

— TWICE TOLD TALES —

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the
Bureau
of

Holiday
Affairs



Ylva

Chapter 1

ROBIN SIGNED THE PAPERWORK AND slid it aside. Maybe it was a dick move to fire people this close to Christmas—bleeding hearts would probably rag on her, but oh, well. The bottom line was the bottom line, and she didn't need to burden the company with extra weight into the new year. Even though sales were up a bit, Robin didn't want to take chances.

She answered a few emails and added a couple of figures to an upcoming presentation, which was sure to get her noticed as a CEO for a subsidiary, before she picked up the earlier paperwork. Robin walked the paperwork across the expanse of carpet in her office, past the sleek leather couch against the wall and the mini-fridge next to it, through the heavy mahogany doors to her assistant's desk, positioned behind short cubicle walls.

"I need these scanned and sent to HR before lunch," she said as she set the papers next to Laura's keyboard. She retreated to her office before Laura could give her one of her questioning looks. Laura was damn good at her job, Robin conceded, but sometimes she acted like Robin's conscience, like a little angel sitting on her shoulder. The last thing Robin needed or wanted was recrimination, silent or otherwise, on how she did her job.

Robin sat down and glanced at the clock on her laptop monitor. Not even ten yet. Her office door opened, and she looked up, irritated. Laura usually knocked.

“Good morning, Ms. Preston,” the newcomer said in a clipped British accent as she shut the door behind her. She wore a burgundy pants suit and sleek black high heels that looked like something a woman might’ve worn in the forties. Come to think of it, Robin thought as she studied her, the visitor looked a bit retro, like a forties professional woman. She also carried a classic black briefcase.

“And who are you?” Robin asked.

The woman approached Robin’s desk. “Your ten o’clock.” She smiled, pleasant.

“I don’t think—” Robin reached for her desk phone. How did Laura miss this? She picked up the phone. It was dead. She looked at her laptop. The screen was blank. She picked up her cell phone. Blank as well. She set it on her desk, wary.

The woman sat in one of the chairs in front of Robin’s desk and placed her briefcase on her lap. “I’ll just get right to it,” she said. “I’m Elizabeth Tolson, senior agent at the Bureau of Holiday Affairs.”

“Okay, you can stop right there. I don’t have an appointment with you, I have no idea who you are, and—” She stopped, puzzled. “The Bureau of what?”

“Holiday Affairs.” The latches on Tolson’s briefcase clicked as she opened it.

“This is a joke, right?” Had to be Robin’s brother. He was always trying to get her to loosen up, especially around Christmas.

“Absolutely not. The Bureau does not engage in such.” Tolson removed a small case from the briefcase, opened it,

and took out a pair of gold-framed eyeglasses that she put on. The earpieces looped around her ears. Very vintage. Next, she took a thick brown accordion file from the briefcase and set the briefcase on the floor by her feet.

“What is that?” Robin leaned forward, unnerved.

“Your dossier.” Tolson undid the fastener—a string that looped around a small cardboard disk—on the accordion file. Robin hadn’t seen one of those in years.

“My what? Who the hell are you?”

Tolson opened the file and took out a manila folder, which she opened with a practiced flip. “Preston, Robin Anne. Date of birth, June 15, 1978.” She looked up from the file. “Seattle, Washington. Lovely city.”

“Okay, this isn’t funny. The joke is over.” Robin pushed back from her desk. She would kill Frank, if he was responsible for this.

“Bachelor’s degree at the University of Oregon. Business.” Tolson regarded her over the top of her glasses. “But you started in art.”

Robin was halfway to the door before Tolson spoke again.

“Master’s in business, University of Pennsylvania.”

Robin’s fingers closed around the door knob, and she turned it. A strange sensation shot up her arm and into her chest, like a mild electrical shock. She pulled her hand back and started to reach for the knob again when she realized she was seated once again behind her desk. Her fingers trembled, and the small of her back was damp with nervous sweat.

“Somewhat of a business prodigy,” Tolson said. “Rose quickly here at Frost Enterprises.” She closed the file and let it lie flat in her lap. “The next logical step in your progression is CEO, most likely of an up-and-coming subsidiary.” She

took her glasses off, disengaging them carefully from her ears. She held them in one hand.

“How do you have all that information on me? That has to be illegal,” Robin said, regaining some of her equilibrium amidst a flash of anger. “I assure you, Ms. Tolson, you will be hearing from my attorney.”

“Gerald Moorhouse, of Moorhouse, Sanders, and Craig.” Tolson sat back and regarded her with a gaze as readable as England’s cliffs of Dover. “The Bureau has scheduled a meeting with him, as well. But that’s neither here nor there.” She smiled, the kind of indulgent but patronizing smile Robin remembered from some of her childhood teachers who were about to phone her mom.

“How do you know my lawyer?” She picked up her desk phone receiver again and held it to her ear. Still dead. She replaced it with extra emphasis.

“Ms. Preston, in all honesty, I argued against this meeting. At your annual case review—”

“My what? What are you talking about?”

“The Bureau analyzes hundreds of individual cases each year. At its discretion, it assigns certain cases to agents based on several factors. Those include whether the Bureau’s Board of Advisors feels the individual is salvageable.”

Salvageable? Robin’s previous indignation dissolved into uncertainty. “What does that mean?”

“Redeemable, basically.” Tolson tapped the file on her lap with her glasses. “Strong childhood, good deeds interspersed with the usual foibles and mistakes of children that carried over into high school. Overall, you displayed general acts of kindness along with the usual high school drama and angst, the latter of which was exacerbated most certainly by

your struggles to keep your sexual orientation hidden until college.” Tolson regarded her. “No doubt to cope with your father’s indiscretions and continued absences.”

Robin hadn’t realized she was gripping the edge of her desk until her fingertips hurt. She forced herself to relax her hands. “That’s personal. How the hell do you know that?” She would kill Frank. With her bare hands.

“We at the Bureau of Holiday Affairs know most everything about you, Ms. Preston. Within proper parameters, of course.”

“What do you mean?”

“We know when you’re sleeping. We know when you’re awake. And we know when you’ve been bad or good.” Tolson cocked her head. “Surely you’re familiar with that adage.”

Robin stared at her. She had to hand it to Frank. This was by far her brother’s best practical joke since...well, it had been a while. She was unnerved enough that she didn’t even remember sitting down after that weird shock at the door. And since it was clearly a joke—there was no other way anybody could know that much about her—she decided to relax and go along with it. Besides, who actually used that line from a goofy Christmas song?

“We noticed a change, however, your third year of college.” Tolson tapped the manila file again, this time with one of her fingertips. Perfectly manicured, Robin noticed. Her nail polish matched her suit. Once this was over, and after she chewed Frank a new asshole, she might track Tolson down and ask her out.

“We attributed the change to Jill Chen’s breakup with you, your mother’s death, and in the following months, an overall existential crisis that left you bereft of previous

foundations. And, unfortunately, drove you to engage in indiscretions in your personal life. No doubt modeled by your father.”

“Really? An existential crisis? Care to elaborate?” She smirked, choosing to ignore the reference to her mother.

“I believe you would refer to it as, and I quote, ‘an increase in general asshole-ness.’”

Robin’s smirk shifted to a frown. That was a low blow on Frank’s part.

“Not to correlate that with business school or business in general. There are thousands of individuals engaged in business pursuits all over the world who do not slide into asshole-ness.” She added emphasis to the last word to indicate she was still quoting Robin. “In your case, however, it seems you used your new field as a way to mask older and better ways of approaching problems and to emphasize less desirable characteristics in their stead.” Tolson paused and took another sheet of paper out of the file and put her glasses back on. “I’ll cite one example here. Allison Wagner.”

Robin clenched her teeth. “Her résumé wasn’t as strong as mine.”

“Nevertheless, deliberately misdirecting her with regard to the deadline date for the fellowship was simply not sporting. And Matthew Jacobs?”

Frank was toast. How did he even know about that?

“Mr. Jacobs developed the business plan that you submitted as your own to win the seminar competition your last year of classwork during your master’s degree.” Somehow, Tolson’s accent made it sound even worse.

“To your credit,” Tolson continued, “you did appear to experience some remorse about that. And about Wagner.

Unfortunately, it wasn't until after the fact." Tolson slipped the paper back into the folder and removed her glasses.

"It was just business."

Tolson raised her eyebrows. "There are standards regarding ethics in business as well, Ms. Preston."

Robin hunched her shoulders. "That was years ago."

"Lydia Evans," Tolson responded. "Joseph Spinelli."

Robin sat up straighter. "There is no way in hell you could know that. I just signed those papers this morning." Nervous sweat gathered at her collar. Had Laura tipped her?

"I told you, Ms. Preston," Tolson said. "It is the Bureau's job to know these things." She retrieved her briefcase from the floor, put the manila folder in it, and returned her glasses to their case before she put it inside as well. She latched the briefcase and returned it to the floor.

"Now. As I was saying, I argued against this visit because I don't think you're redeemable."

"Hold on. What does that mean?" Screw Frank. She'd drag more info out of Tolson.

"In more casual parlance, I believe you are a lost cause. Some people continue to engage in behaviors that are generally motivated by mean-spiritedness or a lack of empathy for their fellows. They learn these behaviors at some point during their lives and continue to use them as coping mechanisms. Some cases are, of course, genuinely unredeemable due to various psychological issues that the Bureau doesn't handle, but others might be, given the opportunity to change their ways." She tapped the arm of her chair a few times. "Many of these have what you might call an epiphany, and surprisingly, it does stick."

"So you're my epiphany?" Robin said, sarcastic.

Tolson smiled. “Of course not. I’m your current case manager. Not that I was pleased about that, since I have a one hundred percent rating at the Bureau for ensuring that my cases have their redeemable moment. Or moments. Some need a progression of smaller epiphanies to point them in the right direction.” She straightened. “But I don’t shy from a challenge, even though I am on record as strongly advising against this course of action where you’re concerned.”

