

# In the Arms of Justice

Rahne O'Connor smiled at Edward and Kris Hollingsworth. "Thank you both for coming down here and giving your statements."

Edward said nothing, but nodded curtly.

"I can think of more pleasant ways of spending a Saturday afternoon than touring the Gossamer Falls Police Department." Kris smiled shakily and glanced around the large, slightly crowded waiting area.

"Just be grateful you're touring and not staying like your friend." Rahne grinned sardonically and jerked her head in the direction of the interrogation room in which Kris' attacker was being held.

"Has he confessed?" Edward asked.

At that moment, Ford Blankenship entered the room. "Dammit!" the uniformed officer said, angrily slapping the doorway. His hard-heeled shoes sounded sharply off the tiled floor as he stomped toward the trio.

"What is it?" Rahne asked.

Ford's brown eyes blazed. "The guy's sealed tighter than a clam. We have eyewitnesses out the wazoo who've positively identified him, but he won't admit to anything. Said he wants an attorney."

"As is his right," Rahne said.

Ford shook his head. "Why waste time? He was caught in the act. I arrived on the scene just a moment after Mr. Hollingsworth and Mr. Dooley caught up to the guy. He's guilty as hell. Why doesn't he just do us all a favor and admit it?"

"He's obviously not the sharpest thumbtack on the bulletin board," Rahne said, "but we'll get him anyway."

"I bet I could squeeze a confession out of him in no time." Ford clenched his meaty fists.

"That's not the way we do things, officer." Rahne's eyes and voice were cold.

Ford nodded brusquely and left the room.

"I'm going to be taking off now if there's no further need for me," Bruce Dooley said, entering the waiting room.

"I'm sure someone will be in touch if we need you, Mr. Dooley," Rahne said.

Bruce nodded to Rahne. Turning to Kris, he said, "I'm glad you weren't hurt."

Kris smiled, her green eyes sparkling. "Thank you, Bruce. And thanks for helping."

Bruce shrugged. "I didn't really do anything. Your husband deserves the credit for the capture."

Kris beamed up at Edward, who acknowledged Bruce's praise with a slight smile. "My husband, the hero." She stood on tiptoe and passionately kissed Edward, who, much to her surprise, seemed unaffected by her public emotional display.

"I should be going." Bruce smiled awkwardly before leaving.

Heather Patterson, fresh from giving her statement, entered the room, turning the heads of more than a few men who were sitting in the chairs lining the room's walls.

"Thank you so much for helping me, Heather," Kris said, leaving Edward's side to hug Heather.

"You're welcome." Heather awkwardly returned Kris' hug.

"Yes, thank you for assisting my wife," Edward said, meeting Heather's eyes.

"Don't I get a hug?" Clifton O'Connor asked as he, Abigayle Nguyen, and Trent Beckham entered the room.

Kris smiled brightly. "Thank you, Mr. O'Connor."

"I could never pass up the chance to aid a damsel in distress," Clifton smiled.

Rahne struggled not to grimace at her father's obvious pleasure at being on the receiving end of one of Kris Hollingsworth's hugs. She felt Trent's eyes upon her, willing her strength, and managed to control her emotions.

"I'd like the details of what happened," Abigayle Nguyen said, stepping between Rahne and Edward.

Edward's blue eyes glared down the length of an index finger pointed at Abigayle. "You would be well advised to keep your distance from me and my family."

Abigayle stepped forward until Edward's finger touched the tip of her nose. Eyes narrowed into slits, she said, "Did you just threaten me in front of the District Attorney?"

Edward lowered his finger, but his eyes retained their fire. "Not at all. I merely dispensed some friendly advice."

"You know," Kris said, stepping between Abigayle and Edward, "I don't personally know you, Ms. Nguyen, but I have to say that the way you conduct yourself as a journalist is just plain sorry."

As Abigayle glared at Kris, Trent stepped between the two women. "Okay, let's calm down here. Clifton, if you would?" Trent raised his dark eyebrows and nodded toward Abigayle.

"Come on," Clifton said, placing his hands on Abigayle's shoulders.

"If you want the facts, Abigayle, you can get them from the blotter," Rahne said sharply. "Papa? Trent? Can the two of you make certain Abigayle doesn't get lost?" Rahne's tone indicated she wouldn't at all mind if that was to happen.

"I apologize for that," Rahne told Kris and Edward as the others left the room.

"It wasn't your fault," Kris smiled.

Edward, his composure regained in Abigayle's absence, said, "If that's all, Ms. O'Connor, we'll be leaving now."

"Of course," Rahne said. "I'll see that you're kept informed as the case develops."

