

True Colors

Slamming the door behind her, Rahne threw her keys onto the curio cabinet as she charged through the living room. Her father had not moved one piece of furniture since she'd grown up in the house, so she knew she didn't need the lights to navigate to his bedroom. Knowing him, Clifton would still be asleep, or passed out from the raucous night before. He hadn't been up at six a.m. since she'd been born.

Alerted by the sound of the shower, Rahne stopped at the open bathroom door. Behind fogged glass, Abigayle Nguyen stood under a stream of steaming water, humming some unintelligible song. The district attorney narrowed her eyes and stared at the intruder for a moment. Her father would be much better off if he'd never met the conniving little bitch.

Clifton had never had a shortage of women in his day, and most had been of a lower class than Abigayle, but there was something intangible about the determined reporter that Rahne couldn't stand. Perhaps it was the fact that a person could never be certain whether the young woman was lying. The thought of her father having a relationship with the woman repulsed the attorney.

With more anger in her heart than she'd brought with her, Rahne continued toward the back of the house. She flipped on the light upon entering the room, not at all concerned about hurting her father's eyes.

Clifton was sprawled across the queen-sized bed, a red satin sheet covering his middle, nothing covering the rest. His sweat-soaked hair was mashed to his head, his breaths deep and even. Rahne kicked the mattress.

"Papa, wake up," she said forcefully.

His mouth opened and closed a few times and he squeezed his eyes tighter, but the handyman did not stir.

The angry woman leaned over him and grasped his shoulder. "Wake up!" she yelled jostling him.

Disoriented brown eyes popped open and Clifton instinctively scooted away from his daughter.

Rahne stepped back, standing defiantly with her hands on her hips. "What the hell were you doing?"

The older man blinked several times, trying to focus. "I'm a wonderin' why the hell yer in my bedroom."

"I mean last night." Her voice dripped with malice.

Clifton rubbed his bearded face and leaned against the brass headboard. "Last night I met some friends at The Blue Streak. What's yer point?"

Shaking her head, Rahne said, "My point is that I got a call from one of Gossamer Falls' finest informing me that my father was careening around the streets drunk and had to be escorted home."

"I don't know what ye're talkin' about."

"Don't fuck with me, Papa. You could have really made a big mess last night. Not to mention you could have killed someone." Knowing his history and admiration for alcohol, Rahne had always worried he'd someday injure himself or an innocent driver.

The older man threaded his fingers through his white hair, brushing it away from his scalp. "I was just fine to drive home last night. I can hold my own." His eyes cut away from her.

"Don't give me that. Do you realize that your actions can now have a tremendous impact on my life?"

"Ye're yer own woman, Rahne. You've worked yer whole life to be so. I ain't gonna ruin it for ya now."

She threw her hands out to her sides in frustration. "You're wrong. If my father was arrested for drunk driving, I would be put under a looking glass for the rest of my career as D.A." She pointed at him. "For one, I'd have to let my people prosecute you. And then I'd be branded just from the fact that you were a criminal. I don't want to go through that."

"And ya think I do?" he asked, raising his voice for the first time. "I got home safe. The cop was doing his job. Enough said!"

"What the hell is going on?" Abigayle asked from behind them.

They both looked to the door to see her standing there, her long raven hair soaked, her naked body wrapped loosely in a terry cloth towel.

"None of your damned business," Rahne said, then turned back to her father.

"Excuse me?" The reporter cocked her head.

Clifton blew out a heavy breath. "My girl here's just ringing me out about a little incident last night."

"What incident?" Abigayle asked.

"Oh, a damned cop stopped me last night, but I was fine ta make it home. I don't know what the big deal is."

Rahne felt as if her head was about to explode. "The big deal is you were drunk and in no condition to drive."

Abigayle moved between them and sat on the bed. "Let me assure you, counselor, your father was in complete control of his faculties last night." She suggestively waggled her eyebrows.

Swallowing hard, the attorney resisted the urge to either kill the reporter or puke on her. "I don't need any assurances from you." Rahne looked to her father. "Papa, try to think with the head between your shoulders from now on. The future you ruin might be more than your own."

Before she could hear another insufferable word from either of them, Rahne left the house.



"Bye, Mom! Bye, Nathan!" Mark Hollingsworth said as he climbed out of the minivan. The morning air was cold, and Mark's exhalations formed vaporous wisps that trailed him as he rushed toward the front doors of Gossamer Falls Junior High School.

Hoots and scattered applause greeted him as he entered the school. Taken aback, Mark stopped to survey the scene. Two of his friends, Michael Hawthorne and Jeff Davis, rushed to meet him.

