

# Twisted Tails

Rahne O'Connor smiled in relief when a waiter escorted Trent Beckham to their table. For a few moments, she'd been afraid he wasn't going to show.

"I'm so glad you came. Thank you for meeting me for lunch," she said once he was settled across from her.

He pulled gently on the bottom of his light blue sweater and smoothed back his short dark hair. "I'm happy to. Thanks for asking."

Rahne knew she was staring at him, but she couldn't help it. After a sleepless, self-evaluating night, she had a lot on her mind.

"Rahne, is something wrong?"

"I missed you last night."

His dark eyes never left hers. "I missed you too."

The attorney sighed in irritation. "Then why didn't you come over?"

Trent's head shook slightly. "I thought it might be best not to."

Her brow wrinkled, Rahne said, "I thought we cleared the air with our discussion yesterday."

He nodded affirmatively, his face impassive. "We did."

"Then I don't understand."

The air in the restaurant was silent as the psychiatrist fiddled with his menu. "I thought we should let things settle down so that we avoid falling back into a pattern."

Rahne frowned. "That sounds like a bunch of psychological mumbo jumbo to me."

Trent shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe so."

The stoic woman looked away, her eyes catching on the cars passing beyond the windows. When she spoke, her voice was soft. "I feel like you're punishing me."

A soft hand slid over hers reassuringly. "That's not it at all. From what you said, I figured you could use some space. The last thing I want to do is crowd you."

"I don't feel crowded," she said with passion, turning back to him. "I feel lonely without you beside me at night. I miss falling asleep feeling your heart beating against my back, your soft breath against my ear, and your strong arms around me."

Trent smiled bashfully. "Are you sure you're ready for me to come back?"

Taking a deep breath, Rahne nodded. The touchy-feely stuff wasn't so bad once you got used to it. "Positive."

Though Trent looked happy with her response, he was silent for several moments. She didn't want to leave anything to chance. "So, will you come stay with me tonight?"

Letting a full smile overtake his face, the doctor squeezed her hand. "I'll be there."



"Thanks, Jessie," Lisa Hollingsworth said to the secretary as she opened the door to her mother-in-law's office, which was now occupied by her favorite brother-in-law, Stuart.

"Hey!" Stuart said, glancing up from a manuscript and motioning for Lisa to sit.

Lisa watched his intense blue gaze scan the manuscript. It was a look she'd seen reflected in Harris' eyes more than once, and she knew it was best not to interrupt.

A few moments later, Stuart reached the end of a chapter and set aside the manuscript. Looking up, he smiled at Lisa.

"Thank you for making time for me, Stuart."

Stuart's eyes twinkled as he leaned forward in the chair. "Anything for you, my dear, but what would Harris say about the two of us meeting for lunch?"

Lisa laughed. "Actually, that's not why I'm here. I already had lunch with Harris."

"Damn." Stuart settled back in the chair. "I was hoping you'd come to rescue

me.”

Lisa’s eyes widened. “I’m so sorry, Stuart! I forgot all about you not being able to drive because of your cast. Do you want me to go get you something to eat? Or take you out?”

Stuart shook his head. “Thanks, Lisa, but it’s not necessary.”

“It’s no problem,” Lisa said. “I’d be happy to do it.”

Stuart smiled. “I know you would, but it truly isn’t necessary. I’m a half-day into the job and I’ve already realized one of the greatest perks of being in this office is the never-ending supply of brownnosers willing to serve my every whim.”

Lisa laughed. “That bad, huh?”

Stuart rolled his eyes. “I’m thinking of having a paper-towel dispenser installed and a wastebasket placed beside the door so I can ask them to clean their faces on the way out.”

Lisa laughed again. “Is there room for one more at the end of the line?”

It was Stuart’s turn to laugh. “What’s up?”

“Well,” Lisa leaned forward in her chair, “I told Harris that I was interested in getting a job, and he suggested I come to you to see what was open at Hollingsworth Publishing.”

Stuart’s forehead creased. “Harris agreed to this?”

“Don’t sound so surprised! I think you’re confusing him with Edward.”

“Well, it’s so easily done,” Stuart grinned. “They’re so much alike.”

Lisa raised her eyebrows. “Bite your tongue!”

Stuart looked down at his mid-section and slapped his abdomen. “If I don’t get out of this cast and back to the gym soon, I’m going to be the one sharing traits with Harris.”

