucky fifty-percent whose marriages end in divorce. You get to enjoy your freedom, drink beer for breakfast, and leave the toilet seat up," Stuart said enthusiastically, trying to lighten Devlin's suddenly dour demeanor.

"My wife died, Mr. Hollingsworth." Devlin's voice was cold.

"I'm sorry," Stuart said helplessly.

"It was a long time ago," Devlin remarked quietly.

As the silence between them stretched to uncomfortable proportions, Stuart said, "You have the file on Abigayle Nguyen for me?"

Devlin smiled. In a puff of smoke, he said, "You have my fee?"

Stuart reached into the inner pocket of his suit coat and produced a white envelope which he tossed onto the desk before Devlin.

Devlin opened the envelope, riffled through the bills, then opened a desk drawer from which he pulled a Manila folder. He placed the folder in Stuart's open hand.

"That's it?" Stuart asked, handling the thin folder. "It doesn't seem very big."

Devlin grinned wickedly as he ground out his cigarette in an overladen brass ashtray. "Haven't you heard that size doesn't matter, Mr. Hollingsworth?"

"Once or twice," Stuart nodded. "But if you ask me, it's a damned lie."

Devlin laughed. "That's the same way my lady friend thinks. Especially if we're talking about the size of a man's wallet."

Stuart joined in the laughter.

"You have a lady, Mr. Hollingsworth?" Devlin suddenly turned serious.

Stuart shook his head. "I have enough problems without adding another to the mix."

Devlin chuckled. "I understand." Again, his gaze momentarily graced the photograph on his desk.

Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Stuart struggled to his feet. "Thank you for your help, Devlin. I know my mother will appreciate this information." He awkwardly brandished the folder.

Devlin smiled. "You just be sure she gets a copy of my manuscript, hear?"

"I assure you, I will," Stuart promised.

Devlin nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Let me help you out the door."



Slowing down to pull into the parking lot, Kris Hollingsworth could see Bruce Dooley unlocking The Blue Streak's heavy metal door. By the time she pulled into a space, the large man was already inside. Kris cursed to herself and exited the car.

She turned the knob, but it was locked, so she knocked on the door, eager to talk to the bartender. After the other night, she felt obligated to make an apology to the man. He'd been more helpful to her than he could possibly know. With all the strife she currently confronted everyday, it was nice to have a friendly face to which she could turn.

The door cracked open to reveal a black chasm. "Yeah?" Bruce's wary voice asked.

Kris cleared her throat, suddenly embarrassed. "I wanted to talk to you."

Bright brown eyes and a smile appeared in the doorway as it opened. "Oh, hi, Kris." He looked apprehensively back into the bar. "Would you like to come in?"

"Um—yeah, I would," she said, though she was a little unsure.

He walked to the bar and took the next-to-last stool, motioning to the one beside it. Kris took the seat, hoping her eyes would adjust quickly to the dim interior of the bar.

"What do you need to talk to me about?" the big man asked.

Securing her short blonde hair behind an ear, Kris wondered where her memorized speech had fled. "I wanted to thank you for taking my car back to the manor the other night."

Bruce drew a circle on the countertop with one big hand. "That was no problem. It wasn't safe for you to drive or for a Mercedes to stay out in front of this place."

"It was a very nice thing to do, Bruce. Not everyone would have."

"Ah, it just took a few minutes," he said, uncomfortable with the attention.

Kris smiled, enjoying the soft flush on his stubbled cheeks. "I want to pay you for your time," she told him.

"No ma'am. I didn't take your car home to get paid."

She stilled his hand with one of her smaller ones atop it. "I know, but I want to reward you for your honesty. There should be more people like you."

He didn't quite understand what she meant by honesty. He'd just taken her car home. "Kris, it really isn't necessary. It was worth it to see that mansion you live in."

"I insist on at least repaying you for cab fare. I know your return trip from the manor must have cost a fortune," she asserted. Kris couldn't accept letting his kindness go unrewarded.

Bruce sighed. "I would have done the same for any of my customers, ma'am." He stared at the bar.

Kris didn't quite believe that statement, having seen his clientele, but she didn't call him on it. "Bruce, what you did was one of the nicest acts I've been graced with in a while. Like you said, something could have happened to my car here. It's very expensive, and you could have done anything with it yourself if you so chose. But you didn't." She gripped his hand tighter.

A rush of heat infiltrated his face, collecting in his cheeks as it always did, but Bruce could do nothing. He looked at the hand on his and wondered if his actions truly deserved this much praise. If so, he was even more glad he had returned the car.

"The care you took with me and my car made me feel very special. You are a very trustworthy person," Kris said, her thumb brushing the back of his hand.

"I don't know about that," Bruce responded, looking into her green eyes.

She smiled radiantly. "I do. And your boss must too, since he lets you open this place by yourself."