"What's up?" Mark asked, perplexed.

Michael, the tallest of the three said, "Dude, you're like a freaking hero."

"Yeah," Jeff agreed, nodding.

Mark wrinkled his nose. "Why?"

"For beating up Jerome Taylor!" Michael said, playfully punching Mark in the shoulder.

Mark snorted. "Who told you that?"

"It's all over the whole school," Jeff said. His full-moon face flushed with excitement, exaggerating his freckles.

Mark rolled his eyes as he began walking toward his locker.

"What did you do to him?" Michael asked.

"I heard you socked him in the nuts," Jeff said, pantomiming a low blow.

"Welcome back, Mark," a deep voice said.

The boys stopped walking and looked up at the voice's source. "Hi, Mr. Douglas," they greeted the school's principal.

"Gentlemen," the man nodded as the boys resumed walking.

"Dude," Michael said once they'd turned a corner and were out of the principal's sight, "was it cool to be kicked out of school?"

Mark shrugged. It wasn't as if he could tell them the truth. At least not without being thought a freak.

The fact was that he'd always liked school. What his classmates saw as drudgery, he perceived as an opportunity to learn new things. Memorizing facts and formulas required little effort on his part, perhaps making it easier for him than for some of his peers. "It was okay," Mark said.

"Well, well, well."

The three friends stopped in their tracks as Adam Cunningham appeared in front of them. A blue-eyed blond like Michael, Adam was a good eight inches taller than the other boy. More notably, he was a member of the crowd that ran with Jerome Taylor.

"Look who's back." Adam made a fist and menacingly pounded it into the palm of his other hand as he glared at Mark.

"You don't scare anyone, Adam," Jeff said.

Adam whirled toward Jeff. "Who asked you, lard ass?" He shoved Jeff.

"Stop it, Adam!" Mark said, grabbing Jeff's arm to offer a steadying hand. "Leave him alone."

"Or what?" Adam sneered, leaning intimidatingly over Mark.

"Or else he'll kick your ass like he did Jerome's," Michael said.

Adam roared with laughter. "Is that what he told you?" He leaned forward and placed his face inches from Mark's. Holding Mark's gaze, he said, "You're going to get what's coming to you, Hollingsworth. We'll see to that."

"Is there a problem here?" Principal Douglas asked as he approached.

Adam straightened, but not before shooting a warning glance to Mark. "Not with me," he said.

Mark turned to face the principal. "None here."

Principal Douglas nodded knowingly. "Let's keep it that way, shall we?"



"Did you remember to take your pills?" Dominique Carpenter asked her mother as they left the farmhouse.

Constance Hollingsworth sighed heavily. "Yes, Dominique. I'm not a child."

"I was just concerned," Dominique said. "After yesterday—"

"What happened yesterday was an aberration caused by stress. Let's not discuss it again."

"Okay," Dominique said, willing to drop the subject if only to put less stress on her mother's heart. "So what do you think about Morgan?" she asked as they pulled out of the driveway and onto the road.

Constance shook her head. "I don't know what to think."

"You like her?"

"Well, of course I like her," Constance said. "It's just a bit of a shock getting used to her story."

Dominique smiled wryly. Her mother wouldn't win any awards for open-mindedness, but there was the possibility she would yet adjust to living in a new millennium. "Which way?" she asked as they approached an intersection.

Constance indicated which direction to turn by a flourish of her hand.

They had little trouble finding the address taken from Morgan's telephone directory, and it didn't take long for them to find Demetria Johnson's ramshackle home. "You ready?" Dominique asked as they sat in the parked car, staring at the weather-beaten house.

"I suppose," Constance said, reluctantly opening the car door.

They hesitantly approached the house, finding its deteriorated condition to be forbidding. Dominique hoped her great-aunt would be more welcoming than her home appeared to be. After carefully mounting the steps and making certain her mother had no trouble navigating them, Dominique knocked on the wooden frame of the tattered screen door.

"I'm comin'. Hol' your horses," came a voice from inside.

Dominique stared at the elderly woman making her way toward the door. She leaned heavily on her cane and her white hair stood out in stark contrast to her dark skin. Thick-lensed eyeglasses lent the woman a wide-eyed appearance.

As Demetria reached the door, realization, rapidly followed by hatred, spread across her face. "I got no use for you, Constance Walker. Get off my property, now!"

"Please," Dominique said. "Please we need to speak to you." Dominique felt herself being scrutinized by Demetria, but couldn't read the older woman's expression.

