

And The Winner Is...

"Come on, Mark," Nathan Hollingsworth pleaded.

"How many times do I have to say no?" Mark Hollingsworth asked his little brother.

"Please?"

"Go watch cartoons."

"I don't want to watch cartoons anymore."

"Then find something else to do."

"I'll have something else to do if you'll play with me," Nathan said.

Mark sighed irritably. "Why don't you go find Molly or Heather? They're the ones who are supposed to be watching you, not me. See if one of them will play with you."

"But I want you to play with me," Nathan whined.

"And I've told you that I don't want to play with you."

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Nathan put his hands on his hips and stared defiantly. "I would so!"

Mark shook his head. No way was Nathan ready to hear the thoughts that filled his mind. A few weeks ago, he would've probably played with Nathan, but everything had changed after Tiffany was raped. Playing with toys and games was no longer interesting. Such pastimes seemed so trivial considering what had happened to Tiffany. "You wouldn't understand," Mark repeated.

"I would so! I'm not a baby!"

Anger rose swiftly in Mark. "You are so!" he sneered. "You still wear underwear with pictures of cartoon characters on them! When the chandelier fell in the dining room, you peed your pants just like a baby! You probably pissed all over the freaking Teletubbies!"

Nathan's eyes rounded. "You said a bad word!"

Mark leaned close to Nathan and widened his own eyes in response. "Ooh, big deal!"

Nathan's lips trembled. "I'm telling Mom."

"You can't! She went to New York City with Dad and everyone else. If you weren't such a baby, maybe you would've remembered," Mark taunted.

Nathan's lower lip protruded and trembled. "I don't wanna play with you anymore." He turned and fled the room.

"*Good!*" Mark called after Nathan's retreating form. A curious mixture of triumph and regret swirled within him. It had felt good to be cruel to Nathan, though Mark knew his brother had done nothing to deserve his anger.

Mark sighed. Why did life have to be so complicated? Things hadn't been right since the night of the Fall Dance. Though Tiffany had suffered physically as well as emotionally after being raped, Mark felt that he'd been an emotional victim as well. Suddenly faced with a surfeit of unfamiliar feelings and circumstances, Mark had no idea as to how he was supposed to react. Was this what it meant to be an adult? He certainly no longer felt like a child.

Guilt gnawed Mark's conscience. It was a sensation with which he was familiar. Despite what everyone told him, he knew what had happened to Tiffany was his fault. If he hadn't tried to stand up to Jerome Taylor and his friends, Tiffany would still be well and living in Gossamer Falls. Though there was nothing he could do to make right what had happened to Tiffany, it wasn't too late to try to make amends with Nathan. Though Mark didn't relish the idea of playing whatever nonsensical game Nathan had in mind, he found the idea far preferable to adding to his burden of guilt.

"Nathan, wait up!" Mark cried as he ran after his brother.



Though she was looking through the classical music section, the Metallica CDs directly on the other side of the display case were calling Rahne O'Connor's name, the thought of pounding Heavy Metal appealing to her state much more than the calm melodies of Bach. Her foul mood had brought her to the Galleria Mall, simply because she had nowhere better to be. Sam Goody's was a store she didn't frequent often, but rifling through the music gave her mind

somewhere else to wander besides through the mess her relationship with Trent was quickly becoming.

When the doctor had slammed out of her apartment the day before, Rahne had sat on her bed crying over a million things, the fight included. Her life seemed to be in somewhat of a downward spiral personally, as well as professionally. All through the day and night, she prayed for the answers to come to her, a silent mantra ricocheting through her brain.

Rahne wondered if the other people in the store, strolling among the isles of music and bright red sales signs, had the same type of struggle she did. She supposed so, but the strain didn't show on their faces the way she knew it did on hers. The gist of her life had been one fight after another, trying to overcome a past she couldn't run from, or work away.

Shaking her head, the woman wondered why she even tried. She knew she should get over her father's transgressions, yet something deep inside her refused to budge. Fate, she supposed, was against her.

"I always imagined you to be into the punk scene."

"And I figured you to be a country and western fan," she said, turning to watch Ford Blankenship saunter up beside her. He was dressed in his GFPD blues, his gun and billy-club swaying with his hips. Rahne wasn't a woman who had a thing for men in uniform, but Ford definitely did his getup justice.