"Thanks," Kris said as Edward nodded curtly and propelled her toward the exit.



Tiffany Stevens thought she could never again be as happy as she was the moment she entered the apartment she shared with her mother. So pleased was she to finally be away from Mark Hollingsworth and his family that it didn't matter that Billy had accompanied her and her mom into the apartment.

As bad as she'd expected spending the day at the park with Billy and her mom to be, it had been even worse to spend the day with Billy, her mom, Mark, and Mark's parents and brother. She still couldn't believe Mrs. Hollingsworth had asked them to join their family picnic, or that her mother had accepted the offer.

As if being seen with her mom and Billy wasn't bad enough, Mr. Hollingsworth had recognized Billy's name from a manuscript at his office. Tiffany's curiosity had been mildly aroused, but she'd also been somewhat petrified. About what could Billy have written a book? How to fill an ashtray in 3 seconds or less?

Mark had suggested they go play on the swings while their parents talked, and she'd agreed. Even though Nathan had accompanied them and had been showing off by acting like an acrobat, Tiffany wasn't able to fully enjoy herself for worrying about what her mom or Billy might be saying to embarrass themselves—or her.

At least now it was over. They were home. Tiffany was determined not to let the rest of her Saturday afternoon be ruined. She was going to her room, putting on her headphones, turning up the stereo, and ignoring everyone for the rest of the day. As she began walking toward her room, Tiffany was stopped by her mom's hands gripping her shoulders.

"Today was such a wonderful day, wasn't it, Tiff?"

"If you say so," Tiffany replied.

Joyce smiled brightly. Her pewter-colored eyes gazed at something faraway before meeting Tiffany's eyes. "Mark Hollingsworth has *such* a crush on you!"

Tiffany raised her eyebrows. "I don't think so, Mom."

William Devlin's broad face creased into a grin. "Listen to your mom. That boy's sweet on you," he said as he limped toward the bathroom.

"See!" Joyce cried. "Even Billy thinks so, and he's a guy, so he knows what's going on in that boy's head!"

Tiffany frowned. She wondered what Billy's being a guy had to do with anything. She was female but still didn't know what went on in her mom's head. "Why do you think he likes me? Did his parents tell you he said that or something?" she asked Joyce.

"No, but there are some things a woman knows about men without being told."

Tiffany sighed in relief as she turned and walked toward her bedroom. Her mom might know how to be a good secretary, and she definitely knew how to waste a lot of time and money gambling on the Internet, but she didn't know how to use her instincts. If female intuition truly existed, it had completely bypassed her mother.



Abigayle Nguyen knocked on Donald Farraday's door and entered his office when her editor waved her in.

"You got something for me, Nguyen?" Donald asked, wiping beads of perspiration from his forehead with a white handkerchief.

"Check your computer, Donald. I already filed the Gossamer Falls Downtown Art Fair story."

"Good," Donald said.

"I also filed another story you may want to look at," Abigayle smiled coyly.

"What is it?" Donald asked, rearranging a stack of folders and loose papers on his desk.

"An eyewitness account of the mugging of Kris Hollingsworth and the subsequent chase and capture of her assailant."

Donald's gaze shot up from the papers. "I just sent Davis over to GFPD to get the story. How did you—" Donald's eyes went wide as realization struck him. "You were at the art fair! Did you see the whole thing?"

"Check the computer," Abigayle smiled.

Donald Farraday hurriedly accessed the stories filed that day and opened *Kris Hollingsworth Attacked* by Abigayle Nguyen. When he'd finished reading, Donald looked up and nodded at Abigayle. "This is good stuff, Nguyen."

"I'll expect to see it on tomorrow's headline," Abigayle said.

"We'll see." Donald shrugged noncommittally.

"Come on, Donald. You said it was a good story."

"It is. But Davis may write a great story."

Abigayle frowned. "Winston Davis hasn't written a great story in a decade. My headlines sell more copies than his."

"You've only had one headline," Donald remarked.

"But that one headline sold more copies than any other single issue since JFK's assassination."

"It was the story, not the writer, that sold the papers."

"But it was *my* story," Abigayle said. "If I hadn't been in the right place at the right time, the story might never have come to light."

"So you're saying it was blind luck," Donald grinned.

"No! I'm saying I have a timely knack for being where news concerning a Hollingsworth is occurring."

Donald nodded. "That much, I have to admit."

"Then take me off this assignment," Abigayle said. "Get me off of this stinking business beat and into a juicier department."

"All our positions are filled right now, Nguyen."

"Come on, Donald. You know what I can do. I deserve better than this."