"I got nothin' to say to her," Demetria indicated.

"Then tell me," Dominique pleaded, suddenly filled with desperation. Demetria might not be their last hope of finding her father's grave, but she was probably the best.

"Get out of here," Demetria said.

"Come on, Dominique. Let's go," Constance said, turning to leave.

Dominique turned to her mother. "No! She knows something! I can tell it!" Turning back to Demetria, she said, "We're family. You have to tell me where my father's buried. Please?"

Once again, Dominique felt her measure being taken by Demetria. At last, the older woman spoke. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I grew up without my family. And for years I pretended it didn't matter to me, but it did. I managed to find my mother, but I learned my father was dead. It hurts not knowing where he is."

"You have your mother to thank for that!" Demetria snapped. "She's responsible for what happened!"

Dominique turned to look at Constance, who was standing on the steps, her green eyes brimming with unspoken pain.

"Please tell me where he's buried," Dominique asked. "As his daughter, as your great-niece, I'm begging you."

Demetria regarded her coldly. "You're part of that woman," her dark gaze fell upon Constance, "and I'd sooner invite the devil himself into my house than either of you." She looked back to Dominique. "But if you're so determined to find your daddy, I'll tell you where to look, but I want you to do one thing."

"Anything," Dominique said.

Demetria's dark eyes glittered. "When you're looking down at your daddy's tombstone, I want you to remember exactly who it was that took him away from you." She glared at Constance.



"See you later, Stuart," Harris Hollingsworth said to his brother as he continued toward his office on the thirtieth floor of Hollingsworth Tower. He opened the doorway to his outer office and greeted his secretary, Joyce Stevens.

"Well, good morning, Harris!" The pretty blonde smiled up at him from behind her desk.

Harris smiled as he walked toward his office. "Anything important I need to know, Joyce?"

"Not relating to work," Joyce said, "but I do want to tell you how grateful I am that Mark asked Tiffany to the Fall Dance. She's been excited ever since I picked her up from your house yesterday."

"Well, I'm glad she's excited," Harris smiled. "Mark's walking on clouds, too."

"Isn't being young and in love just great?" Joyce flashed a toothy smile.

Harris forced his smile to remain in place. It was the first time he'd really noticed what Lisa had mentioned about Joyce seeming overly excited about Mark and Tiffany's relationship. His wife had been right: there *was* something disconcerting about Joyce's manner. "I'm sure they'll fall in love a dozen times before they reach adulthood," Harris said.

"Maybe," Joyce said as Harris reached for the door to his office. "Oh, before I forget, what is Mark going to be wearing to the dance? I don't want Tiffany's outfit to clash."

"Um, I'm not sure," Harris said.

Joyce laughed. "Spoken like a true male! No offense, boss," she hastily added.

"None taken."

"What about travel arrangements? Will they be riding to the dance together?"

Harris stared at Joyce. What was she thinking? That they were going to use a company limo to take the kids to a junior high school dance? "I think it'd be okay for them to go separately, but why don't you talk to Lisa about it? She's usually the family's activity director," he admitted with a nervous laugh.

"I'll do that. Thanks."

Harris nodded and entered his office. Joyce's behavior was bizarre. Maybe it would be for the best if Mark wasn't allowed to tutor Tiffany after he changed schools, though he was sure his son wouldn't agree. Harris sighed as he walked to his desk and began trying to concentrate on his job.



John Nguyen drummed his fingers on the pressed-wood desk as he stared at the marked ledger before him. His eyes would not leave the various patches of red ink that now appeared in more places than he preferred. A month ago his

business had been a thriving concern. Now it was near bankruptcy.

"Is it that bad?" a soft voice asked in Vietnamese.

John looked up to his wife with a smile as she entered the room. She wore her long black hair in a tightly coiled bun, but he knew it was beautiful when flying free in the sunlight. He hated the effect the financial situation was having on her. "It could be worse."

"Really, husband, how are we?" Rose looked over his shoulder to the account book.

The older man shut it. "We couldn't make the van payment this month."

She cringed. "This isn't good. What are we going to do?"

"I have no idea, Rose. I paid everything we had to have, beginning with the rent. The delivery van is where the money cut off. If the bank takes it, we will just not make deliveries."

Trusting brown eyes peered into his soul. "You will come up with something to fix this. People will come back here."

John sighed. Sometimes he hated the devotion he saw in her. "We'll do everything we can."



"There it is," Dominique whispered.

Constance followed her daughter's line of sight and outstretched hand and saw Haywood's tombstone. She walked toward the grave as the world around her seemed to blur and fade into nothingness.