Lisa sniffed indignantly. “Some women happen to find love handles attractive.”

“And some women dive out of airplanes with half a canvas bag strapped to their

back, but I don't have to follow their lead," Stuart grinned.

Lisa shook her head. "You're an incorrigible smartass."

"So I've been told." Stuart's smile faded. "Seriously, Lisa, what sort of job are you interested in doing?"

Lisa sighed. "That's a great question. Truth is, I don't know. I don't want something that's going to require all my attention, because I still intend on spending time with the boys and driving them to and from school, but I also need something to do that's outside my responsibilities as wife and mother."

Stuart ran his fingers back through his thick brown hair, smoothing it. "So you're basically interested in a part-time job that's flexible enough for you to work around your present schedule."

Lisa laughed. "It sounds absurd when you say it like that, but yes, that's what I'm looking for."

"Well, I know you sometimes read manuscripts and give Harris a second opinion. How would you like to give a first opinion?"

"What do you mean?" Lisa asked.

"You're aware that we work with a slush pile—a group of unsolicited manuscripts—correct?"

"Yes."

"Well, we simply don't have an editorial staff large enough to sort through the number of manuscripts we receive, so we employ 'first readers,' which are people who scour the slush pile for anything of merit and pass along their recommendations to a supervising editor."

"Grunt work," Lisa smiled.

Stuart shrugged. "It can be a thankless job, but it is an important one."

Lisa pursed her lips and considered the offer. "Okay, Stuart. Honestly, what are my chances of finding a salable manuscript in the slush pile?"

"Little to none," Stuart replied without hesitation. "Most of the manuscripts are sent that way because they're too horrid to find agent representation. But that's not always the case. There are some people who simply aren't familiar with the

industry's preferred method of operation of having an agent pitch your manuscript, and then there are those who dislike or distrust agents and simply hope to bypass paying the agent's fee by selling directly to us."

"Hmm." Lisa gently tapped her chin with her forefinger as she pondered Stuart's words.

"It's certainly nothing you have to do," Stuart said. "I'm sure we can find you another position. I just thought you would be a good person for the job since you're already familiar with the type of manuscripts we publish. Although, I must say that I think it's best if you don't work in Harris' department."

"Why?" Lisa demanded, more harshly than she'd intended.

Stuart raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "I know the two of you go together like Tammy Faye Messner and mascara, but the reason for that is you're equals in your relationship. You're partners in every sense of the word. But if you're having to report to him, even via one of his assistant editors, he becomes your boss."

Lisa nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "I see what you're getting at, Stuart. Either I could get resentful of him for not running with one of my ideas, or he could get angry at one of his assistants for not paying attention to my recommendation."

Stuart nodded. "Unlikely, yes, but not impossible."

Lisa smiled ruefully. "And I was just getting used to the idea of taking the job."

"You still can," Stuart said. "You can work for me or Edward."

Lisa's mouth opened and her eyes widened in shock. "I would *not* under *any* circumstances work for Edward!" she said indignantly.

Stuart laughed at her response. "Then that leaves me."

Lisa squinted her eyes and peered at him.

"Well? Do I pass muster?" he laughed.

Lisa sniffed and daintily tilted back her head, looking down her nose at Stuart. "Depends on what my salary is," she grinned.



A rap on his car window drew William Devlin's attention from the condominium building outside which he was parked. *Shit. A cop*, he thought. He lowered his window and said, "Problem, officer?"

"You could say that," Ford Blankenship said. "I need to see some I.D."

Devlin swallowed hard. "Okay, officer, I'm going to tell you this before I reach for my wallet. I'm a private investigator and I'm licensed to carry a gun. It's unloaded and holstered, but it's under my jacket."

"Fair enough," Ford said, putting a hand on his own weapon. "Keep both hands where I can see 'em, and move slow."

Devlin did as told, pulse ringing in his ears. It wasn't the first time he'd been caught by a cop while on surveillance, but it never seemed to get any easier on the nerves. "Here you go," he said, handing the wallet to the uniformed officer.

Officer Blankenship carefully examined the credentials while simultaneously managing to track Devlin's movements. The P.I. was impressed. It wasn't every day that he encountered a cop who was capable of simultaneously performing two tasks. *Big fella might even be able to walk and chew gum at the same time*, Devlin thought and smiled.

"Step out of the car, please."