Typical bureaucrat, Robin thought. Passing the buck.

“Regardless of your opinion regarding my place of employment and methodologies,” Tolson said, as if she’d read Robin’s mind, “I am here to do a job. With that in mind, you will have three more visitors between now and Christmas Day.”

You have to be kidding. Robin fought an urge to roll her eyes.

Tolson stood and picked up her briefcase. “They will, of course, keep me informed on your case.”

“Of course.” Robin put extra snark in her tone.

“They don’t necessarily share their tactics with me ahead of time, so I can’t speak to those. But they all know they have two weeks before Christmas Day to schedule their visits in coordination with each other. And once this process has begun, the Bureau does not stop it for any reason.” She paused, as if letting that sink in.

“What if I don’t want your visitors?”

“Our cases never do. No one likes the mirrors we hold up to them.” She smoothed the front of her jacket. “Good luck, Ms. Preston.” She turned and moved effortlessly to the door, which she opened with no problem. It closed with a soft click behind her.

Robin let out a breath. “Frank, you dick,” she muttered. She reached for her cell phone just as a knock sounded on the door. “Come in.”

Laura entered. She held a stack of papers up and moved toward Robin’s desk.

“Did Ms. Tolson leave a card?” Robin asked as Laura handed her the papers.

“Who?”

“Ms. Tolson. The woman who was just here.”

Laura’s brow creased in puzzlement. “Here? In your office?”

Robin studied her. “You didn’t see her?”

“No. You were just at my desk with the other paperwork.”

Robin glanced at her laptop screen, which was functional now. The clock on it read 9:59 A.M. “What the hell?” she muttered.

“Ma’am?”

“Never mind.” Robin stood. She’d go for a coffee. A big, strong cup from the café at street level. That would cure anything. “I’ll be right back.” She left Laura in her office and headed for the elevators. She was just working too hard. She always got stressed this time of year. But she couldn’t shake the chill wrapped around her spine.

The elevator doors opened onto the spacious lobby of the Frost building.

“Good morning, Ms. Preston.” The guard at the info desk nodded at her. She could never remember his name.

“Did you see a woman come through here a few minutes ago? Burgundy suit, dark hair, briefcase?”

“No.”

“You’re sure? It would’ve been the last ten or fifteen minutes.”

“No, ma’am. Hold on and I’ll check the cameras.” He appeared to be looking at something beneath the counter.

“No. Nobody like that. Would you like to see?”

She shook her head and continued to the exit. She was definitely working too hard.

Chapter 2

“AM I AN ASSHOLE?” ROBIN asked from the bed.

Cynthia turned to look at her. She was putting her earrings back in. Her hair fell in tousled waves like golden silk around her shoulders, and her breasts filled her lacy bra just right. “In what sense?”

“In general.”

Cynthia smiled and blew her a kiss. “Of course you are, darling.”

“I’m serious.”

Cynthia turned back to the mirror on Robin’s closet door and finished with her other earring then put her necklace back on. “One needs to be less than savory sometimes, doesn’t one?” She made a few adjustments to her skirt before she picked up her blouse and slipped it on. The color reminded Robin of the suit Elizabeth Tolson had been wearing two days ago.

“But am I an asshole more than sometimes?”

Cynthia seated herself on the bed next to her and ran her fingers along Robin’s bare upper arm. It felt delicious but distant.

“You’re fucking someone else’s wife, darling. That qualifies as more than sometimes.”

“You could have said no when I asked you to bed.”

Cynthia laughed. “And you didn’t have to ask. But you did.” She stood and buttoned her blouse. “No one comes off clean in this, sweets,” she said, but the endearment sounded sharper than it should have, and a weird little chill gripped Robin’s chest.

“But given your reputation,” Cynthia added, “I expected no less.”

“What do you mean?”

“No less than uncommitted and enjoyable sex behind my husband’s back.” Cynthia finished with her blouse. “Surely you’re not developing a conscience now.” She gave Robin one of her sultry looks.

“That makes it sound like I don’t have one.”

Cynthia regarded her, expression decidedly cooler. “There are two types of people in this world, darling. Those who are doormats and those who are not. If you don’t want to be a doormat, you ensure you get what you want. The ends justify the means.” She adjusted her hair. “Call me next week. He’s out of town again starting Tuesday.”

Robin nodded and watched Cynthia leave the bedroom. She heard the door of her apartment open then close, and she lay back in bed and stared at the ceiling. Her phone rang from the bedside table, and she picked it up. Frank. About time.

“That was a dick move,” she said when she answered.

“Hi, sis. Good to hear from you. How have you been?” he shot back.

“Don’t act innocent.”

He was silent for a few moments. “About what? What’s going on?”

“That practical joke you pulled on me a couple days ago. Why the hell did you think it was okay to tell her those things about my past?”

“Whoa. Hold on there, speedy. What joke, what things, and who?”

Robin knew the nuances of Frank’s voice. He was clearly confused. “Elizabeth Tolson.”

“Who’s that?”

“So you didn’t send her to my office?”

“No.”

“So this wasn’t something you did?”

“No. The last time I did a Christmas joke on you was at least four years ago. And if I remember correctly, you did *not* appreciate it.”

“A singing telegram dressed as a nutcracker sent to my place of employment doesn’t go over too well.”

“Maybe your whole company needs to lighten up. So what did this Tolson say?”

“Never mind. One of my other friends probably put her up to it.”

“Put her up to what, exactly?”

“Just some be-good-for-Christmas crap.”

“Well, even though I didn’t send whoever it was, that’s good advice for pretty much everybody. Speaking of which, what are you doing for Christmas?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you come visit?”

Robin frowned. He sounded genuine.

“C’mon. Remember when we were kids? How much fun we’d have on Christmas Day?”

“You must’ve been at a different house. All I remember was Dad not being there and Mom trying to pretend

everything was all right.” And usually, her dad was off with some other woman, though he claimed he just had to work on the holidays.

“Look, I know that hit you hard. But we did still have some fun. You have to let go of Dad being a dick. Because hanging on to old crap can make you—well, you start becoming the crap. So come and visit this year.”

She clenched her teeth. Every year he always asked her to come and hang out with him and his wife and every year she always turned him down. Wasn't that the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over expecting different results? “I'll think about it,” she said, another part of the annual ritual.

“At some point,” he said, “you need to remember who you were. Catch you later.” He hung up, and Robin tossed the phone to the other side of her bed. Remember who she was? What the hell did that even mean? Irritated, she got out of bed and padded to the shower, trying to figure out who might have sent Elizabeth Tolson to her office. The fact that she couldn't think of anyone else close enough to her to want to bother with a joke like that added to her irritation, but also fed a strange sense of loneliness.

Twenty minutes later, dressed in sweatpants and sweatshirt, she poured herself a Scotch over ice and made sure she locked the deadbolt on her front door, too. She turned her television on but didn't watch it. Instead, she stood staring out over the city through the sliding doors onto her balcony, which still bore the remains of the last snowstorm. In the distance, she could just see the outline of one of the myriad bridges over the Hudson. People practically killed for views like this in the city, even in a

rather plain apartment like this one, with its off-white walls and beige carpeting. It might've been a hotel room, for all the personalization she'd done in here.

No real surprise, since she spent most of her time at work or traveling for work. She sipped her drink, but the usual velvet caress on her tongue of this brand of Scotch was missing. It tasted flat and a little rough, like her mood since Elizabeth Tolson's visit.

"Bureau of Holiday Affairs," she muttered against the lip of her glass. She had looked it up online, but the only thing that came close was, ironically, a 1949 Christmas movie titled "Holiday Affair." Christmas was for sentimental idiots who couldn't get ahead in life because they weren't willing to make hard choices. You had to keep moving, like a shark. Otherwise, you'd sink.

Her door buzzer sounded, and it startled her. What the hell time was it? Cynthia always called before she came over. Besides, she'd just been here and Cynthia never forgot anything. Robin picked her phone up from the coffee table. Almost eleven. Probably some drunk idiot hitting the wrong button downstairs. She took another sip and the buzzer sounded again.

She stared at it, positioned next to the front door of her apartment. This was an ultra-secure building, so she wasn't worried about people actually getting to this floor. Another buzz. She set her drink and phone on the coffee table, crossed the room, and pressed the button.

"Yes?"

"Hey," said a woman's voice. "Pizza."

"You've got the wrong address. I didn't order anything."

“You sure? I’ve got a large pepperoni pie here for Robin Anne Preston, born June 15, 1978. Extra cheese.”

Robin’s stomach clenched. “Who is this?” she said, but it didn’t sound as forceful as she wanted.

“Pizza. Courtesy of the Bureau.”

“Okay, you can stop now. This isn’t funny anymore.” Not that it ever was. “Get the hell away from my apartment building.”

Silence. Robin exhaled in relief, shaky in the wake of her adrenaline surge.

“You want a big slice or a little one?”

Robin whirled as a surge of panic shot through her veins. A woman stood in the doorway of her kitchen, holding a pizza box.

“How the hell did you get in?” Robin clutched her phone like it was a weapon.

“Trade secret. So do you want a piece?”

Robin stared as the woman shrugged and set the box on the counter that separated the kitchen from the dining area. She wore blue surfer shorts, battered black flip-flops, and a pale-yellow T-shirt. A pair of sunglasses hung from the collar. Her hair—a cute jumble of spikes—was bleached blond.

“I’m Decker,” she said. “And I’ll be your tour guide this evening. Okay if I call you Preston? I’m not big on formality.” She grinned, a flash of white beneath her tan, and opened the pizza box. She took out a slice.

“Tour guide?”