He shrugged, adjusting his gun belt, muscles flexing in his thick arms. "Nah, I'm not into that cowboy crap. Give me the Boss and I'm straight."

"How very New York of you," she said, bumping him in the shoulder. "Is the mall a big part of your beat or what?"

Ford laughed. "You'd be surprised at the crime going on at this place on a daily basis. But no, I don't usually get to come in. There was a big shoplifting brew-ha-ha an officer needed a second for."

"Great. I love throwing the book at petty thieves. It really makes my day," she said, sarcastically.

Taking the CD Rahne was looking at out of her hand, the dark-haired man examined the cover carefully. "You seem to be in great spirits today."

She knew her caramel eyes were misty, but she looked up anyway. "You could say that." Spotting an empty bench outside the store, she motioned to it. "Can you sit down for a minute?"

Gently, he placed a hand on her shoulder, his face a mask of concern. "Sure. It's about time for a donut break anyway."

Rahne smiled as they made their way to the corridor. She felt oddly comforted by Ford's presence, knowing she could talk honestly with him without being judged. They sat down on the hard plastic seat, two full feet between them.

"I had a huge fight with Trent. He tried to get me to talk about something I didn't want to and things got really nasty."

Ford grimaced, shaking his head. "That sucks."

"He walked out last night and I haven't heard from him. It was crazy. Both of us knew exactly which buttons to push, and we did." Rahne looked back on the argument and knew she was as much at fault as her lover was, if not more. The fact that Trent could analyze her had simply sent her over the edge. She didn't need to be told she had issues, a fact she knew all too well.

Moving his arm to the back of the bench, his hand again touching her shoulder, Ford said, "I've been there before. Sometimes the more you know someone, the harder it gets."

"Yeah," Rahne answered, nodding. "Trent knows the bane of my existence is my father. I just didn't want to talk about it last night and he wouldn't accept that."

"I know how hard father's can be to live with sometimes."

Rubbing her eyes in hopes of keeping them from leaking, Rahne hated that his statement was true. "I don't know how you can love someone and hate them at the same time."

Neither of them spoke as a crowd shuffled past. "Do you hate him, or what he did?"

"How do you separate the two?"

With a sigh, Ford's eyebrows drew in as he tried to formulate an answer. "I've been asking myself that for years," he said, a small grin on his lips.

Rahne answered with a smile of her own. "I hear some people magically get over it one day, but I'm not sure I believe it."

Taking her hand in his own, gently rubbing his thumb across the back, the policeman said, "We just have to keep hoping."



Placing the last box in her closet, Abigayle Nguyen frowned at the fact that the bottoms of her clothes touched cardboard. She had a narrow lane to walk, with no space wasted in the small area. What wouldn't fit would have to go to storage with the remainder of her parents' things and the furniture she'd had to remove from the second bedroom. Luckily, she hadn't relied that heavily on the room for her belongings.

Much to her surprise, her parents possessed relatively few belongings. She supposed the tendency stemmed from their lives as political refugees all those years ago. Whatever the reason, she had much more stuff than her folks. The only things they'd had to rent a storage unit for were their big appliances and living room furniture. Abigayle liked their couch better than hers, but moving it into her apartment would seem much too permanent an arrangement.

"Abigayle, the last of the boxes are in the truck. Do you want to come with us to drop them off?" John Nguyen asked, standing at the foot of his daughter's queen-sized bed.

The reporter stepped out of the closet, brushing her long, dark hair out of her face. "No, I don't think so, Father. I'll stay here and keep cleaning."

"Okay, your mother will cook us dinner when we get back."

Nodding, Abigayle watched him go, sighing when the front-door closed behind him. She was working hard to make the best of the situation, imagining that living with her parents wouldn't be so bad. Her imagination, however, wasn't quite good enough to present a realistic picture of her future bliss. Instead, the young woman felt as though the walls were closing in on her, taking away the very air she needed to breathe.

Not only would she be under her father's strict rules again, ones she'd learned to loath as a child and teenager, she would be faced with years of memories she had done a good job of burying. Her parents had done what they thought was right to raise her, followed their ingrained rules to the letter, embedding her with centuries of tradition. When she wasn't home, though, out in the real world, she'd had to learn how to live outside of the box where her parents had placed

her. They'd done nothing wrong, but after years of striving to overcome their teachings, the idea of being thrust back into their traditions was disturbing.