Devlin's smile faded. He sighed and did as requested. Damned if it wasn't turning out to be one hell of a day. He was beginning to wish he hadn't got out of bed that morning.

"I don't suppose you care to tell me while you're parked outside this building?" the officer asked.

"Working a case," Devlin said tersely.

Ford Blankenship smirked. "And does that case involve following people through the streets of beautiful downtown Gossamer Falls?"

Devlin winced. "Damn. I can't believe he spotted me."

Ford's gaze hardened. "Well, someone did. And you know what you've done? You've fucked up a police operation. Now it's going to be harder to place a tail on him 'cause you've got him aware that there was one."

Devlin closed his eyes. *Great. Just great.*

"So our only hope is to let him know we have his best interests at heart," Ford smiled. "And to let him know we're going to be around to make sure you or some other idiot doesn't bother him."

Devlin wasn't sure where the young cop was going with his rambling. "So, am I free to go?"

"Not until we make this look good," Ford said. "Where exactly is your gun?"

"In a holster under my left breast pocket."

"You have any other weapons on you?"

"No."

"Then assume the position. Turn toward your vehicle, place your hands atop your head, and spread your legs."

"I hope that ain't how you ask for a date," Devlin chuckled as he turned around.

"Ha, ha." Ford's search was quick and a little rougher than it had to be.

"Damn," Devlin said. "Go easy."

"You brought this on yourself," Ford said. "Now deal with it."

Devlin grunted but knew better than to respond. He had the distinct impression it was taking every ounce of self-restraint the young guy had not to use more force.

"All right," Ford said when he was finished. "Drop your hands and turn around."

Devlin did as told.

"I'm only going to say this once, and I'm going to say it slowly so you'll be able to understand it," Ford said lowly. "Drop this case. I don't care how much you're being paid, it ain't worth what's going to happen to you if you come within a hundred yards of this asshole again. Copy?"

"Clear as crystal," Devlin said.

"Then get out of here," Ford said, stepping back and allowing Devlin to enter the car.

A moment later, Devlin, heart still pounding in his throat, pulled away from the curb. In the rearview mirror, he saw Ford Blankenship's angry reflection.



Dominique Carpenter sank into one of the hotel room's overstuffed armchairs. Eastern Pennsylvania wasn't where she'd planned on spending the night, but her mother's curious travel habits had made it necessary. She looked over at Constance, sitting on the opposite side of the room in a chair matching Dominique's and reading another manuscript. Shaking her head in silent wonder, Dominique reached for the television's remote control and pressed the power button.

Constance's head shot up as if on a spring. "What are you doing?" she snapped.

Dominique raised her eyebrows. "Watching TV."

Constance peered at the screen. "What is this? *Who Wants to Prove He's a Moron?* Really, Dominique." She shook her head and snorted disapprovingly.

Dominique turned off the television and slammed the remote onto the nightstand, her frustration with the day's events and her lack of control reaching its peak. "You don't want me to listen to the radio, you don't want me to watch TV, so why don't you just tell me exactly what you want me to do?" Dominique shouted.

Her mother's cool eyes regarded Dominique as she silently wished she could take back the words, but Constance's voice was placid when she spoke. "Why don't you read?"

Dominique stared at her for a moment, then sighed and extended her hands. "Give me something." Though it wasn't what she'd prefer to do, she thought she'd at least follow Constance's wishes while they were traveling together. It would probably lessen the tension between them. *But when I get home, Mama, I'm propping up my feet and watching Regis.*

Dominique took the proffered manuscript and began reading. Despite her reluctance to do so, Dominique found herself enjoying the tale until she made a shocking discovery. "Good grief!" She clucked her tongue.

"What is it?" Constance asked.

"Somehow 'atrocious' wound up being spelled with two 't's.'"

Constance squinted and gazed into the distance. "Kelvin Liefeld?" she asked, her eyes focusing on Dominique's.

Dominique glanced from her mother to the manuscript and back again. "Yeah, that's the author," she said, impressed.

Constance returned her attention to the manuscript in her lap. "Just pray he doesn't attempt to spell 'familial' this time."

Dominique laughed. "You remember authors by words they misspell?"

"And their punctuation skills and their use of grammar and their writing technique and how many copies they sell," Constance said without raising either her tone or her head.

