

~ Blessings In Disguise ~

by Ambrosia

Disclaimers: Hate to sound possessive but all characters within this story belong to me (grin). If they remind you of someone that ya know, that's just a co-in-ki-dink.

Feedback: If ya'll feel so inclined, you may send your comments to me at SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you and very Happy Holidays! (Um, yes I'm pathetically late...or early)

Part 1

December 18th 2005

They were almost at the security checkpoint when she abruptly stopped walking within the busy terminal. Her partner took another dozen steps before she realized that the tall redhead wasn't beside or right behind her. Turning around with the handle of her suitcase within her grasp, she looked at the other woman curiously. Why was she frowning? Had she left something at home? They had made a 'do not forget' list days in advance of this trip and that morning had successfully checked off all items, so what could she have possibly left behind?

"Honey, come on," Layne called, taking a few steps toward her. "Is something wrong? Did we forget something?"

"We should talk."

"Okay." Layne offered her a smile as she used her thumb to point over her shoulder toward the growing checkpoint. "Can it wait until we find our seats on the plane though? There's a window seat with your name on it."

Shoulder length curly red hair shook from side to side. "No. I rather discuss this now." Picking up her luggage, she headed toward a row of empty seats, choosing one toward the middle. She watched as Layne followed, sitting beside her. "This is so hard for me." Too nervous to keep her eyes on her partner, she stared ahead observing as a little girl asked her mother if they would get to go visit Santa when their plane arrived in grandma's state. "Layne I...you can't get on that plane."

It was Layne's turn to frown. "What? I don't understand. Why can't I get on the plane? Promise I won't freak out and attempt to squeeze all of the blood out of your hand if there's some turbulence," she joked, hoping to gain a smile from the redhead. Unfortunately, her hopes went unanswered since Kirsten's expression didn't alter. Trying not to look as anxious as she felt, Layne fingered the identification tag attached to her black Samsonite upright. "What's going on here Kirsten?"

She opened and closed her mouth several times before the words she needed to say would begin tumbling out. "I was on the Internet one night four months ago and discovered an email from an

old flame who I hadn't spoken with since college. We started corresponding by email and then Yahoo Instant Messenger and then decided to meet about a month after the first email sent to me." Sighing, she chanced a look into Layne's now expressionless face. "You have to understand Layne that none of this was planned. It just happened. But even on the few times that we've met, I never was unfaithful to you. We kissed a handful of times--I admit that but that's all.

"But that's not all we want. As much as this pains me to tell you, we want to be together. I've been trying to gather the courage to tell you for two weeks. He still lives in Albany near my parents so I'll see him while I'm there and we'll tell our parents that we're getting back together. My parents will be so happy--they've always loved Darren. Not that they haven't adored you."

"What?" It wasn't necessary for Kirsten to look at her face in order to decipher the shock. No longer wishing to sit next to her partner, Layne scooted one seat down putting a chair length between them. "You've been cheating on me for months--"

"No, no." She wagged an index finger at Layne, which she had delusions of snapping off. "I never cheated. I wouldn't allow our relationship to go that far out of the respect that I hold for you."

Gray eyes narrowing, Layne's tight fist broke the thin rope connecting her identification tag to her suitcase. "Gee thanks for being so considerate of me that you refrained from sexing up your...boyfriend! BOYFRIEND! Not only did you cheat on me emotionally, you did it with a man? You're not a lesbian anymore?" Not that it truly mattered, but it irritated Layne even more that Kirsten had a mister instead of a mistress.

"I was never a lesbian," Kirsten explained, sounding calm when compared to Layne's near hysteric tone.

If Layne's eyes narrowed any further she wouldn't be able to see. "Four years together and now you admit that you're not a lesbian. Guess this has been an extensive experiment?! Why you Anne Heche mimicking--"

"I never told you that. I'm attracted to men *and* women, which makes me bisexual. And calling me Anne Heche is insulting Layne."

"You deserve every insult I can think of to hurl at you."

The redhead shrugged. "Maybe, but I can't help that by reopening those lines of communication with Darren that I fell back in love with him. We were a couple throughout high school, but we were young then. Now we're adults and able to bridge a deep and hopefully lasting commitment."