As was the idea of eating her mother's cooking on a daily basis. The older woman could certainly cook, but Abigayle had grown tired of her menu by the time she was ten. Not to mention that Rose Nguyen's disapproving glare had long struck anger in her daughter's soul.

Abigayle cursed the day her roommate had moved out on her. Since she'd been able to afford the place on her own with her newspaper salary, the reporter had decided she liked the extra room. Little had she known it would lead to her parents' reentrance to her home.

Sitting down on her bed, Abigayle began wondering if she could con her landlord into arbitrarily moving her to a one-bedroom apartment.



He'd noticed the well-dressed, dark-haired man the moment he'd walked into The Blue Streak looking extremely out of place. Bruce knew he recognized him, but from where he could not place. The man looked like a professional of some sort, his deep blue sweater denoting that he could not quite drop his image, even after working hours. Or perhaps he was always on duty. The slight sag to his pointed jaw indicated the latter might be true, as he looked as though much trouble was on his mind.

The bartender was used to that. If people started coming in who didn't have problems, the world would probably be coming to an end. As he made his way over to the new customer, Bruce remembered where he'd met him.

"Hello, Dr. Beckham. I never expected to see you in here."

The doctor smiled shyly. "Not my usual type of place, I admit, but it's near the hospital and I remembered you from the trial. I could use an escape."

"We all can from time to time. What would you like to drink?"

Sighing, Trent wrinkled his brow as he thought. Finally, he shook his head and said, "Just give me a Coke."

An atypical request from an unusual customer. Bruce prepared the beverage, keeping his eye on the man. In another strange sensation, the big bartender found himself extremely interested in what had brought the psychiatrist to his bar.

"Here you go," he said, handing Trent the glass.

Running a hand over his short-cropped hair, the doctor sighed. "I'm not one to drown my sorrows in alcohol, nor do I recommend it, but I am beginning to understand why some people do."

Bruce nodded, seeing the truth in the man's sad brown eyes. "So this is about a lady, then?"

Exhaling deeply, Trent closed his eyes briefly. "More woman than I ever thought I'd have."

"You've got it bad, buddy. I feel for ya," Bruce said, meaning every word.

The doctor laughed. "You've got that right. I let this woman into my heart more than anyone I've ever known. I'm beginning to think that was a mistake."

Bruce shook his head negatively. "You have to take those chances or you might as well be dead."

"Is that your personal philosophy?"

"Sure," Bruce answered. Certain circumstances prevented him being too outgoing, but given the chance to love, his heart would not let him miss the opportunity. "Love is too important to let pass you by."

"So you're pursuing Kris Hollingsworth?"

Gasping, Bruce wondered if it was tattooed on his forehead or something. "How—"

Trent sipped his soft drink. "I know people, Mr. Dooley. At the courthouse that day, sparks were flying between you two."

"Oh," the bartender whispered. His first instinct was to want to slap himself for being so obvious, probably undressing the woman with his eyes every time he looked at her. Then again, he couldn't feel very guilty for falling for Kris, her sweet charm had simply forced its way into his heart. "Yeah, well, what can I say. There's nothing going on. Kris is married, if you haven't noticed."

Smiling sadly, Trent said, "Love has a funny way of not recognizing legal documents."

"True, but I do." Noting the thickening traffic in the bar, Bruce picked up a towel and began cleaning glasses. "Just like you know what you have to do, even though it's not easy."

The doctor finished off his drink and pulled out his wallet. "And what is that?"

"Stand by your woman until the good times come again and help her make it through the even worse times in between. And love her all the time like your heart depends on it."

Bruce stuck out his hand, and Trent took it, shaking firmly. An understanding passed between the men, born of mutual heartache and loneliness.



Dominique Carpenter was astounded by the opulence of New York City's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. When she and the Hollingsworths, along with Kyle Curtis, had first entered the Park Avenue lobby, Dominique had almost been unable to breathe. Beside her, Stuart had reacted much the same. Perspiration had beaded on his forehead as he'd paused and stared at the ornate chandelier which hung in the center of the lobby above the large circular Art Deco mosaic in the center of the lobby floor. "That's one fucking huge chandelier," he'd whispered under his breath before quickening his step to catch up with the other family members.