Dominique stared at the top of her mother's bent head, trying to determine whether or not she actually knew all those things. Shaking her head in wonder, she returned to reading the manuscript. A few pages later, she snorted. "He can't differentiate between 'sequins' and 'sequence,' either."

Constance raised her eyebrows. "That's a new one." She pursed her lips and looked questioningly at Dominique. "You've edited before?"

Dominique shrugged as she kept her attention focused on the manuscript. "I was editor of my college's newspaper. The first black editor in the school's history, which didn't sit too well with some of the writing staff, who were all white. They used to load their articles with errors, hoping I wouldn't catch them and would lose my position. Didn't happen, though they tried." She chuckled at the recollection.

Constance stared at Dominique.

"What?" Dominique asked, looking up and catching her mother's eye. "Oh, no!" Dominique's eyes widened and she shook her head defiantly. "Don't even start!"

"Start what?"

"Suggesting I come to work for you at Hollingsworth Publishing."

A slight smile played on Constance's lips. "It was the farthest thing from my mind."



"Hey darlin', why don't ya take that off?" Clifton O'Connor tugged on Abigayle's black satin nightshirt.

She slapped his hand away. "I would if I thought you could do anything about it." She put a finger on his forehead and pushed the drunk Scotsman back to his side of the bed.

"I could do ya so good," he wavered for a moment, obviously trying to think, "yer ol' ma would feel it across the ocean."

The reporter wrinkled her nose. "Don't ever mention my mother and sex in the same sentence, please. It's disgusting."

Clifton had been useless all night. He's stayed late working at Hollingsworth Manor, then stopped by The Blue Streak for more than a few. When he was this plastered, he was a blithering idiot. He was lucky he'd made it home at all.

He hiccupped, sinking into his pillow. "If I could do one thing, I'd go back to the old country to see my dear mum's grave. I didn't get ta be with 'er when she went."

*Oh, God.* It was time to change the subject or she'd have to do something drastic. "What the hell were you doing at the Hollingsworths' all day?"

He perked up, his dim brown eyes focusing on his bedmate. "Those people," he said, shaking his head. "I'm still cleanin' up from the mess they made the other day. We'll be pickin' glass from our boots for weeks yet."

"I don't know how you can even be around those assholes. I'd puke."

"Ah, honey, they're not so bad. They pay the rent, anyway. And that Dominique has an ass that won't quit."

Abigayle narrowed her almond-shaped eyes at him and considered slapping him, but held back. "I still think that old bitch and her new daughter put rats in my parents' restaurant."

Slicing a shaking hand through the air, Clifton brushed her off. "Don't be ridiculous, Abigayle. Why would they give a damn about yer parents' place? Dominique's more of the kind to just come kick yer ass if she don't like ya."

"How do you know?"

"Me and that African beauty," he pulled his hand back up from the bed with two fingers crossed and waved it in his lover's face, "we're like this."

The young Asian woman shook her head. She'd better get something interesting out of him just for having to listen to him babble. If he was that close with her, somebody was gonna pay. "Yeah, right," she said, challenging him.

Clifton raised himself from the headboard and faced her. "I'll have ya know I talked ta her for a good bit at the house tonight."

"She's at the manor now?"

"Sure is. She's probably sleepin' in one o' those big fluffy beds they've got out there. All curled up in a nightie...."

Abigayle had the urge to belt him again. "When do you think you'll talk to her again?"

"Ah, not for a while."

She frowned. "Why not?"

Clifton's eyes shut until she pushed him, popping them open blearily again. "Dominique and her mum left."

A big smile crossed her lips. "Where have they gone?"

"I heard 'em talkin' 'bout going home."

He looked like he was on the verge of passing out, but he hadn't yet told her enough. She shook him roughly. "Where's home, Clifton?"

"Edinburgh," he slurred.

"No, you idiot! Where are Constance and Dominique going?" Abigayle realized she was yelling, but it didn't matter.

"Oh," he laughed. "Dominique has a house in Athens, Georgia. Then they're goin' to some backwoods place called Roseboro. I bet there ain't much there."

"Why do they want to go there?" she asked, hoping he knew.

"Dominique came into the world there. It's where her papa is buried."

"Her father?"

"Aye. Haywood Johnson, I think his name was. The ol' lady's papa killed him when Dominique was born," Clifton said, closing his eyes.

Abigayle knew there was nothing more she could get from him now, but she didn't care. She had all the information she needed.