Decker took a bite and pointed at the letters across her chest, silk-screened in red in a seventies-style font. *Xmas Past*. They hadn’t registered with Robin until Decker pointed at

them. I'm dreaming, Robin thought. That's what this was. A weird dream, probably caused by stress.

"Seriously?" Robin asked.

"Mmm hmm," Decker said around the pizza.

"This is beyond ridiculous."

Decker shrugged.

"So you're going to take me on a trip into my past, and I'm supposed to get all emotional and change my ways."

"That's the general idea, yeah."

"That's completely stupid."

"That's what they all say." Decker took another bite. "You sure you don't want some of this? It's pretty good."

"No, I don't want any damn pizza. And I'm not going anywhere with you."

"They all say that, too."

Robin glared at her. "I could have you arrested for trespassing."

Decker finished chewing and swallowed. "You could try. Your phone's on the coffee table."

Robin moved and picked it up. "Fine. I'm calling the cops."

Decker shrugged again and took another bite.

Robin's phone was dead. Ice filled her chest. "What the hell is happening to me?" Was this it? Was she finally going crazy?

Decker finished the slice and brushed her hands on her shorts. "Think of it as an intervention."

"I don't need one."

Decker's expression might've been pity. "Let's go," she said, and she went to the front door and waited, her hand on the knob.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Yep. You are.”

“So you’re kidnapping me?” Robin stayed by the coffee table, still gripping her phone.

Decker released the door knob and faced her. “Look. I’ve got a bag of tricks you would not believe, and full authority from the Bureau to enact this intervention. So put on your big-girl pants and take your medicine.” She reached for the knob again.

“It’s locked,” Robin said, chastised, and wondered why she’d said that, as if she was searching for some sense of normalcy in the surreal. Even more, she wondered why she moved closer to the door.

Decker turned the knob and pulled it open, the locks clearly not an issue for her. She motioned at the hallway beyond, in which a mist gathered.

Mist. In the hallway to her elevator in a multistory apartment building. “I don’t have shoes on,” Robin said, as the mist swirled right up to her doorway but didn’t enter. Oh, God. Was she going to crazytown?

“You won’t need ’em.” Decker stepped into the mist, and it curled and twisted around her limbs before it swallowed her.

“Hello?” Robin called, heart hammering. She approached the doorway and stared at the mist as she began to shiver. “Decker?”

“Come on,” Decker responded from somewhere in the hallway. “Really. It’s okay.”

Without knowing why, without fully understanding the compulsion, Robin stepped into the mist. As a cool dampness engulfed her, she held her breath. She couldn’t see anything

beyond a few inches, and then she was falling, but softly. More like floating. Eventually, she felt floorboards beneath her feet, and the mist receded within seconds, revealing Decker, who was right next to her.

“Where are we?” Robin asked. It came out as a whisper.

“Go ahead and have a look around.”

Robin took a tentative step, not sure her feet would carry her. They did. She heard a door slam and a kid yell, “Mom.”

A dark-haired boy barreled down the hallway past her, followed by a slightly taller, equally dark-haired girl, all gangly arms and legs, apparent even in the jeans and jacket she wore.

“Oh, God,” Robin whispered, recognizing herself at age eleven.

“When’s dinner?” Frank shouted.

“Right now,” came a woman’s voice from the kitchen. A voice that shot right through Robin’s chest. “Go get washed up.”

“Mom,” Robin said as her younger self followed Frank into the downstairs bathroom, and she heard the two of them laughing and splashing at the sink. They emerged, and Robin shrank back against the wall.

“They can’t see or hear us,” Decker said. “Go on.”

Robin walked down the hall to the kitchen, remembering everything about this house she grew up in, a comfortable bungalow in one of Seattle’s poorer neighborhoods. She knew the smell—a mixture of damp and meatloaf. It always smelled like meatloaf, though Robin’s mom didn’t make it too much. She remembered the dark wood of the banister as she passed the stairs to her right, and the time Frank fell from the landing and bit through his lower lip. To her left

was the entranceway and the heavy front door that always made her feel safe when her mom locked it at night.

Her mom always decorated the house for Christmas, and Robin's chest tightened at the sight of the lights on the banister. The tree, she knew, would be in the living room behind her in the corner opposite the TV. Christmas music drifted in from the kitchen. Her mom kept a portable cassette deck in there, and loved playing it this time of year, even when her dad didn't show.

"Sweet potatoes," Frank said from the kitchen, his little boy delight spilling into the hall with the light.

"It wouldn't be Christmas without them," Robin's mom said just as Robin reached the doorway. Her mom put an extra spoonful of sweet potatoes on Frank's plate.

"Mom," she said again as tears gathered in her eyes. Mom. Wearing faded jeans and a baggy black sweatshirt, the clothes she always put on when she got off work. She'd seemed so vibrant when they were kids, always smiling and laughing, in spite of their dad's absences. As a kid, Robin hadn't noticed the exhaustion that marred her mother's face and slumped her shoulders.

"We should save some for Dad," Frank said as he dug in. Robin's younger self shot him a look, then transferred her gaze to her mother, worried.

"Sure, honey. If you want. He probably won't be home 'til late, though."

Robin recognized the lie for what it was. Her younger self did, too.

"Where was your dad?" Decker asked from just behind her.

"Probably screwing some woman. He did that a lot." An old pain slid between her ribs, its tip brushing her heart.

“It’s okay, Frankie,” Robin’s younger self said. “We can play Monopoly and watch TV. It’ll be a fun Christmas Eve.”

Robin’s mom looked at her younger self, relief in her eyes. “That’s right. We’ll all play.”

“Did he miss a lot of Christmases?” Decker asked.

“Yeah. Hell, he missed a lot.”

“And you looked out for your brother.”

“Mostly.” Robin watched the scene at the table, thinking that she sort of remembered this particular Christmas. Her mom was laughing at something Frankie said and her younger self smiled and got up and retrieved a pitcher of apple juice from the refrigerator, plastered with all her drawings. Frankie loved all kinds of juice then. Her younger self refilled his glass and checked her mom’s.

“Thanks, honey,” her mom said. She squeezed younger Robin’s hand as she sat back down to dinner, and Robin swore she felt it, a warmth that traveled up her arm.

Mist gathered on the kitchen floor, twisting up the legs of the table.

“No, wait. Please?” Robin grabbed Decker’s arm. “My mom. I just want to see her for a little longer.” The mist thickened until Robin couldn’t see into the kitchen. “Please. Mom,” she called, a sob catching in her throat. And then the mist enveloped her, and she closed her eyes, falling, her arms wrapped around herself as if trying to hold onto her memories.

“You can open your eyes,” Decker said.

Robin heard music in the background. She looked around. “Oh, my God,” she said. “No way.” She stood in the middle of her living room from her college days in Oregon. If this was a dream, the details were amazing, from the beat-up

rugs that covered the scratched wooden floor to the peeling pale green paint above the TV that sat across from a sofa. Her roommate had put a tiny fake tree on the entertainment center. Cal had decorated it with little red and silver balls and lovingly hung tinsel all over it. Robin had laughed, but she admitted that when he did it that the tree reminded her of her mom, who had loved Christmas, and who had believed in it even when she was on her last one.

“Pretty nice for a college crib.” Decker inspected the sofa. “Did you dumpster dive this?” she asked. “Good shape.”

Robin shot her a glare and didn’t respond.

“Who lived here who listened to The Clash?” Decker was reading the labels on the CD cases strewn across the floor. “And Joy Division. Nice.”

“Me, thank you very much.”

Decker raised her eyebrows, grudging approval in her expression. “There might be hope for you yet, Preston. Are these yours, too?” She pointed at the pen and ink framed sketches above the sofa. “Hard to do nudes. These are really good.”

“Yes, they’re mine. In another life.” She stepped carefully over a couple of jewel cases past the mini stereo sitting on the worn shelves she and her roommate had rescued from an abandoned warehouse. She heard what sounded like crying in what had been her bedroom, just off the living room.

The door was barely open. She reached to push it open, but her hand went right through the wood.

“Jesus freaking Christ.” She pulled her hand back and checked it. Still intact.

“You’re here but you’re not,” Decker said, making her jump again.

“What the hell does that even mean?”

“Hard to explain. Just walk in.” Decker motioned at the door.

“How?”

Decker shook her head in exasperation and walked right through the door, like a ghost might. Robin stared after her. This was so messed up. She held her breath and walked toward the door, flinching for what she just knew was going to be a smack in her face. Instead, she ended up in the bedroom next to Decker, who stood watching the forlorn figure who sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor.

Robin knew what day this was. She remembered it, and didn't want or need a reminder. “Dick move, Decker,” she said through her teeth. The day the love of her life dumped her. Right around Christmas.

Decker shrugged. “Did you ever wonder why Jill broke it off?”

“I didn't have to. She told me.” Robin fought an urge to sit on the bed with her younger self.

“Oh, yeah. The old ‘I love you but I'm not in love with you' spiel. And you believed it?”

“What was I supposed to do? Tell her to change how she felt? Demand that she be in love with me?” She clenched her fists. “This is stupid. What the hell does reliving this bullshit have to do with anything?” She whirled on Decker, anger rising in her throat.

And then the room disappeared, and she was falling through mist. Her stomach lurched like she was on a rollercoaster. She didn't know how far down she had to go, and she instinctively braced for a crash, but it didn't come. She heard laughter, talking, and dishes clinking against each

other. She stood in somebody's dining room. The big table in the center was piled with food, and Christmas decorations hung from the eighties-style chandelier above it. Lights twinkled above the picture window. The drapes were open, but with the lights on, Robin couldn't see outside. She was surrounded by people talking and eating, most of whom were Asian. They all ignored her, but she moved back against the wall anyway.

She glanced around. She hadn't seen furnishings like this since the nineties. And where the hell was Decker?