Dominique had been thinking the exact thing. The elegance of Hollingsworth Manor, which only weeks before had seemed to be beyond that to which she could ever become accustomed, was dwarfed by that of this magnificent structure. Dominique had glanced around at the others, noting that everyone, surprisingly including Kyle, seemed blasé about their surroundings.

Dominique's awe hadn't ceased as the time for the National Book Awards Ceremony and Dinner drew near. She wondered if she would ever feel comfortable in such places, but strongly doubted it.

Nervousness knotted her stomach as Stuart took her arm and led her into the room in which the ceremony and dinner were being held. Her brothers and Kyle looked great in their Armani tuxedos, and Lisa and Kris were stunning. Even Constance, despite her lack of makeup, looked fantastic. Dominique had reservations about her own appearance, feeling ill-suited to don the shimmering violet Vera Wang evening gown that her mother had insisted she wear.

Dominique sat at the family's table, next to her mother, while Stuart and Edward schmoozed with their authors. Two authors from Edward's stable were

nominated for the fiction award, but only one had been able to attend. Stuart had one nonfiction nominee, a first-time author who appeared to be petrified and overwhelmed by the experience. *Boy, can I ever relate*, Dominique thought.

Her gaze fell on Kris, who was staring sadly after Edward. Dominique's chest clenched at the sight. That poor girl was putting herself through a lot of pain for a man who certainly didn't deserve her devotion. Dominique sighed. Well, that wasn't exactly true. Kris was only in attendance because Constance had insisted upon it. Dominique wondered if there was any way to get her mother to realize exactly how bad things were between Kris and Edward. Maybe then she wouldn't force the girl into such obviously awkward situations.

Thoughts of her mother's unfairness to Kris led to a momentary flash of bitterness toward Constance for her insistence upon Dominique's attendance. Though Dominique couldn't be entirely certain of her mother's reasoning, she had the impression that Constance had wanted her to attend so she could show the world that she wasn't ashamed of her daughter. Dominique wasn't certain how she felt about being placed in an uncomfortable situation just so her mother could prove a point. Deciding it was better to drink than to think, she concentrated on becoming an expert at emptying her glass of Cabernet Sauvignon.

The awards ceremony began before Dominique was drunk enough to appreciate them. She found the emcee to be boring rather than entertaining and wondered how much of the laughter around her was as forced as her own. Looking at Kris, she had no doubt that the young woman was struggling to maintain her facade. She looked absolutely miserable.

Stuart's author looked almost relieved when his book didn't receive the nonfiction award. Dominique didn't blame him. After your book had sold a half-million copies, who could get excited over a ten thousand dollar cash award and a crystal sculpture?

Dominique observed that while Stuart politely applauded the winner, his eyes darted over to Edward, whose face held a noticeable smirk. *Bastard*, Dominique thought, anger surging through her veins, *I hope you're a two-time loser tonight*.

Unfortunately, when the emcee announced the winner of the National Book Award for fiction, Dominique recognized the author's name, Mahmoud Al-Marayati, as one of Edward's two nominees. Even more unfortunately, the man had been unable to attend the ceremony, so Edward bestowed upon himself the burden of accepting on his author's behalf.

Wonder if ol' Vera designed matching waders for this gown? The bullshit is sure

getting deep in here, Dominique thought as Edward's time behind the microphone tediously wore on. The novel for which Al-Marayati had won, a tragic love story between a male Muslim and female Jew, had been good, but nowhere near deserving the hyperbole being heaped upon it by its editor.

At last, Edward reclaimed his seat, his face bright with jubilation. His triumphant gaze briefly fell upon Stuart, then turned to Kris. Dominique saw the young blonde's entire body fill with tension as her husband leaned forward and kissed her. She was filled with irritation on Kris' behalf.

"I must inform Mahmoud of the good news," Edward said, pulling his cellular phone from a jacket pocket. "I think having celebratory champagne and lobster sent to his home would be an excellent start."

"No!" Dominique blurted.

Edward paused. "What?"

"That's a mistake," Dominique said.

"Nonsense," Edward said as he resumed making the call.

"You can't do that!" Without taking time to think, Dominique reached across the table and snatched the phone out of Edward's hand.

Her brother responded with an icy glare of rage.