Donald leaned back in his desk chair, causing its base to squeal indignantly beneath his weight. "I'll make a note of your dissatisfaction, Nguyen, and when a new position opens, you'll be the first to know."

Abigayle stared at him for a moment before reluctantly nodding. "Fine. But you'd better not forget about me, Donald."

"I have a strong feeling you wouldn't let that happen," Donald said.

"Go with that instinct," Abigayle said, turning to leave his office.

"Wait a minute," Donald said as she reached the door.

"Decide to make me an offer I can't refuse?" Abigayle grinned.

"Actually, I think there's something you should probably see before tomorrow,"

Donald said solemnly, offering her a sheet of paper.

Abigayle's grin faded as she read. She held a report from the Department of Health that was scheduled to be printed in tomorrow's edition of the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*. In its text, Abigayle read that earlier in the week, Nguyen's Vietnamese Cuisine had been cited for rats. Aghast, Abigayle handed the paper to Donald, then hurriedly fled the room.



Shaking his head, Bruce Dooley wondered how a man like Mickey ever got to be so old. Looking at the bald, grubby man sitting on his customary stool was depressing, but the bartender got to see him almost every night. Mickey would come in just after five, spry and chipper, order a beer, and begin slipping down an invisible spiral of depression.

Bruce often inserted subtle hints to the man to try to get him out of the bar and back home, but they never seemed to work. Unfortunately, it wasn't in his philosophy to come out and tell Mickey he was pissing his life away. The bartender wondered what heartache had led the man to this point.

"What'll it be tonight, Mickey?" Bruce asked as the customer settled in for the night.

A dirty fingernail tapped against his chin. "Let me see. How 'bout a glass of suds? That'd be different, huh?"

Bruce smiled and began drawing from the tap. "Yeah, I wouldn't know what to do with all this beer if it weren't for you."

Mickey sneered playfully. "You could have a glass of your own then, maybe."

"Nah, not me. I don't touch the stuff," the bartender responded. And it was the truth for the most part. With all the troubles his life had seen of late, he feared a drink would lead him to sitting on the wrong side of the bar.

"You should try it," Mickey said.

*No, I shouldn't*, Bruce thought. He moved away a few paces and began wiping down the bar. He didn't want to look at one of his possible futures anymore. Thinking about being alone in the world, no matter how true it currently was for him, was not one of Bruce's favorite pastimes.

He hadn't always been alone, but it sometimes felt like it. His days were filled

with deafening silence, even as he worked in a crowd night after night. There wasn't really one person in town he could consider an intimate friend, and Bruce certainly had no lovers. He couldn't afford the risk.

Without his permission, a short, blonde woman popped unbidden into his mind. The soft curves of her face and the glint in her green eyes made him smile. Until today, he'd been hopeful Kris Hollingsworth was turning into a friend.

*What was I thinking?* he asked himself as he mindlessly poured drinks to fill his waitress' order. During their recent encounters, Bruce had been touched by the sweet young woman. He couldn't lie to himself. She had a childlike naivety that drew him.

The look in her eyes when Edward had draped the necklace around her neck at the art fair refused to leave the bartender's eyes. So much devotion existed there that it was almost breathtaking. Bruce searched his mind to try and find an image with which he could replace it, of a woman looking at him in such a way, but his memory failed. He'd caught more than one woman's attention in his life, but the images were old and faded. It would be nice to have someone to refresh his memory. He missed being needed.

"Hey, Bruce, I need another," Mickey said from down the bar. The regular held up his mug just a little more unsteadily than the last time.

As he fixed the drink, Bruce wondered if Mickey had someone that looked at him with as much love as Kris showed when she looked at Edward. He doubted it. If someone loved the drunk, surely they would help him.

"Here you go, Mickey," he said, handing the man his beer.

Bruce noticed that business had picked up while his mind continued to drift. The Saturday-night crowd was his least favorite. Most of them were there to find a meaningless conquest for the night.

His mind conjured up a picture from earlier in the day, of Kris kissing Edward at the police station, of the passion in her eyes. The stale smell of the waiting area hadn't registered. For the exuberant young woman, no one else in the world had existed. She'd been focused solely on her savior.

Bruce thought back to the last time she'd come to The Blue Streak. After he had returned her car, Kris had been insistent on thanking him. It hadn't been a big deal for Bruce, but he'd enjoyed her attention.

Feeling the softness of her lips on his cheek was as real to him now as it had

been on the day it happened. He hadn't expected Kris to kiss him, and the contact had been shocking. *Shock is a good word*, he thought. What she'd actually done was inflame him, as she was doing now. The moisture on his cheek had only lasted a moment, but the memory was strong.