An older Asian woman emerged from what Robin guessed was the kitchen, and Robin froze. Chinese. She was Chinese, and she was Lin, Jill's mom. Robin had met her twice, and both times Jill had introduced Robin as a "good friend." Oh, God. She was in Jill's parents' house in Portland. Had to be.

"Have you seen Jill?" Lin asked a boy who looked to be about ten. He was reaching for another piece of fudge.

"No."

Lin's mouth tightened and she worked her way to a doorway opposite Robin.

"Might want to follow her," Decker said, and Robin jumped. She was sure Decker hadn't been there a moment earlier.

"Fine," she snapped, and she worked her way around the periphery of the dining room.

"You don't have to do that," Decker said.

Robin looked over as a man walked right through Decker.

"That is seriously—no. Just no." She continued hugging the wall and sighed in relief when she made it to the hallway, noting that though she could tell the carpet was thick, she couldn't feel it under her feet.

“Jill, it’s time for this to stop,” Lin was saying to a closed door at the other end of the hall. “It’s rude.”

“Give me a few minutes,” came a response, and Robin closed her eyes as a voice she hadn’t heard in fifteen years poked at an old wound.

“I’ll talk to her.” A young Chinese woman passed Robin. She looked about the age Robin had been when Jill dumped her. “Go back to the party, Mom. I’ll take care of this.”

Lin harrumphed and went back to the dining room. Robin squished herself against the wall of the hallway as Lin walked past her, barely two inches between them.

“Jill, it’s Christie. Can I come in?”

Robin didn’t catch the response, but Christie opened the door and went in. Decker motioned toward the door, and Robin approached it, took a deep breath as she shut her eyes, and walked through.

“Good job,” Decker said when Robin opened her eyes.

Robin ignored her and stared instead at Jill, who was slumped in a chair next to a single bed. The room was probably Jill’s before she went to college. Several awards for sports and academics hung on the wall next to Robin’s head and they all had Jill’s name on them. The walls had been painted pink, which might have explained why Jill hated that color so much.

Christie sat down on the bed opposite Jill, who had been crying. Robin’s chest tightened. She hadn’t seen Jill in years, hadn’t wanted to after she’d gotten past the pain of the breakup, and she vowed that if she ever did see her, she’d make sure to remind her how awful it had been, getting dumped. But seeing her like this left Robin feeling a strange mixture of numb and raw.

She looked like Robin remembered, long straight hair pulled back in a ponytail, the elegant planes of her face still familiar, something that had always seemed incongruous with the mischievous spark in her eyes. Robin had caressed Jill's face many times, and Jill had always smiled when she did. But that was lifetimes and worlds away.

"You did what you had to do," Christie said.

"So how come it feels so fucking bad?" Jill dabbed at her eyes with a well-used tissue. Christie handed her a fresh one out of the box on the bed.

"You'll get over it."

"Really? I broke her heart. She thinks I'm the worst person ever." Jill blew her nose. "I am the worst person ever. I couldn't even tell her the truth."

Robin tried to swallow, but the lump in her throat prevented it.

"Do you think that would've made her feel any better? That you couldn't be with her because your family would disown you?"

Robin's teeth were clenched so hard that her jaw hurt.

"I'm a coward," Jill said through a fresh round of tears. "I'm not strong enough to fight for love."

"Come on," Christie said. "You know our family is extremely traditional. Did you really think you could be openly gay? What were you planning to do? Have some kind of commitment ceremony?"

"Maybe I was," Jill said, and tears stung Robin's eyes.

"I thought you weren't in love with me," Robin said, but Christie and Jill didn't react. "Why didn't you tell me?" Robin turned to Decker. "Why didn't she tell me?"

Decker looked at her, expression inscrutable. "There's usually another side to a story."

“God, I miss her,” Jill said through her tears.

Christie reached over and squeezed her knee. “Look, breakups are hard. You’ll get through it, and so will she.”

“And then what? I can’t express part of who I am. If I do, I lose my family. What kind of choice is that?” Jill got up and pulled another tissue out of the box.

“Well, you’re not going to solve anything sitting in here. Go out and mingle for a little bit. You can tell people you’re not feeling well after you do it and come back here.”

Jill laughed, but it lacked humor. “Because it’s so important to save face. It doesn’t matter how bad somebody feels, or that my own family put me in this position. We must always keep up appearances.” She wiped her eyes with the fresh tissue. “I’m going to the bathroom. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Christie nodded and gave her a quick hug. She left, but didn’t close the door, and the sounds of the party floated down the hall.

Jill brushed past Robin, and Robin flinched though she didn’t feel even a breeze from her passage. Instinctively, she reached out, but her hand passed through Jill’s arm, and as bizarre as that was to see, it left her feeling even emptier.

“Can I go home now?” she asked. “Because this really sucks.”

Decker shook her head as mist suddenly engulfed Jill’s bed.

“Not again.” Robin shut her eyes tight as the floor beneath her feet fell away. She landed a little harder this time, and stumbled forward to regain her footing. Where the hell was she now? She kept her hands out, waiting for the mist to clear. “Decker?”

“Right here,” came the response to her right. She saw her form, solidifying as the mist receded.

“Here’s to my big sis and her new job,” Robin heard Frank say. She was standing next to the refrigerator in his kitchen, in the apartment he had shared with two other guys during his college years. At least they kept it reasonably clean, though the décor was frat boy meets jock. A football sat on the kitchen counter next to three pint glasses with different beer logos on them. A neon “bar” sign hung in the window above the sink. It hummed and threw pale blue splotches on the linoleum. Her younger self raised her glass and smiled.

Decker leaned against the door frame, arms crossed, watching with interest.

“Really glad you’re here,” Frank continued. “Merry Christmas.” He gave her a one-arm hug, and Robin’s younger self grinned.

She’d just finished her master’s, Robin remembered, and gotten hired at a subsidiary of Frost.

“Merry Christmas,” younger Robin said, and older Robin remembered how excited Frank had been for her.

“Mom would’ve been proud,” he said and leaned back against the counter. Like their mom, he had a favorite pair of old jeans and a sweatshirt he always wore around the house. He looked a lot like her, too, Robin realized, as she studied his curly hair, the same shade of brown as their mom’s, much lighter than her own. Both Robin and Frank had gotten their mom’s eyes, a deep brown. She was grateful for that, because the less she shared with her father, the better.

“You think?” younger Robin asked as she sipped the beer.

“Duh.” He smiled then lapsed into silence.

“Did you hear from Dad this year?”

He looked at her. “No. I stopped trying, though. No point in beating my head against that wall. You were right.” He set his beer on the counter and sighed.

“Hey,” younger Robin said. “It’s okay. You’ve got me.”

“I do. And I will always have your back, Rob. Always. No matter what happens. Don’t ever doubt that.”

His words dug into her chest as she thought about how she’d blown him off just a couple of days ago.

“I like your bro,” Decker said from the doorway.

“Me, too,” Robin responded, defensive.

“Got you something,” Frank said to younger Robin. “Be right back.” He left the kitchen, and Robin knew he was going into the living room where the beat-up little tree he and his roommates had “liberated” from the tree lot stood, decorated with cardboard bar coasters and Seahawks sports cards. She examined her younger self for a few moments. Seriously trippy, being on the outside of yourself. She looked stressed. Robin saw it in the way her younger self carried her shoulders and in the frown lines at the corners of her mouth. Grad school had worn her out. Hell, by that time, *life* had worn her out.

“Here you go.” Frank returned and handed her a small, flat package. Her younger self put her beer on the counter and opened it. Robin already knew what it was, but watching herself see it for the first time made her smile. Her younger self took the framed photograph out of the wrapping paper.

“Oh, no way. I love this photo.”

Robin knew it by heart. It currently sat on her dresser. Frank at age six, Robin at ten, and their mom, grinning as they stood on the porch of their house. Robin was dressed as

a cowboy and Frank had his blue superhero cape on. Their dad had taken it. Robin considered it one of the rare good things he had done.

“Thanks,” younger Robin said, smiling. She put it carefully on the counter and gave Frank a big hug. “No gag gift this year?”

He laughed. “Maybe next year. I was feeling all sentimental.”

Robin watched, and a warmth she vaguely remembered spread through her limbs. She’d gotten Frank an autographed baseball and given it to him a few days before, signed by his favorite players from the Mariners. She knew that he had slept with it next to his bed for several months.

“So how about some Christmas pizza?” Frank asked as he opened his cell phone.

“Nice,” Decker said, approving.

Younger Robin laughed. “Hell, yes. Extra pepperoni and cheese.”

Frank grinned and pressed buttons on his keypad.

“Did you know where your dad was?” Decker asked.

“Not that year. Frank was in contact with him the year before, but then he stopped returning Frank’s calls.” Robin chewed her lip as she watched herself banter with Frank. They’d been tight, since they were kids. Until the last few years.

“How come you two don’t hang out anymore?”

Robin didn’t look at Decker. “I don’t know. Life got in the way, I guess.”

“Or it got in *your* way.” Decker straightened and stepped into the kitchen.

“Whatever,” Robin muttered.

“So next Christmas, should I find you a girlfriend?” Frank was asking her younger self.

“Oh, please. That’s the last thing I need.” She laughed and gave him a playful shove.

“I don’t know. Maybe you could use a little bit of settling down,” he teased. “Quit sowing so many oats and grow something instead.”

“That’s something Mom would’ve said.”

“She probably did. I just assimilated it.”

Younger Robin snickered. “How about we fire up the Playstation and shoot a bunch of bad guys?”

“No better way to celebrate Christmas.” He followed younger Robin out of the kitchen. Older Robin remembered that night. They’d stayed up almost all night, playing video games and munching on pizza. When they were kids, their mom would stay up with them, watching old movies, playing games, and eating popcorn. And though their dad hadn’t been around that much, those Christmases without him usually turned out all right. She heard Frank bellowing “Silent Night” in the other room and she smiled.