"It's well-tended," Dominique said quietly.

Constance took note of the clean headstone and the brightly colored artificial flowers, and nodded agreement. Her thoughts turned to the recent events in Hollingsworth Manor where her late husband's spirit had resided. She wondered if Haywood's spirit remained near his body and whether he could hear her.

A lump rose in Constance's throat as she sank to her knees, feeling the cool remnants of the morning dew seep through the material of her slacks. She ran her fingertips along the rough edges of the tombstone, finding it a cold

substitute for the young man she remembered. "There are so many things I'd like to say to you. So many." She choked as tears filled her eyes.

Dominique placed a reassuring hand on her mother's shoulder. Constance raised one hand and covered her daughter's with it. "Our daughter's here with me, Haywood. I hope you can see her. She's beautiful." Constance gripped the headstone with her free hand as her tears began flowing.

"Oh, Haywood," she sobbed. "I never meant for this to happen to you. I'm so sorry. So sorry. If only I hadn't gone into labor then. If only I hadn't called your name. If my father—" she choked. "If my father hadn't killed you, things would've been so different. We could've followed our plan, we could've been a family."

Constance looked to the sky. "I don't know if you've forgiven me. I know I haven't forgiven myself. I can never take back what happened to you, but I want you to know that I loved you. I loved you in a way I've never loved anyone before or since, and in a way I'll never love again."

She lowered her chin to her chest, adrift in pain as her body was racked by sobs, no longer aware of her daughter's presence or gentle embrace.



"See anything you like?" William Devlin asked.

Tiffany Stevens shrugged. It had been so nice of Billy to offer to buy her dress for the dance, but there just wasn't anything in the store that appealed to her.

"What about this, Tiff?" her mom asked, holding up a screaming red dress.

"I don't think so," Tiffany said, trying not to scowl at her mother's taste. The dress was short and strapless and looked like something a hooker-in-training would wear.

"Well, we can go to another store," Devlin said. "There's gotta be something in this mall that you like."

"Thanks, Billy," Tiffany smiled awkwardly. It was still hard getting used to thinking of him as a nice guy and not just the latest jerk in her mother's seemingly endless line of boyfriends.

"I still don't see what's wrong with this," Joyce said, reluctantly hanging up the red dress.

"I think it'd look great on you," Devlin whispered.

"Really?" Joyce's face beamed. "Maybe I can find one like it in my size. Is that okay?" she batted her eyes at Devlin.

Tiffany turned around and frowned. She hated when her mother acted like that. She'd talk Billy into letting her get the dress, wear it once, then tell him something was wrong with it and take it back to the store for a refund. She'd keep the money, of course. Tiffany wished Billy could see through her mother's actions.

"Sure," Devlin said.

"Ooh, thanks," Joyce said, hurrying away. "I'll see what they have over in my section."

Tiffany watched Billy to see what he'd do. He stared after her mother, then turned to her. "You wanna go look somewhere else?"

Tiffany nodded. "Please."

"Why don't ya go tell your mom we'll be next door, then?"

"Okay," Tiffany smiled. She hurried after her mother.

Joyce's gray eyes were stormy when Tiffany caught up to her. "Just my luck that there's nothing like that dress in my size. Designers act like once you've had a kid and gained a little weight you can't wear anything sexy."

"Billy's taking me next door to look for a dress," Tiffany said.

"I may as well go with you," Joyce fumed. "It's obvious I'm not going to find anything here." She stomped off in a pout.

Tiffany sighed. It was certainly going to be a fun evening. Her mother could hang onto a bad mood longer than anyone else she knew.

As Tiffany began walking after her mother, a dress caught her eye. It was light blue, not cut too low, featured thin straps, and was long enough that she'd be able to bend over in it without worrying whether her butt was showing. Too bad it wasn't her size....

Tiffany's gaze lingered longingly on the dress, then her breath caught in her

throat. Someone had obviously hung the dress on the wrong hanger. She glanced at the dress' size tag. It *was* her size! Someone had just hung it in the wrong section of the store!

As Billy and her mother approached, Tiffany lifted the dress by its hanger and held it out to examine it. The dangling price tag ended any thoughts she might've had of getting the dress. She couldn't expect Billy to pay that much for a stupid dress that she'd probably only wear one time.

"You like that one?" Devlin asked.

Tiffany hurriedly hung up the dress. "It's too expensive." She gave the dress one last look before turning away.

"Why not try it on?" Devlin asked.

