

# FINDING FAITH

*A Faith Holliday Novel*

A Novel by E.B. Archer

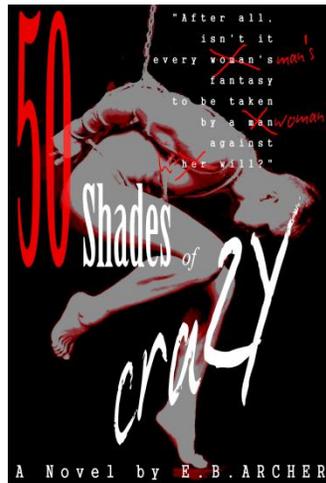
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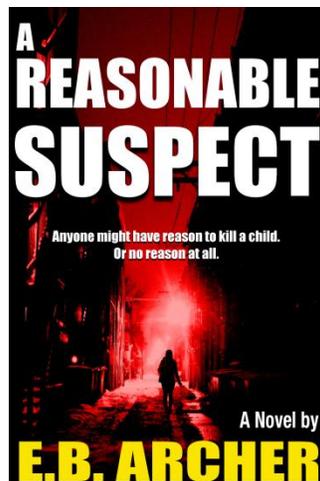
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Also by E B Archer and available exclusively at Amazon.com with Bonus Preview excerpts at the back of this book

## 50 SHADES OF CRAZY



## A REASONABLE SUSPECT





**THE TOUGH GUY** isn't so tough anymore. He lies spread-eagle on his back in the dirt. Beneath his hairline a nasty bruise appears. Blood leeches like rust down his forehead, left temple to right.

*"Faith Holliday?"* he says.

"My dad is a preacher, my mom is a travel planner. To them, I represent the best of both worlds," I say, as if it should be obvious.

He seems confused and for a brief moment, I think I've hit him too hard. Then no; his eyes remain defiant, even hostile. I bristle. With a hoof to the solar plexus, I knock both the wind and the resistance right out of him.

"For your wife *and* your three children," I say. "*And* the scumbag judge who made me chase your sorry ass out here in the first place."

Here is Tuba City, Arizona, where days earlier the tough guy had eluded my grasp by crossing over the border from Needles, California. I'd cornered him in the men's room of a dive juke joint off the I-40. For nearly ten minutes, I'd waited outside for him to do his business. After a while I decided to see for myself. What could be taking him so long? I was exhausted from the long drive interstate. Had I neglected to identify a secondary exit, a window through which he had slipped out the back way?

I made my way in, my attention on the lineup of grungy urinals along a far wall, being careful not to disturb any of the local yokels in the act. Modesty: my first miscalculation. My

second was to enter the men's room empty handed, satchel zipped tight and slung low over my shoulder; not so much as a tampon between me and the prospect of imminent attack. Seconds later the son-of-a-bitch has me on the floor, doubled over from a well-placed shot to the gut. Okay, I think to myself as I watch him walk out the door: round one to you.

Now, having convincingly thumped him—round two to *me*—I rub my belly. The gut-shot he gave me earlier will leave a bruise.

Before the tough guy has the chance to recover, I kneel and, using all my strength, roll his beefy two hundred thirty pound frame on to his belly from his back. I immobilize his arms and legs with plastic fasteners designed expressly for the purpose. I secure both ankles and wrists. To prevent asphyxiation, I clear an airway to his mouth. I remove dust, pebbles and accumulated yard debris. Before standing, I insure he's breathing evenly.

“Not for your sake, sunshine,” I say. “I could care less if you choke to death on your own vomit. This is to guarantee I get paid.” My tone isn't antagonistic but, rather, a simple matter of fact. At a rate of ten percent of total recoveries exceeding fifty thousand dollars, my payday on this particular deadbeat dad will amount to over one hundred grand, *plus* expenses.

I retrieve my satchel from the dirt, my tools of the trade so to speak. They consist of a healthy supply of aforementioned fasteners, a hefty, leather-clad black sap—which in this case has administered much of the earlier damage—a nine-millimeter LadyHawk semi-auto with custom rubberized pink grip—which the tough guy mocks until I lay him flat on his bum—my ID, assorted sundries, a partially consumed package of Pall Malls and a half dozen condoms because a girl never knows, does one?