“Now that’s a cool Christmas,” Decker said.

“Yeah, it was.” Robin moved into the living room, where Frank was getting the game console ready. Her younger self was on the couch, her stocking feet propped on the coffee table. It was a great Christmas, she realized, watching her younger self laugh at Frank’s antics, and she wanted to stay, wanted to eat pizza and play video games and not care about anything but that moment.

But mist curled around her feet and moved up her legs like vines. “Just give me a few more minutes.” That’s all she wanted. Just a few more. Tears stung her eyelids, and the mist

wrapped around her arms and chest. She heard Frank singing again, but his voice was fainter, and then she couldn't see or hear anything and she was careening, weightless, through darkness. She wasn't sure if her eyes were open or closed, and she yelled all the way down—was she even pointed that way?—until she snapped awake.

Robin was lying on her couch, covered by a blanket. Morning light was trying to make its way past the closed vertical blinds on her patio doors, but it wasn't having much success. She heard the alarm going off in her bedroom, a series of insistent beeps. Thank God. A dream. She hadn't dreamed about her mom in a while, and usually it left her unsettled. Today, it left her sad and sort of lonely. And why the hell had she dreamed about Jill? Was it even true, what she dreamed?

She groaned and sat up, stiff. The blanket fell on the floor as she stood to go turn the alarm off in her bedroom. Thirty minutes later, Robin was showered and dressed and feeling much better about things, though she couldn't kick the sense of sadness she'd woken up with. She picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder then went to her small, galley-style kitchen for a yogurt. She opened the fridge and automatically reached for the middle shelf. And then she stopped and slowly withdrew her hand. A pizza box sat on the bottom shelf, balanced on her cans of diet coke.

"No way," she said. The graphic on the box depicted a smiling Santa holding a piece of pizza. *Courtesy of the Bureau of Holiday Affairs*, the neat red script said underneath him. So was she still dreaming? Was this one of those weird dreams within a dream? She reached into her fridge to take the pizza box out but withdrew her hand before she actually touched

it. Her cell phone dinged with a text, and she jumped as she closed the fridge. The message was from Laura, informing her that her nine o' clock meeting was delayed by fifteen minutes. That gave her time to get a cup of coffee on the way. A really big cup. Strongest coffee she could find. She left her apartment, unnerved and on edge.

* * *

Bureau of Holiday Affairs

Field Report: Preston, Robin Anne,

DOB June 15, 1978//Seattle, WA

Case Number 26901-15

Agent: Decker, T.M.

Date of Interaction:

December 14

Methodology Employed: Decker pizza delivery. Standard Christmas Past intervention: Childhood, early college/Chen, sibling (Preston, Francis "Frank" Dean, DOB April 28, 1982), though I did include a visit to Chen after she dumped Preston for a dose of the other person's side.

Results: Preston may have a heart. Tried to be indignant at outset, then resigned. Really affected when she saw her mom and when she saw Chen in the aftermath of the breakup. Wanted to stay and watch a Christmas scene with brother when Preston was in grad school.

Observations/recommendations: Preston totally felt the scenes and engaged. Question is, will she recognize her own crap? I have a vibe that she will, but she'll need a good kick in the butt for that. Audio and video filed.

Personal Overview: Preston's breakup with Chen was a tough loss on top of her mom's death. If she can pull the asshole stick out of her butt and recognize it for what it is, there's a decent chance she could epiphany out of this rut. Her emotional responses to the scenes from her past were totally consistent with someone who has mad potential for an epiphany, but she might refuse this awesome opportunity out of pride and stubbornness. That's the biggest hurdle.

Chapter 3

IF SHE DIDN'T GET HER shit together, she could kiss her next promotion goodbye. Robin had been staring at the same image on her computer for a good hour. Just a mental block, that's all. Though she still couldn't shake the feeling that she might not be sane since that whole weird dream she'd had a few days ago. What kind of dream was so disturbingly accurate? That was part of what was freaking her out.

She clicked into email, answered a few, then clicked back to the presentation. Another few minutes crawled by. Frustrated, she stood and went to stare out the window, across the cityscape.

A long way from Seattle, in a lot of different ways. She and Frank used to spend summers mostly outside there, and even during the long, often gray winters it seemed she was outside more often than not. Here, however, she tended to stay inside. Too crowded to jog, too dirty and loud to spend much time outdoors, and parks were a pain in the ass to get to. When did her shift to the indoors happen, exactly? Because it wasn't when she moved here. College?

A helicopter swooped low over the river. She and Jill used to hike all the time. Jill was into landscape photography at the time. Even after Jill broke it off, Robin still spent time

outside. Graduate school was when it changed, she decided as she watched tugboats and barges on the river. That's when she started living inside more than out. She had shifted to what she thought was urban and urbane, as if she'd been trying to leave her past behind, with its jeans and flannel and faded alt-rock T-shirts.

Her personal phone dinged with a text message, and she returned to her desk to check it. Christ. Cynthia. Robin hadn't called her yet this week, and Cynthia's husband had left town two days ago. Robin checked the text, just two words. "Call me."

She did, thinking that maybe if she got laid, it would help with her screwed-up mood.

"Darling," Cynthia said when she picked up. "You were supposed to call me this week."

Robin frowned. Cynthia was used to getting what she wanted and normally, Robin liked that she took control. It was nice, sometimes, to let someone else do that, since she spent so much time being a control freak on her own. But right now, it kind of pissed her off. She decided she wasn't in the mood to get laid. At least not by Cynthia. "Sorry. Busy."

"Well," Cynthia said with an extra layer of sensuous, "he's out of town until Saturday, and I'm all alone tonight. I'll be at the apartment at eight. Wear a tie. And don't be late." She hung up, which is what she always did when she gave an order like that. Robin knew that if she didn't show, Cynthia might not call her again, but she'd make life pretty uncomfortable at social gatherings.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, seducing the wife of another Frost executive. Hot as Cynthia was, Robin figured she'd be able to get something out of it, like

a good word to the guy, maybe some help up the corporate ladder. But Cynthia had no interest in putting in a good word for anybody but herself. And here Robin thought she'd been the savvy one, finagling Cynthia to bed to further her own career, while Cynthia was actually the one who held all the cards. It occurred to Robin at that moment that Cynthia could, at any time, get her royally fired.

You mess with a snake, her mom had told her on a hike once, you get bit.

Robin texted Cynthia a lie. *Dinner and drinks w/ clients tonight. Rain check?*

She sat back down at her desk and checked her calendar on her computer. Cynthia would make her wait a while for a response, in keeping with her dominatrix personality. "Damn," Robin said as she looked at the calendar. Meeting in twenty minutes. Good thing it didn't have much to do with her directly. She didn't need to prepare anything.

Her cell phone rang. She checked the ID. That was unusual. Cynthia, calling right back.

"Preston," Robin answered. She always kept it formal on the phone with Cynthia.

"Darling, I'm rather disappointed."

"Me, too," Robin lied.

"I can't tomorrow—let me check a few things. He's out of town again next week, but I'm not sure for how long." She tsk'ed. "I was so looking forward to fucking you senseless. Soon," she teased and hung up.

Relieved, Robin turned her ringer off, picked up her tablet, and went to the meeting.

* * *

Robin finally left the office at eight, after she'd spent the last two hours working on her presentation. Or rather, trying to. She thought about calling Cynthia and saying that the "clients" had cancelled, but decided she'd rather not deal with her. Anybody else, and she might be into a night of sex and forgetting.

"Good night, Ms. Preston," said the guard in the lobby.

She gave him a perfunctory wave. She could never remember his name, either, and she worked this late several times a month. Robin exited through the revolving door into the cold, which carried the promise of snow in its wet, heavy greeting. Cab or walk? She debated the merits of both and opted for the cab. Just as she stepped to the curb, a sleek white limousine pulled up in front of her.

"Thanks, asshole, for blocking me." She turned to go around the back when the driver got out.

"Ms. Preston," he said.

She looked at him. Basic limo driver, she categorized. Stocky, pleasant face. Classy livery.

He came around the car and opened the back passenger door for her. "Your car, ma'am."

"I didn't order a limo—" Had Cynthia been spying on her? Was this one of her scenarios?

"Not consciously, no." He tipped his hat and motioned toward the car. "Lady Magnolia will see you now."

Robin stared. What the hell was this?

"Come on, sugar," said a voice from inside the limo. "Getting a cab in this city is impossible."

Robin stooped slightly to see who was in the car. An absolutely stunning woman smiled at her. She carried the kind of glamor Hollywood had fifty years ago, and she wore

a form-fitting red evening dress with matching gloves that made her look as if she was about to host the Oscars. The white stole around her neck added a nice touch.

The driver smiled, encouraging. “We’re here for Robin Anne Preston,” he said. “Date of birth June 15, 1978.”

Robin stared at him and her chest tightened. “Oh, no. Hell, no. This is the last thing I need tonight.”

“Which is why you need to sit your cute, little, lesbian ass in this car,” said Lady Magnolia. “Because Mama don’t take no shit. And girl, you better hope I don’t have to get out of this nice warm car to throw you in it.”

Fuck, Robin thought as realization dawned. Of course her second visitor had to be a drag queen. Nobody could out-snark a good queen.

“What’s it gonna be, sugar?” Magnolia asked.

The driver regarded Robin with polite interest.

Robin groaned, but she got in, and the driver closed the door behind her, leaving her in the company of a gorgeous RuPaul lookalike with a perfect Audrey Hepburn coif and a low Georgia drawl.

“That’s better, sweetie. Have a tonic.” She held up a silver flask and poured a bit into a shot glass, which she handed to Robin.

“So are you the good cop or the bad cop?” She sniffed the shot glass. Smelled like whisky. She sipped. Very smooth.