"I don't really care what you and he are able to bridge. Hell, you both can jump off of one."

"Layne I never meant to hurt you. You've been great and you've shared so much of yourself with me, which I know isn't easy for you. But I have to follow my heart." The other woman offered

nothing so she continued. "I'll always love you, but it's time for us to part. I know this is lousy timing--one week before Christmas and you'll be all alone--"

"That's right Kirsten. Just dig that knife in deeper by reminding me that I'll be alone in time for Christmas. Why did it take me four years to realize that you were a cold untrustworthy bitch?" It was obviously a rhetorical question since Layne rose and grabbed her suitcase beginning to walk away. She ignored the woman calling her name who had become a stranger within a few minutes. The hurried footsteps approaching caused her to finally turn around. "Go away. Don't want to miss your flight to see lover boy and your family who loves him so very much."

"Layne this isn't some cheap affair. Darren is my first--"

Layne held up a hand, forestalling her declaration of love. "Here's my third!" Her ex caught her meaning when she lowered every finger but the middle one. Taking advantage of Kirsten's speechlessness, she stormed off with the wheels of the Samsonite rolling so rapidly behind that it was a wonder heated smoke didn't emanate from them.

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### **November 26th 2005**

Sprawled across her couch, a supremely bored Dylan Tate channel surfed until her thumb began to ache from punching the tiny up and down arrow buttons. Almost a hundred bucks per month for cable and half the time she couldn't find anything decent to watch. All the movie channels circulated the same few movies several times a week.

Movies. She grinned as her eyes zeroed in on the never before watched by her DVD placed on the scarred wooden coffee table. Always buying cheap bootleg copies of movies her cousin Jimmy had given this particular DVD to her the day before yesterday when he went to her mother's house for Thanksgiving dinner. Dylan's mother might have killed her nephew had she noticed the title.

*Santa's Naughty Elves: The Sequel.* Dylan displayed a mischievous grin. She hadn't seen the first one, but she supposed that she couldn't have missed anything vital. Sitting up, she grabbed the DVD, pried the cover open and carefully removed the shiny disc. She had just inserted it into her DVD player when the doorbell rang. Sprinting toward the door she threw it open seeing no one. Looking up and down the empty hall an irritated Dylan shook her head. *Little punk ass pranksters.*

She almost had the door closed when she heard the tiniest mewl. She expected to spot a kitten when she looked down. To her surprise there was an infant instead. Laying in a car seat and wrapped in a soft pink blanket, the baby slept, unaware that she had been dropped off at someone's doorstep. Dylan merely stared at her for a quarter of a minute before her brain resumed its normal function.

*No freaking way.*

Slipping passed the baby, she ran down the hall glancing toward the bank of elevators on her way to the stairwell. Six floors up from the apartment lobby, long legs moved quickly down the steps, often taking two at a time. Finally pushing through the exit door, Dylan heavily breathed as she hurried up to the late twenties doorman whom she had spoken with just about every day since she moved in two years ago.

"Henry did anyone carrying a baby walk in here recently?" She asked while trying to catch her breath. She peered through the double glass doors although she hadn't a clue who to look for. Who would just leave their new baby on a stranger's doorstep? And why would they travel six floors up to do it?

"I dunno Dyl." The lean young doorman stroked a mostly smooth chin, which he had been trying to grow a beard on since high school. "I don't remember. Think you can refresh my memory somehow?" Although mostly 94% sweet, Henry didn't mind exploiting a situation to make some extra money. That summer he bribed the husband in #4F who he caught cheating for the third time. Henry sweetly ignored his first two indiscretions. However, what he made from the third offense was enough to pay off the balance on his Visa.

Wondering what to charge Dylan for the information she sought, he immediately lost his concentration when a strong hand gripped the crotch of his pants. Grimacing from the pain, Henry stumbled backward until he felt the cool wall at his back. He hoped that someone, anyone would enter the lobby, but the elevators, stairs and front entrance were quiet. If she didn't let up on the pressure soon surely he would pass out.

"How is this for refreshing your memory Henry?" Dylan sarcastically inquired while her hand seemed to further tighten. "Does it help you any?"