Tiffany frowned. There wasn't much sense in trying on something she knew she wasn't going to be able to get. On the other hand, when would she ever again have a chance to wear such a fancy dress? "Okay," she said, taking the dress from the rack and heading for the changing room.

She felt awkward in the dress. The fabric was light and moved with the lines of her body, making her think it would look good when she was dancing, but she wasn't sure. She stepped out of the changing room to let her mom and Billy have a look.

Joyce's mouth fell open. "Oh my gosh!"

Tiffany felt herself blush. "Do you like it?"

"Honey, it looks wonderful on you," Joyce gushed.

Tiffany turned around and looked at the mirror outside the dressing room. Maybe she didn't look so bad in it after all. She wondered what Mark would think about it, then hastily pushed the idea from her mind. It was just too expensive.

Joyce moved forward and grabbed Tiffany's long blonde hair. "What if we pull your hair up like this? And we could leave a few tendrils dangling on the sides. Wouldn't that be cute?"

Tiffany turned her head a little. She had to admit it wouldn't look bad.

"Oh, honey, that dress really brings out your eyes," Joyce said. "What do you

think, Billy?"

Tiffany turned to face Billy, wondering if he would approve and marveling that it actually mattered to her.

"I think you've just got yourself a dress."

Tiffany's mouth fell open. "But, Billy, it's too expensive! You haven't seen the price tag!"

Devlin dismissively waved his hand. "Doesn't matter. That's why God invented credit cards."

Tiffany surprised herself by grabbing Billy in a quick hug. "Thank you," she said. For once, the smell of cigarettes that usually permeated his clothing didn't make her want to gag. He smiled back at her as she pulled away and returned to the dressing room to change.



"Son of a bitch!"

Abigayle threw the remote control at the television. There was absolutely nothing on that would hold her interest for more than five seconds. She didn't consider herself a T.V. snob, but she'd recently found herself unable to watch any of the new shows.

I shouldn't have to be relying on the boob tube for my entertainment, anyway, she thought. Earlier in the evening Clifton had made her go home, but not without much protesting on her part. He said Rahne would kill him if he partied the night before the big trial.

What a bitch. Abigayle had no idea how such an uptight slag could be Clifton's daughter. She'd never met a man more ready for fun and frolic, which is what he should have been doing with her tonight. But the district attorney was a completely different story.

Looking at the clock, Abigayle shook her head. Almost eight o'clock and she had nothing to do. A nightclub was looking pretty tempting for the night's entertainment. She didn't need Clifton to have a good time.

The ringing phone drew her attention. "Maybe he's come to his senses." She picked up the handset and answered.

"It's all done," an aged voice said.

Abigayle smiled. She'd been waiting for Demetria to call. Perhaps her night would go better than she'd thought. "Did they take the bait?"

"Course. I tol' ya I'd do my part. That witch will get her due."

That's the kind of thinking I like. The reporter shifted the phone anxiously. "What happened?"

"That Constance came and wanted somethin' from me like I'd give her the time o' day. She brought Haywood's girl, though, so I could stand talkin' to her. Sent 'em on to the cemetery, just like we talked." The old woman cleared her throat.

"Good job. Sounds like everything went off as planned." Abigayle pumped her fist in the air.

"Like a charm. My friend tol' me they spent a right bit o' time at the grave. Then they went back to the ol' Walker place."

Abigayle thanked the old woman, hung up the phone, and jumped up from her chair. Everything had gone perfectly.

"I don't care if you ever know what I've done, you old bag," she said, picturing Constance Hollingsworth's face. "It was worth every penny just to know I screwed you over. I win."



Demetria hung up the phone and leaned back in the worn recliner, causing the cracked vinyl to stretch and creak. She picked up the phone card from the nightstand and stared at the picture of the thick football player on its face. Whoever had thought up the idea of putting money on a little piece of plastic was a genius. And she had just barely used it.

She started to set down the card, but the image of Dominique Carpenter came to her mind. The woman had kind eyes. She hadn't had a say in who her mother was. The world did terrible things to children at times.

Not that she had any regret over what she'd done to that whore who was with her. Constance Walker wasn't worth spitting on. The girl, though, once an innocent babe, didn't have to pay for what her momma had done.

Demetria picked the phone back up and slowly began punching numbers. Her

old, arthritic fingers deliberately punched the digits on the card, then another phone number. Hearing the high-pitched ring, she smiled expectantly as she waited to hear a familiar voice.

“Hello,” a rough male voice answered.

Her smile widened. “Hi, Haywood. I was just thinking about you.”