Magnolia screwed the top back on the flask and put it in a tasteful bejeweled clutch from which she now withdrew a compact. “Sweetie, I am either your worst fucking nightmare or the best bitch you’ve got.” She inspected her makeup and gave Robin a sideways glance. “Whichever of those you get is on you.”

“I’m already in a nightmare, so I’ll go for the latter.”

Magnolia tsked. “Sugar, this ain’t no damn nightmare. This—” she made an expansive gesture, “is a chance, and not everybody gets one. Or my fabulous company. So I expect to hear some counting tonight.”

“Of what?”

“Your lucky stars.” Magnolia pursed her lips at the compact’s mirror.

“So what’s tonight’s agenda?”

“Honey, all my agendas are gay. But in your case, I’ll go lesbian.” She made a soft kissing noise. “Now. Let me introduce myself. I am Lady Magnolia, your guide this evening.” She handed Robin a card that said, in flowing formal script, *Christmas Present*.

“Seriously?” Robin held the card up.

“Honey, you have just been properly served. And a night with me is always a present.” She flashed a wicked smile. “So you just settle your cute self and let’s see where we end up.” She tapped the glass between them and it slid open.

“Ma’am?” The driver asked.

“Ramón, do a lady a favor and give us some music.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The window slid closed and a club song Robin knew thumped softly from unseen speakers. She drained the rest of the shot glass and Magnolia took it from her.

“Much better, sugar. Because girl, bitch does not look good on you.”

Robin started to retort but thought better of it and instead looked out her window, watching the mist that completely surrounded her. For all she knew, the car was flying, so completely were they enveloped. “Where are we

going?” she asked, more to hide her growing anxiety than to get an answer.

“Where the night takes us. You just sit back and relax,” she said with a little purr. “Magnolia’s got you, and there is nothing you need to worry about. Except maybe the truth.”

Robin closed her eyes, the beat of the song reminding her of her club days during college after Jill left. She’d ended up in a lot of different beds, then, but never for long.

“Time to get out,” Magnolia said. The fog was already dissipating when Ramón opened the door.

Robin exited the car, knowing there was no point to trying to stay put. “Where are we?” She looked around at the buildings, shoved so close together that they probably held each other up. Many shared walls, while others were fortunate to have a walkway between them. Low income neighborhood, she automatically cataloged, in one of the boroughs, but she wasn’t sure which. Signs on local businesses advertised services in a variety of languages. Trash bags piled on the curb for pickup. Cars lined the street, but Ramón had double parked, leaving room for drivers to go around the limo. Maybe he’d get a ticket. Robin wondered how the Bureau handled that.

“All in good time. Let’s go, sugar.” Magnolia adjusted her stole and walked regally in her six-inch heels to a beat-up metal door that Robin knew would take them to upstairs apartments. Magnolia went first up the stairs, walking as if she owned the place, stepping gracefully over an empty beer can and a crushed paper bag with *Deli* printed on the front.

The dim lights flickered overhead, and Robin smelled something cooking that might’ve been meat. Magnolia continued to the next floor.

“Okay, seriously,” Robin said to Magnolia’s back. “I’ve never been here. What does this have to do with me?”

Magnolia stopped and turned slowly to look down at her, a gesture that incorporated more drama than if she had done a hair flip. “Christmas Present isn’t always about you.” She raised an eyebrow imperiously then continued up the stairs to the landing. Here, Magnolia left the stairs and went down a corridor that had only one working light overhead, but she clearly knew which apartment she wanted because she stopped at a door on the right without checking any of the numbers.

She waited for Robin and pointed at the door. “After you,” she said.

“Really?”

“Oh, girl. You do *not* want to go there with me.” She smiled and ran a gloved finger down Robin’s cheek. “Now get your sweet little ass in there.”

Robin took a couple of deep breaths, shut her eyes, and moved toward the door, waiting for the feel of wood against her forehead. But like last time, she moved through the door and opened her eyes onto a cluttered apartment that smelled of hamburgers. This was the living room. Shelves made of boards and cinderblocks held a small flat-screen TV and a couch that had seen better days sat across from it. An overstuffed chair that might’ve been new twenty years ago hunkered next to the couch. She heard voices coming from what was probably the kitchen, right off this front room. Magnolia pushed her forward, and Robin peered in. A man she didn’t know sat at a table, while a woman she also didn’t know stood at a stove overseeing a frying pan. The window above the kitchen sink was open a bit.

"I have no idea why the hell I'm here," Robin said in a low voice, though she guessed the apartment's occupants couldn't hear or see them.

"That's Joseph Spinelli," Magnolia said. "Joe, as he prefers." She made a little growling sound. "I'd call him whatever he wants."

"Who?"

Magnolia placed her hand over her heart dramatically and gave her a withering look. "Girl, if he was a queen, his name would be Pink Slip. Courtesy of you."

Robin winced and looked back at him. She'd signed his termination papers a week ago.

"I'll see if I can get some more hours at the restaurant," the woman was saying. "We'll figure it out."

"How?" he asked. "We could barely afford her medicine before I got cut."

"I'll check to see if there's a program we can get on," the woman said, but Robin heard the strain in her voice.

The front door opened and a teenage boy entered. He took his coat and shoes off and left both by the door.

"In here, Mark," Joe called, and the boy went into the kitchen. He wore a shirt with a deli logo on it.

"Got paid," Mark said. He put a check on the table next to Joe, but Joe didn't look at it. The muscles in his jaw clenched. Mark squeezed his dad's shoulder. "Dad, it's okay. The college fund can wait."

The woman gave the boy a hug and a kiss. "Are you hungry?"

"Nah. Had a sandwich at work. You and Dad go ahead."

Another door in the apartment opened, and a girl about eight years old rushed down the hall. "Hi," she said as she gave Mark a hug.

“Hey, careful. Don’t be running like that. It messes with your lungs,” he said, and Robin noted how pale the girl was, though she smiled up at her brother.

“I took my medicine already.”

“Okay, but don’t get wild. There’s only room for one of us to do that here.”

She giggled and sat down at the table.

“Now just you look at that. Cute as a l’il ol’ bug,” Magnolia said, crouching to smile at the little girl though she couldn’t be seen.

“What’s wrong with her?” Robin asked.

Magnolia straightened to her full six feet and some. “Debilitating asthma. And girl, this place doesn’t help.” Magnolia moved to the sink and frowned as she looked at it. “Only so much you can do,” she said, casting a critical gaze at the paint peeling on the ceiling.

“Look, sometimes people get laid off,” Robin said, and it sounded petulant in her ears.

Magnolia turned back toward her, injecting the motion with extra flair. “Yes. They do. But honey, you’d better have a damn good reason when you make such decisions, and you’d better damn sure make room when those chickens come home to roost.”

The girl started coughing, and both Joe and Mark scrutinized her. “I’ll get her inhaler,” Mark said as the girl wheezed. Joe moved over to her and Mark left the room. He went down the short hallway to what Robin guessed were the bedrooms.

“It’s okay, honey,” Joe said in a soothing voice. “Just relax, like the doctor showed you.”

Mark reappeared with an asthma inhaler. He shook it up and handed it to the girl. She took it and managed a puff between wheezes.

“That’s it. Sit still,” Joe said. Mark caught his mom’s eye and they exchanged a look. The girl’s breathing improved and Joe stroked her cheek. “Why don’t you go watch some TV?”

“Okay,” she said, and Robin moved aside for her, though she knew it wasn’t necessary.

“Mark, sit with me,” she called as she got on the couch and turned on the TV.

He did and pulled her against him. “You all right?”

“Yeah. Are we going to be okay?” she said softly. Robin barely caught her question.

“Sure,” he said, but he was lying, and Robin knew it. Her throat tightened, and she could feel Magnolia’s eyes lasering the back of her head.

“Will Daddy get a job?”

“Oh, yeah. He’ll find something soon,” Mark said as he stroked her head. “Don’t worry,” he lied again.

“Why didn’t his boss like him?”

Robin gritted her teeth.

“Sometimes companies are assholes, Annie, and sometimes bosses are, too.”

She stared at him. “You said a bad word.”

“I’m sorry.” He smiled down at her. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.”

“Here’s Mr. Cuddles.” He handed her a stuffed elephant, and she held it tight, snuggled against him.

“I’m tired of being sick,” Annie said after a while.

“As soon as Dad gets a job, we can figure out how to make you feel better. Don’t worry, okay?”

“I’m trying, but it’s hard.”

He gave her a little squeeze. “I know. But you’ve got me and Mom and Dad and we’ll figure everything out.” He smiled, male bravado and assurance in his voice, but Robin knew it was all for show. She clenched her teeth, realizing that it was a lot easier to lay people off when they were just names on a form. Here in Joe Spinelli’s shabby apartment, watching Mark with Annie reminded Robin of her own childhood. Her mom had always scrambled to keep things together, to make sure she and Frank were taken care of, but at the end of the day, it seemed there wasn’t much money to go around.

Mist started to gather in the room and this time, she was relieved and ready to go, ready to leave this indictment of who she was.

“This way, sugar,” Magnolia said, and she grabbed Robin’s wrist and they walked, but Robin didn’t know where. All she could see was Magnolia’s seemingly disembodied glove on her arm and then they were at the car. Ramón stood there, waiting with the passenger door open.

Magnolia got in first with a “thank you, sweetie” to him. Robin followed and settled back into the seat, glad to be out of that apartment and away from the evidence of how low she could go.

“Okay, sugar. Let’s continue on our journey.”

Robin decided she didn’t want to ask. She should have taken Cynthia up on her offer after all. She pushed herself against the seat, as if she could disappear in it. There were lots of jobs in the city. She thought about the other person she’d

laid off with Joe. Linda? No, that wasn't it. L-something. Lydia? That sounded right.

"Sometimes a company's bottom line means you have to make hard choices," Robin said, but she didn't look at Magnolia.