I ignite a cigarette, inhaling greedily. My soiled linen suit clings to my breasts, crotch and thighs like a see-through spandex bodysuit. On the ground, the tough guy stirs. In his eyes the resistance flickers. I take one menacing step forward. Just as quickly the resistance fades.

I wonder if my ill temper can't be blamed on the heat. The heat is oppressive. After all, one hundred ten in the shade is still one hundred ten no matter what they say about the humidity. To the west the mountains beyond Grand Canyon National Park simmer in the noonday sun. The distance in between is bleached of all color and relief by the relentless glare. Powerful enough to sanitize the landscape but not, it seems, my immediate surroundings.

These consist of a battered thirty-two by eight foot aluminum clad house trailer with a tattered and faded blue canvas awning. It flaps wildly in the rising breeze. The rusted hulk of a Dodge pick-up truck sits on blocks, as if in anticipation of better days yet to come. A fifty-gallon plastic jerry jug meant to collect rainwater from the awning is bone dry. The place stinks of neglect, as if this patch of earth is not worth preserving. Leaning against a splinter of old fence a collection of still serviceable garden tools belies the fact that what passes for garden here is no more than a scrabble of hard stone. A dozen or so similarly forgotten properties make up the neighborhood. Running among the trailers are several small brown-skinned children, hooting and hollering up a storm and having a huge yuk, I imagine, at the expense of the big white guy lying hog-tied like a rodeo bull in the dirt.

I mop my brow with the soiled cuff of my shirtsleeve. My dark hair is a tangled mass of greasy, limp curls, a hastily applied pre-dawn make-up job smudged beyond repair. Perspiration flows in a slow trickle from my hairline, between my knotted shoulders, through

the valley at the small of my back, then over the mounds of my buttocks. The hot wind feels like a blowtorch against my skin. I look skyward, pray for relief, expect none.

By late day thunderheads will build over the horizon, threatening but producing no rain. It will be weeks, possibly, before the monsoon rains—what the Navajo call *male rains*—batter the mesa tops and crash down into the Canyon to replenish the Colorado River on its journey toward Lake Mead. Not that any amount of precipitation will slake the thirst of crops laid down in a landscape where even Mother Nature herself means for no crops to grow, or men living in a land where She means for no man to live.

The authorities arrive and I present my credentials. They inspect these only in passing. Both young deputies are too preoccupied with my bust line to question my bona fides.

“Los Angeles,” the brighter looking of the pair says, citing my original point of departure.

“Via Barstow, Flagstaff, and here,” I say in a tone that serves notice of my potentially foul mood. “Your department knows I’m here and why. I checked in when I arrived.”

“*Faith Holliday?*”

I nod. Anticipating his next question, I say, “My father is a preacher, my mother is a travel planner. To them—oh, *forget it.*”

Neither young man knows what to make of this. They turn to the enforcement order issued by LA County Child Support Services compliance adjudicator Jay Gonsalvez, scrutinizing it more closely. Gonsalvez is the scumbag whose careless decision to not freeze the financial assets of the tough guy has me down here on behalf of the estranged spouse and three kids.

Thrusting the piece of paper as if to return it to me the not so brighter looking of the two says, “Is this thing legit?”

“Absolutely,” I say, knowing full well its shaky legal status outside the State of California.

“You a bounty hunter?” he says.

“You read too many books,” I say, doubting it. “Maybe watch too much TV?”

“A private *dick*?” he says, savoring the word, rolling it over his tongue as if it were a piece of hard candy.

I say, “I’m an Officer of the Court, sunshine, duly empowered. It’s all you need to know.”

The brighter looking one steps forward and says, very nicely, “With all due respect ma’am, we’re all here *officers* of the court. We’re just trying to establish your authority.” He jerks a thumb at his partner. “As an *officer* of the court, duly empowered, you’ll allow as this is a fair question.”

Okay, on closer inspection not so bad looking and, I allow, maybe not such a dim bulb either. (I regret not having remade my face and—for only a *very* brief moment—I consider extending my stay.)

I say, “Look, fellas’, this is a bad man here, an asshole, grade-A.” Gently, I prod the tough guy with the toe of my boot, stirring up a puff of dirt. “Three months ago he filed for divorce from his wife, mortgaged his home to the hilt, maxed out on his credit cards, sold his Ferrari for cash, emptied his bank accounts, cashed his portfolio, quit his job and skipped town leaving his wife and three kids no forwarding address. In California that’s a no-no. It’s my job to set things right, you know, for the wife but mostly for the kids.”