"The guy must be nuts," he said, grinning. Thankfully, he could feel his tension waning. He didn't understand what it was about her that flustered him.

"You should give yourself more credit," Kris said passionately. In his eyes she could see an openness Edward so badly lacked. She could scarcely recall ever holding her husband's hand for as long as she'd held this practical stranger's.

Realizing she was indeed holding his hand, the young woman felt a jolt pass through her body. Without indicating her distress, she swallowed hard, moved her hand away, and hopped off the stool. "I guess I should be going. I just wanted to pay you for your trouble."

He watched her lay a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. "I'll use that for cab fare for someone who really needs it," he said.

Kris smiled. "Use it for whatever you want. It's yours."

Shaking his head, he walked the small woman to the door. He reached around her to pull it open. "Have a good day, Kris."

"You too. And thank you again. You're sweet." Before she could stop herself, Kris stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. In the moment she lingered there, her lips felt the unusual sensation produced by his light beard.

Green eyes twinkled as she gave him one last glance before heading to the parking lot. Bruce watched her go, a hand covering his face where she'd kissed him.



In her hotel room, Dominique Carpenter sat in the reproduction Louis XVI chair, her elbows resting lightly on the chair's gold leaf arms, her hands folded in her lap, her gaze focused outside the window at the late-afternoon traffic below.

So many cars, so many people, so many destinations. They all seemed to know exactly where they were going and how they were going to get there. Dominique wondered how many of them would suddenly find themselves somewhere they'd never expected to be.

Like me.

She had come to Gossamer Falls to get answers, and now she had them. She had confronted her birth mother, learned the truth about why she'd been given up for adoption, and been told her grandfather had murdered her father on the day she was born.

Dominique's original plan had been simply to confront her mother and learn the truth, but the truth she'd been told wasn't what she'd expected to hear. She'd never expected to stay in Gossamer Falls, to want to forge a relationship with her mother, to want to know her brothers and their families, but after Tessa's death and the subsequent divorce from Ellis, Dominique had no other family. Her new plan was to avoid being alone.

She considered Constance's offer to let her move into Hollingsworth Manor. It did hold a certain appeal, especially when faced with the boredom of living in a hotel, but Dominique couldn't bring herself to accept the offer. Too much uncertainty remained in her mind.

After telling her sons that Dominique was her daughter, Constance had reported that things hadn't gone as well or as bad as they could've. What, exactly, had she meant by that? That one of the three had decided not to strangle her upon sight?

With a great sigh, Dominique stood from the velvet-upholstered chair. If she sat there any longer, she was certain her rear would permanently conform to the chair's dimensions.

The clock above the dresser showed it was already after four. The Blue Streak would be open. Maybe she'd pop in and see Bruce. He was friendly, unlike some of the other residents of Gossamer Falls.

Like that conniving little reporter, Dominique thought. Or the photographer who

blinded me with that damned flash the other day.

As Dominique reached for her handbag, the telephone rang. She hesitated only a moment before snatching it out of its cradle. "Hello?"

"Hello, Dominique."

Dominique smiled. "Hi, Mama."

Constance Hollingsworth cleared her throat. "How are you?"

Dominique laughed wearily. "Going stir-crazy. I'm tired of looking at these walls."

"How do you feel about going out for lunch tomorrow?"

Dominique's heart skipped a beat. Her mother wanted to be seen with her in public! "I'd love to," she said, trying to conceal her excitement. "What're we having?"

"Revenge." Constance's voice was ice.

The smile faded from Dominique's face. "What do you mean?"

"I have before me a folder containing everything there is to know about Abigayle Nguyen from the date of her birth in New York City to the length of her tenure as the resident snooping bitch of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*."

Dominique chuckled. "That sounds good. What do you have planned?"

"Since the little witch struck at me through my family, I'm determined to pay her back in kind," Constance said.

Laughing, Dominique said, "That sounds like ironic justice to me." Still smiling, she asked, "So we're meeting tomorrow to discuss the plan?"

"Actually, I won't be meeting you for lunch."

"Oh?" Dominique couldn't keep the disappointment from creeping into her voice. "Then I don't understand."

"If you agree to participate, you'll be dining at Nguyen's Vietnamese Cuisine, which is owned by Abigayle's parents, John and Rose."

"I see," Dominique said, though she really didn't. It was obvious her mother had plans for the reporter's parents, but what could they be? "So I'll be dining alone?"

Constance laughed wickedly. "Oh, no, Dominique. You won't be alone. I want you to take a couple friends with you."

Dominique's thoughts turned to Bruce Dooley. He was the only person in Gossamer Falls who'd earned the right to be called a friend. "I don't think I can find two friends, Mama."

Constance laughed devilishly. "Oh, Dominique! You'd be surprised at what money can buy."