"Honey, where I come from, the bottom line is the lowest mark on your pitcher of margaritas, and the only choice you make is who's buying the next one."

The car glided to a stop, and Robin's door opened. She thought she saw some light through the mist, but she wasn't sure.

"Go on, sweetie. Shake a tail feather."

Robin stepped out of the car, and the mist settled around her like Magnolia's stole. She took a tentative step. And then another, on something that felt more like a floor underfoot than a street.

And then the mist parted, and she was standing in someone's living room. Oh, God. Frank's.

"Well, isn't this Middle America?" Magnolia said as she sashayed over to the photographs on the wall. "Look at you," she said. "A bouncing baby lesbian. Honey, you had the gay all over you from the get-go. Oh, and what's this?"

Robin joined her. A watercolor cityscape hung between the photos, a soft almost impressionistic depiction of Seattle and Puget Sound. She'd done that piece as a freshman in college.

"Girl, you have some skills." Magnolia gave her an appreciative look. "Put that to work, sugar, and use your powers for good."

Robin was about to say something when Frank walked into the room. She hadn't seen him in a year, and in the

stress lines around his eyes, she saw echoes of their mom, who worked all the time to make sure they had the basics. Deb was right behind him, and her body language broadcast tension. Great. Magnolia had dropped her in the middle of a spat between her brother and his wife.

“I feel weird not telling her,” Frank said. He was staring at the painting on the wall. “I mean, I’m going to be a dad. I want to share that with my sister.”

Robin stared. Deb was pregnant?

“Oh, Lord,” Magnolia said. “Drama.” She fanned herself with one gloved hand.

“Baby, I get that,” Deb said. “But she always blows you off. You barely see her anymore, and when you do, it’s never because she wants to.” Deb moved behind Frank and leaned her head against his back as she wrapped her arms around his waist. “Can you see where I’m coming from? I know what it does to you every time she blows you off. Do you honestly think she’s going to be involved in the baby’s life when she can’t even be bothered to be in yours?”

“Oh, snap.” Magnolia said, but Robin was too stunned to even glare at her.

“She’s working through some things,” Frank said, and the pain in his voice made Robin cringe.

“You’ve used that excuse the entire time we’ve been together.” She released him and turned him to face her. “Look at me,” she said. “Frank.” She stroked the side of his face. “I know she’s your sister, and I know that you used to be close. But that’s not true anymore.”

“She’s just lost,” he said, and Robin knew, again, what heartbreak felt like.

“And that’s sad. But you can’t help her. And she doesn’t want your help, anyway.” Deb brushed at the tear on Frank’s cheek. He had always been a crier. Women loved it about him. And apparently queens did, too, because Magnolia dabbed at her eye.

“I’m not going to give up on her,” he said.

Deb smiled and gave him a kiss. “I’m not asking you to. I’m just asking you to have a more realistic view of things, and to stop expecting anything from her. If you can get to that point, then it won’t hurt so much when she doesn’t come through.”

He leaned his forehead against hers. “Should I tell her about the baby?”

“Generally, family members tell each other things like this. But she might not say what you want to hear.”

“What do you mean?” He pulled back slightly.

“What I just said. You might be expecting her to be the sister you had years ago, and that things will go back to that. And if that doesn’t happen—” Deb brushed his hair away from his eyes. “I don’t like to see you hurt.”

He sighed. “It makes me feel bad not to. I know she can be a total jerk, but she’s my sister, and I want her in the loop for this.”

“A jerk?” Robin’s stomach felt as if she’d been punched.

“The reaction she gives might not be what you want,” Deb said. “Be prepared for that.”

“What the hell do you mean?” Robin demanded. “What reaction?”

“Sugar, quiet.” Magnolia put her hands on her hips and stood, statuesque, listening.

“She’ll be happy for us,” Frank said, and it sounded defensive.

“I’m sure she’ll be happy on some level.” Deb put her hands on his shoulders. “But don’t expect anything else from her.”

“That’s cold,” he said.

“Yes, yes it is. Thank you, Frank.” Robin shot Magnolia a look of triumph.

“No, it’s realistic.” Deb rubbed his shoulders. “In the five years we’ve been together, I’ve only been in your sister’s company twice. And the first time was when I met her.”

“Hey, I have a name,” Robin said.

“Girl, is that true?” Magnolia raised her perfect eyebrows. “Twice? In five years?” She shook her head, a gesture that managed to convey both pity and patronization.

Frank smiled at Deb. “Okay, it’s realistic,” he said.

“Hey, wait a minute. Frank—” Dammit. He couldn’t hear her. Robin clenched her fists. “What do you mean, it’s realistic not to expect anything from me?” she asked anyway.

“But I think I’ll still tell her, even if she decides not to be involved.”

“Whatever decision you make about telling her is up to you. The baby will still have involved aunts and uncles,” Deb said.

Frank nodded. “I just wish—”

“I know. Just keep in mind that your sister doesn’t seem to want much to do with us.”

“That is so not true.” Robin was shaking, a mixture of anger, hurt, and pain. “Frank, that’s not true. That is totally not true.”

“When was the last time you had a face-to-face visit with him?” Magnolia asked.

“A year ago.”

“Sugar, it was longer than that.” This time, she almost sounded gentle.

“Frank, don’t listen to her. I’m right here.” Robin patted her chest emphatically. “Right here.”

“Is she coming for Christmas?” Deb asked him.

He hesitated. “Probably not.”

Deb hugged him, and he held her close. In his expression, Robin saw that Deb had made her point. The worst part was that Robin had given her all the ammo.

“It’s not a war, sweets,” Magnolia said. “It’s just life. You make your choices, you own the consequences.” She adjusted her stole.

Robin tried to swallow, but the lump in her throat prevented it. Frank was going to be a dad. And he hadn’t told her. Maybe he had wanted to, the last time they talked, and she’d gone off on him about a practical joke that he said he didn’t do. She gave him no room to talk about it. Robin hadn’t felt this bad since Jill had left. No, this was worse. This was her brother, the little boy she’d tried to protect when they were kids, the man she’d somehow left behind. This was a red-hot poker to the heart. She gulped back a sob.

“My mama always said truth’s a mean bitch.” Magnolia took her arm and guided her through the mist to the car. Ramón closed the door behind her again, but Robin barely noticed. She touched her face. Tears. Her whole body ached with sadness. The car moved. Or maybe the mist did. Robin couldn’t tell and she didn’t care.

“Can I go home?” she asked after a while, glad that Magnolia hadn’t said anything else.

“Soon.”

“I hate this.”

“Change don’t always come with a hot meal and a highball.”

The car stopped, and Robin’s door opened again. “Please, I really just want to go home.”

“Honey, we’re still in the middle of our come-to-Jesus moment. Move your booty on out.”

Robin stepped out of the car. Did Frank really have that conversation with Deb? Or was it all a setup? Her feet sank into carpet, and she smelled familiar cologne. Cynthia. This was the apartment she used with Robin if they didn’t go to Robin’s place.

She heard the unmistakable sounds of Cynthia and sex coming from the bedroom.

“This could be interesting.” Magnolia model-walked to the open doorway. Her heels should have left indentations in the carpet, but they didn’t. “Oh, no she didn’t,” she said, fanning herself.

Robin gritted her teeth and joined Magnolia at the doorway. “Seriously?” she muttered at the sight of Cynthia underneath a naked woman on the bed. Both were going at it hard.

“Mmm mmm,” Magnolia scolded. “Careful where you dip your honeystick, sugar. Because Miss Thing here seems to attract a lot of flies.” She gave Robin a sympathetic look, but it only seemed to make this whole trip worse.

Robin walked away, back to where she estimated they’d arrived, but she still heard the sounds emanating from the

bedroom. Why was she surprised? Hell, Cynthia had screwed around with her, why wouldn't she screw around with someone else? She wondered how many more Cynthia had on her chain, and a wave of queasiness roiled her stomach. If she puked, would Cynthia see it the next morning? Or would it be invisible like Robin was? The thought amused her, and she fought a laugh, knowing that if she started, she'd probably cry, too.

"Hang on, sugar," Magnolia said softly near her ear. "And enjoy the ride."

At the sight of the mist gathering around her feet, she almost cried anyway, from relief. The mist seemed to swell, but Magnolia wasn't with her, and Robin was falling, like the last time she'd gotten a visit from the Bureau. She shut her eyes and braced for a crash. It came, but not as hard as she'd expected. Her feet hit ground, and she stumbled and went down, landing on cold concrete that bit into her palms and her knees. Hard enough to sting.

"Oh, my God, are you okay?" said a woman's voice. It sounded weirdly familiar.

"Yeah, for the most part."

"Here." The stranger took Robin's arm and helped her up.

"What happened?" Robin asked as she inspected her knees. Her slacks hadn't torn, fortunately.

"I don't know. You just seemed to fall. Are you sure you're okay—" the stranger stopped, and Robin looked at her. Her throat seemed to close, and she couldn't talk as they stared at each other.

"Uh," Robin managed after a few seconds.

"Oh, my God. Robin?"

Robin kept staring. “Jill?”

“It *is* you. Oh, my God.”

“I—um.” Robin stared again, at her amazing cheekbones and the still familiar sparkle in her dark eyes. “You cut your hair.”

Jill laughed, and it broke the awkwardness of the moment.

“Oh, Jesus,” Robin said. “I can’t believe I said that. I mean, of course you cut your hair. It’s been years. Why wouldn’t you?” And it looked really cute, with the buzzcut on the sides and back and the punkish spikiness up top. She also had several piercings in one of her ears, each hole decorated with either a silver stud or a small jewel. And she wore a black leather motorcycle jacket, tight dark jeans, and combat boots. Jill had never dressed like that in college. She was always wound a little tight, but sometimes she’d show her rebel side with a punk rock T-shirt and a pair of black canvas sneakers that she’d decorated in art classes. But this—this was so not how she’d been in college.