The good-looking one considers this. The other one seems to be stuck on *leaving his wife and three kids no forwarding address*. They inspect my trussed up quarry, take note of his

dimensions. After a while they return their gaze to me, now a mixture of both glassy eyed lust *and* grudging respect. I sigh, knowing this is the best I can hope for.

After settling up with the local constabulary, I make my way to my rented Cherokee four-wheel drive. Twelve-hours later on the return flight to LA, the tough guy flying coach and safely in the custody of a pair of burly hired guns, I sleep. Restlessly and with one eye half open, a legacy of my first marriage, if not my work.

# 2

**NEXT DAY**, back in the office, Rosie my business partner jabs at my swollen belly. She says, “Does it hurt?”

I poke back. I say, “Only when you do *this*.”

Rosie sits back, contemplating my disfigurement. “You won’t be wearing a bikini any time soon.”

I ponder Rosie’s declaration and say, “At my age, should I even be wearing a bikini?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Rosie says. “Stretch marks are the new sexy.” When I fail to respond, she continues. “Uh-huh. Apparently, every twenty year old wants to sleep with his mother.”

I consider this and say, “Then thank God I don’t have children.”

“No, you have cats, cats which eat, pee and poop more than any infant I know. My place is beginning to smell like a litter box, Faith. When are you retrieving the little fur balls?”

On occasion, the nature of my work requires me to travel. When I do, Rosie is the keeper of my long-haired mongrel tabbies, *Artemis* and *Atalanta*. While Rosie is not an animal lover, she accepts the imposition—though not necessarily without complaint—as the distance between her condo in Marina Del Rey and mine in Encino often requires the forced relocation.

“Don’t be a grump. You know you love their company.”

Turning serious, Rosie says, “I don’t like it when you come back hurt.”

I appreciate the sentiment. I don't often encounter violence but when I do it's unnerving. Usually, when I finally do catch up to them, most men simply throw up their arms and say: *Got me!* But there are those who possess a mean streak as deep and dark as a vein of Kentucky coal. They are nasty brutes who abuse their children and beat their dogs, cowards who abandon their family, leaving a woman to carry their weight.

"Occupational hazard," I say with a breeziness I don't necessarily feel. I button my blouse. "Well, what did I miss while I was away?"

Tucking her legs like a rower Rosie kicks off, returning to her place opposite me across the massive antique library desk at which we both do most of our work. Rifling through a foot thick stack of file folders, she says, "Let me see. What did you miss while you were away?" She screws up her face. "Bills," she says, "lots. A call from the producer of *Dr. Phil*. He wants to know if you're available for a taping end of next month."

"What? Suddenly, I'm a celebrity?"

Rosie shrugs. "Since that profile appeared in the LA Times Magazine, phone's been ringing off the hook." As proof, Rosie indicates the pile of stacked folders. "In fact, there may be a book deal in here somewhere, is all I'm saying."

"Yippee," I say, playing along. "Who gets to play me in the movie?"

As if she's given it a lot of thought, Rosie says, "Robin Wright. She's got the look, she's got the bod, she's got the chops. And she was married to Sean Penn."

"But the *hair*?" I say, flicking at my mass of what Rosie describes as eighties-style porn star curls.

"Robin Wright would look good bald."

"Some girls have all the luck," I say.

“I still have contacts in the business,” Rosie says. “I could make a few calls.”

Dismissing the offer, I turn my attention to the pile of folders on Rosie’s desk. I say, “Anything in there to keep us out of the poor house?”

Like a dealer, Rosie shuffles. She extracts a folder from the bottom of her stack. I suspect she’s been hiding it there all along. When it comes to choosing our cases, generally, I defer to Rosie. If I am considered the *brawn* of our operation, she is considered the *brains*. She passes me a dated copy of the Los Angeles Times magazine. She grins, looking like the cat who got the cream. Apparently, Rosie has been spending too much time with my babies.

“*Read*,” she says. “Page twenty three.”

I read. After ten minutes, I return the magazine to Rosie. I say, “*Seriously*, Rosie? Are you going under the knife *again*?”