Swallowing hard, Bruce moved closer to the counter, wiping the glass in his hand so fiercely it was in danger of turning to sand. Wide brown eyes glanced around the room, glad no one was looking at him. He could feel an unfamiliar stirring in his body, one he tried not to let surface often. At the moment, though, he had no choice. He was glad his lower half was hidden behind the bar.



Rahne O'Connor stoically sat on the hard, splintered pew, her legs and arms crossed, listening to Father Greer. As he said Mass, she thought of the earlier conversation they'd had. He'd spoken of the confusing ways of the world, and she'd wondered if he really had any idea what it was like out on the street. Most of the time, she wished she didn't.

*People are nothing but glorified animals*, she thought as the priest continued. Life was about desire and satisfaction and nothing more. Every day she was confronted with consequences of people trying to fulfill their needs.

Today at the art fair, that fool had wanted some money. Hundreds of people were put in danger because he needed a fix, or whatever his problem was. She really didn't care. The man was like so many others she had come across as Gossamer Falls' District Attorney.

Her hard brown eyes returned to Father Greer, and she wondered if he really saw the world in the way he described it. She knew good existed, but the evidence was rarely in her field of view. All Rahne ever seemed to see were victims crying and perps denying.

A motion on her bench drew the woman's attention. The last thing she needed today was a nun to sit beside her and read her mind.

Rahne smiled when she realized it was Trent, dressed in his blue blazer and matching slacks. He slid closer to her, smiling nervously himself. She couldn't help but acknowledge the warmth filling her chest at his presence. *Maybe I do sometimes get touched by good things.*

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

Glancing to Father Greer and back, Trent responded, "I thought it was important

to you.”

Not knowing what to say, Rahne merely nodded. She had no idea how she'd come across Trent among the string of thugs in her life, but she was truly thankful she had. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

Trent scooted close to her, bringing their thighs in full contact, and took her hand.



Heather Patterson slowly stopped at a red light, her mind barely comprehending the signal. She was driving by instinct, her mind far away. The whole day had been a wash, and she couldn't wait for it to be over.

The Gossamer Falls Downtown Art Fair had been the biggest fiasco of all, leaving her more depressed than she'd been when this miserable day had begun. The sight of Edward and Kris embracing still made her want to throw up. She wished she'd have stayed home.

But then, of course, she would have been alone all day, wondering why she'd been asked not to work and thinking about her life. Not that she'd had a lot of company as it was, but at least she'd been *around* people. Seeing other people involved in normal relationships wasn't exactly what Heather preferred, but it was better than moping around the house.

Music from her car speakers drew her thoughts, a sad song about loneliness and heartache. Country music was the best to listen to when she was down, as it seemed every other offering spoke exactly what was on her mind. *Yeah, if I were her, I'd keep my man too*, she thought, not able to imagine wanting to leave a good man.

Heather's mind drifted again to the art fair, and Edward holding Kris. *I need someone to protect me like that*. His strong arms had wrapped, lovingly and tenderly, around his wife's tiny body. The young maid longed for that kind of attention.

*How long has it been?* she asked herself. Realistically, she knew she'd never *truly* been loved. There had been a couple of times she'd hoped she'd found the magic, but her dreams had been shattered violently. Lately, she'd come to believe love wasn't in her future.

Shaking her head, Heather let out an exasperated sigh. It did no good to think such thoughts. Her time would be better spent doing any of a million other

things.

Up ahead, she could see blue neon shining in the night. What she needed was a good distraction, and a night of fun and companionship might do the trick. Slowing the car, she turned carefully into the crowded parking lot.

Heather smiled sadly as she found a spot near the back of the paved lot. *And if I don't have fun, at least I can get plastered and forget about my miserable life.*



Constance Hollingsworth lay abed. Though it was growing late, she found sleep to be elusive. She was keeping her mind preoccupied by a manuscript she long before should have finished reading.

The telephone on her night table rang, startling her into a flurry of movement. "Hello?" she answered.

"Ms. Hollingsworth, I'm phoning to let you know that we're having a bake sale at two p.m. on Sunday."

"Tomorrow?" Constance asked breathlessly, recognizing Leyland Cross' voice.

"Yes."

"Thank you." Constance replaced the phone in its cradle.

The pounding of her heart sent Constance for her purse. She took out one of the pill bottles from inside the purse, and opened it. Wincing at the blue pill's bitterness, Constance replaced its bottle and returned to bed, willing herself to dream of brownies and oatmeal cookies.