“And you grew yours out,” Jill said, still smiling. “Oh, my God. I cannot believe it’s you.” She started to move as though she was going to give her a hug but stopped, as if she remembered the circumstances that had created the length of time between them. “So—oh, my God, I have so many questions and it’s so great to see you. But you’re probably on your way somewhere—”

“No, actually, I’m not.” Robin smiled down at her, wondering why it didn’t hurt to see her, and wondering why it felt as though it hadn’t been years between them.

“Oh. That’s—that’s great. I’m having an opening. Across the street.” Jill motioned at a building ablaze with lights and

people. And art. Lots of art. All over the walls, Robin saw through the front windows.

“Seriously?” Robin stared first at the building and then back at Jill.

“Seriously,” she said with a little grin. “And you are now formally invited, if you don’t think it’s too fucked up to do that. Since we haven’t seen each other in a while and you might still—”

“I’d love to.”

“Okay. Come on.”

And Robin followed her across the street, dodging traffic and smiling like she was in college again, going out to explore abandoned buildings looking for objects to use in their art pieces.

She entered the gallery behind Jill, who was greeted effusively by a guy who looked like a thinner, gayer version of Thor.

“You’ve sold five so far,” he said, clearly pleased for her.

“That’s great news. Samo, this is...an old friend from college. Robin.”

“Charmed,” he said with a nod, apparently not one to touch strangers since he didn’t offer his hand.

“Nice to meet you.” Robin returned his nod and several people converged from different directions on Jill, going on about her art.

“I’m going to wander,” Robin said to her as she backed away.

“Thanks. I’ll find you later. So please don’t leave.” Jill smiled.

“I won’t.” Robin half waved and left Jill to her fans. She took her coat off and carried it on one arm, the faint smell

of paint that seemed to always linger in galleries taking her years back, to her days and nights in the studio when she was sure she was an artist, sure that was her path.

Something stirred within her as she stopped to admire one of the larger pieces Jill had chosen for this show. Mixed media, Robin automatically catalogued. Oils and found objects. Jill had painted a day scene of a city port that looked a lot like Seattle's, and she'd incorporated objects like antique fishing lures and hooks and a retro fishing rod. It seemed to be part of a port series she'd done, since this one was called "Port 9." She'd included hints of her Chinese background, in the characters she'd skillfully painted into spots on the canvas.

Bold, Robin thought, to use those kinds of objects, but Jill had placed them in such a way that they complemented the oils with their own bright colors and positions.

"I love this piece," said a woman next to her. "The colors are so vibrant and alive."

"Yeah," Robin agreed, automatically cataloguing the woman, too. Trust fund college student who liked art and the local scenes, she figured.

"Jill Chen is brilliant," said another woman who joined them. College student, probably not trust fund. Funky hipster goth-y, Robin decided. Nose ring and dreads.

"The way she places found objects in her paintings—I can't replicate it," funky hipster said.

"Maybe you shouldn't," Robin said, and both women looked at her as if she'd just slashed the painting. "I mean, maybe you should find your own way, and use media that best expresses *you*."

The women looked less appalled.

“After all, art is your personal creative journey, and how you travel is all you,” Robin said.

Funky hipster nodded. “I feel you.”

“What’s your medium?” Robin asked.

“Mostly photography. But I work with others.”

“What makes you feel the best?”

“Photography and collage, actually.”

“Have you combined them?”

Trust fund leaned in, interested.

“Not really, no,” funky hipster said.

Robin shrugged. “Maybe try it. See if you like how those two play together.”

“Right on.” Funky hipster nodded.

“Good luck,” Robin said and she moved through the crowd toward some of Jill’s other work. That had been a conversation like she used to have back in her art days. Sharing thoughts and offering suggestions. It felt good. Was it some kind of automatic response to art? To being in a place like this? Or was there something changing in her subconscious, brought on by Magnolia and Decker? A waiter in black tie slowed when he saw her.

“Wine?”

“Love some.” Robin took a plastic flute from the tray and sipped. Some kind of chardonnay, she guessed. She moved to the back end of the gallery, which featured a few more of Jill’s oils, all with found objects that echoed the painting themes or provided a juxtaposition that strengthened the relationships between internal elements. Jill leaned toward urban scenes, though she had a couple of landscapes of the Pacific Northwest that were gorgeous, and in each one, she’d included elements that related somehow

to her Chinese background. Robin particularly liked how Jill had incorporated mahjong tiles in a few of her pieces. Jill's older female relatives loved to play that, and Jill's stories of particularly heated games had always make Robin laugh.

She sipped, seeing in these works a maturity and grace that the artist she'd met in college hadn't yet developed, though Robin definitely saw glimpses of her past, in some of her choices of found objects. Whimsical but maybe a little restrained in some instances. Playful and flirtatious in others. And weird, how Robin fell so easily into art vernacular, so easily into a scene like this. Weird, but somehow not.

Robin didn't know how long she'd been in the gallery, but she was nearly finished with her second flute of wine and she'd munched on a plate of cheese and fruit. Many of the pieces had sold already, which made her happy but somehow sad, because she'd lost that part of herself, and somehow, Jill had held on to the dream.

Maybe breaking up had been what Jill had to do in order to remain true to herself, Robin thought. After all, look what she herself had become. A corporate dick who burned her bridges and torched her memories. Another lump formed in her throat, and she tried to wash it down with the last of the wine. She managed to swallow it and then set the flute on a tray stand in a corner.

Robin went back to the painting of the city port, with the fishing lures and the hooks and the fishing rod. Someone had bought it, and Robin wondered if it was the trust fund student from earlier.

"Okay, I think I've pretty much talked to everyone who needs to be talked to," Jill said at Robin's elbow. "What

do you think?" she asked, as if there were only a few days between now and the last time they'd seen each other.

"This one's my favorite," Robin said. "I really love what you did with the objects, and how you've got them positioned."

"Thanks. It might be one of my faves, too."

"So I'll guess you're in Seattle. Or Portland," Robin said.

"Not bad. Seattle. I moved there after college."

Robin nodded, and wondered at the sudden desire she had to pack up and fly across the country to the city of her birth.

"What about you?" Jill asked. She'd taken her motorcycle jacket off, and she wore a creamy white tailored blouse with the top buttons undone, exposing her neck and a bit of cleavage. She wore several silver chains, one with charms on it. When she moved her arm, Robin caught the flash of a blue jewel from her cufflink. Jill was much hotter now than she'd been in college, and she'd been gorgeous then.

"Nothing really to tell. I went business. Executive director of sales at a multinational here."

"Jill—" Samo said from nearby, and Robin was glad he'd interrupted because she didn't want to tell Jill any more about what she did. "When you get a minute?" he added.

"Be right there." Jill turned back to her. "Listen, I really would love to catch up with you." She handed Robin a business card. "I know there's some—well, some baggage between us, so if you don't want to, I understand. But it is great to see you, and I'm really glad I ran into you."

"Yeah. Sure." Robin took the card and smiled. "I'd like that."

"Great. I'm in town through New Year's. Call me."

Robin nodded and watched her walk away, and remembered her fifteen years ago, when she'd first seen her. They'd both been starting their second year of college, and Jill walked into art class that fall semester, conservatively dressed and maybe a little nerdy. But she had glitter on her sneakers and interesting glasses, so Robin introduced herself, and when Jill left class that first day, Robin had wanted to follow. She had that same feeling now.

She glanced around and realized she needed to figure out how to get home from here. Or not. Her chest tightened. Lady Magnolia was chatting up one of the servers not even ten feet away, a particularly handsome man—wait. He could see her? Did that mean Robin was still in some kind of Bureau mindfuck? She scanned the crowd for Jill, panic rising. There she was, still talking to Samo. Robin relaxed. Besides, this was Christmas Present, right? So it was, in fact, the present and this was happening right now. Then why was she able to interact with these people when she hadn't been able to earlier?

Magnolia caught Robin's eye and gave her a sly wink. She blew a kiss at the server and walked toward her, letting her stole hang suggestively on her shoulders. More than a few men tracked her with their gazes.

"I do love art," Magnolia said. "But come on, sugar. It's nearly bedtime, and I have to get you back before you turn into a pumpkin."

"Is this for real?" Robin asked as she followed Magnolia out of the gallery to the wet sidewalk beyond. Robin hadn't noticed that it had started snowing, but the limo was waiting and Ramón got out to open the door for her. "Am I really here?" she asked.

The Bureau of *Holiday Affairs*

“Christmas Present can have many different meanings,” Magnolia said as she got into the limo. Robin followed and settled herself against the leather seat again. She closed her eyes, tired and still emotionally raw.

“That’s it, sugar. You just rest.”

The music seemed to increase in volume, a rhythm and blues number, and Robin was so tired she couldn’t open her eyes if she tried. Maybe Magnolia would let her stay here, on this really comfortable seat. Maybe she could stay here forever, and escape all the shit that swirled in her life. That would be nice, she thought as she drifted to sleep. So nice...

* * *

Bureau of Holiday Affairs

Field Report: Preston, Robin Anne,
DOB June 15, 1978//Seattle, WA
Case Number 26901-15

Agent: your favorite queen

Date of Interaction:

December 19

Methodology Employed: Lady Magnolia special, with extra truth plus a dash of the past.

Results: Subject may have a soul.

Observations/recommendations: My mama always said that sometimes people just need a good size ten stiletto up the tush. Audio and video available.

Personal Overview: I have a soft spot for cute hard-luck lesbian cases. People create barriers to avoid dealing with pain, but they can become a weapon. I think there's a heart in there somewhere. The question is, can our little lost lesbian open it, not only to others, but herself? The Lady is cautiously hopeful, but she knows only too well the fallibility of humankind.

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THE BUREAU OF HOLIDAY AFFAIRS

BY ANDI MARQUETTE

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