Rosie smiles, a lopsided grin made that way by too many beatings and one too many surgical procedures. “I assure you, *Ducky*, all my lady-parts are in excellent working order, thank you.”

I pass back the magazine to Rosie. “Then I’m sorry. I don’t get it.”

Rosie makes a face. “Good deeds don’t pay bills, Faith, and they don’t pay rent. You may not be in danger of losing the condo and I’m not going to miss a payment on the Porsche but we’re not getting any younger. We need to establish a more comfortable margin of financial error.”

“We need a margin of financial error?”

“*Every* woman needs one of those, *Ducky*. Besides, what I have here,” she says, placing her palm flat down on the magazine cover, “could make our whole year.”

# 3

**FOR TEN YEARS**, after receiving my Diploma in Social Work from Los Angeles Mission College, I worked as a case officer with the LA County Division of Child Support Services. My job was to counsel women on their available options when dealing with the men in their lives whose sole purpose in a divorce proceeding, it seemed to me at least, was to screw them over. Despite my education and training, my level of success over those ten years was arguable. While I had processed hundreds of support orders each year to seize income and assets from delinquent husbands and dads, I had successfully executed on only a few.

It took me years to figure out why this is; the system is rigged. It's a system designed by men, managed mostly by men, the *There but for the grace of God go I* syndrome is overwhelming among men and, as all little girls learn from an early age, little boys like to hold on very tightly to their nut-sac.

So, after serving those ten soul-sucking years, I quit my work at Child Services, took what meager savings I had and opened a storefront in Encino, close to my former office on Ventura Blvd, smack in the middle of the wealthiest neighborhood in the county.

I wasn't making any money in those days but my reputation for results earned me referrals from former colleagues at the Department. These helped to pay the rent but by working too many sympathy cases, my percentage fee on recoveries remained low. Sometimes, even my expenses went unpaid. Don't get me wrong, I was no saint, just lousy at mathematics.

Enter into my office one day Rosalie Rosado. Make no mistake, from the start Rosie was hard luck, as busted as me. As she explained it at the time, she was working as a top-level assistant to a well know Hollywood producer, earning in the mid-six figures but married to a cocaine sniffing hound dog of a bit-part, pretty boy actor who only eighteen months into their union managed to snort through most of Rosie's savings, home equity, annual income and more. He'd also managed to loosen a few teeth, break her nose, shatter a cheekbone and crack a few ribs.

"He's out of your life?" I said to her then.

"Like the smell of shit on a windy day," she said.

Perplexed, I said, "Then why bother? Let it go. What can you possibly gain from finding him?"

She thought about this for a while. Leaning toward me, massive breasts threatening to spill from her bra onto my desktop, she said, "I could call it justice. I could call it principal. I could but I won't. It's neither. It's retribution, payback, revenge, a settling of old scores. I'll be back on my feet soon, *Ducky*. If it takes half my earned income and most of my adult life, I'm going to make sure the shit-bag doesn't get the chance to do to anyone else what he's done to me."

Two months later I tracked Rosie's ex to a seedy downtown St. Louis, Missouri motel where the night manager and I discovered him on his back, needle in arm, lifeless as road kill after having OD'd on a syringe full of dirty smack. For Rosie, not the outcome she had wished for but at least it got the shit-bag permanently out of circulation.

My initial agreement with Rosie called for her to pay me in trade. She'd come up to my office from her West Hollywood rental two evenings per week to do the books, to help

straighten the paperwork or just to talk. Soon, Rosie's two evenings became three, and three became five until, it seemed, she was as much a part of the business as I. And under her guidance my caseload evolved from mostly sympathy gigs to a ratio of three sympathy cases for every one paying client, to two sympathy cases for every one paying client, eventually to a seventy-thirty split. In less than a year my average client billing went from under three thousand to over fifteen. And, through her Hollywood contacts, Rosie was able to introduce me to many of her wealthy friends.

Two years after first walking through my front door Rosie and I formalized our relationship by incorporating Holliday Rosado and Associates and registering the web site PayUpDaddies.com. We'd since added six full-time staff: three investigators—in addition to myself—a researcher, a paralegal and a front desk, all female and in some way aggrieved by an ex-partner or spouse. Contrary to what many suspect, there are no lesbians among us. If we hate some men in particular, we hate no man in general.