The doorman nodded with such intensity that the back of his head banged against the wall. "Yeah, yeah. A lady walked in about ten minutes ago with a baby. Please Dyl," he hoarsely pleaded. "I wanna procreate eventually and I'll need those. Lemme go please."

"You'll tell me whatever I want to know?" When he nodded again she released him. Dylan waited for his sigh of relief to pass before she asked if he recalled what the woman looked like.

Although aching, Henry conjured up an image of the woman. "Yeah, yeah. She was about three inches shorter than you--5'6" I'd say, approximately 120 pounds, between ages 28-32. Caucasian, fair-skinned, shoulder length reddish blonde hair--strawberry blonde I suppose and gray eyes. She wore blue jeans with a rip in the left knee area and a pink long-sleeved blouse trimmed in white around the collar." Dylan seemed so amazed by his description that a proud smile tugged at the doorman's lips. His ambition to become a screenplay writer, Henry always made sure to pay close attention to details.

"Did she say anything to you?"

"No. Nodded and smiled a little as she walked by to an elevator. When she returned she didn't

look at me. Just hurried out the door moving noticeably quicker than she had coming in." He had questioned that, but chalked it up to her being a mother who had dropped her infant off with the babysitter before hurrying off to work because she was late or close to it. She looked familiar, yet Henry couldn't place where he had seen her.

"Which way did she go? Do you know how she was traveling?" Dylan's blue eyes scanned the sidewalk in front of the apartment complex as though expecting the baby deliverer to return.

"Yeah, yeah. She went down the stairs here and to the right. Last time I saw her a block down she was on foot."

Thanking him, Dylan pushed the door open. Thinking before she could bolt, she turned back to Henry. "Do me a favor and go up to my apartment and watch that baby, okay? I'll give you twenty dollars when I get back."

Henry nodded profusely, imaginary dollar signs appearing before his eyes. She had him at 'I'll give'. "Yeah, yeah. Good luck tracking her down Dyl." A moment later she was running along the sidewalk checking each person as she passed them while Henry waited for an elevator car to return to the lobby.

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The door leading into her apartment closed when she returned fifteen minutes later, Dylan twisted the knob and walked inside where she found Henry seated on her couch playing with the tiny socked feet of the abandoned and now awake baby girl. Releasing her feet, he looked up into an obviously disappointed face.

"No luck, huh?"

Shaking her head, Dylan slumped onto the couch. Her eyes connected with a pair that perfectly matched her own. She thought about that for a second before deeming it irrelevant. "What the hell am I gonna do Henry? Why did that woman give me her baby?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. But maybe this will shed some light." Picking up an envelope from the cushion, the doorman gave it to her. "Found that tucked into the side of her car seat."

Her heart sank lower when she read the words printed in the middle of the standard white envelope.

For Dylan Tate

She groaned. "They know me? They gave *me* this baby on purpose?"

Henry shrugged again. "Certainly seems like it. Open it and read it." The main reason he wanted her to read the letter was because he suffered from an incurable case of nose trouble. Hopefully Dylan was a quick reader because he had to return to the lobby in a few minutes.

Inserting her finger through the corner of the envelope, Dylan slowly loosened the adhesive flap until she reached the opposite corner. She apprehensively stared at the thin sheet of paper inside as though she suspected that it might be covered in anthrax. Henry was on the verge of asking if she wanted him to read it for her when Dylan pulled the letter out and unfolded it. Because she opted to read it silently, the doorman was forced to scoot close to join her.

Dylan,

After enduring nearly two months of motherhood I've decided that it isn't the right path for me. I'm no good for Robin, therefore I've selected the person I trust more than anyone to take on the responsibility of raising her, providing for her, loving her--none of which I'm capable of doing.

*She's **your** daughter Dylan. She belongs with you. If it weren't for you, Robin wouldn't exist. I'm sorry to spring this on you, but I know that it's for the best and I didn't feel like confronting you about it face to face knowing the first words out of your mouth might be something akin to 'no freaking (or the more graphic f word) way'. You'll find her important documents (birth certificate, social security card etc.) in her diaper bag.*

Remember that Robin is your responsibility now, so take good care of her. Don't try to find me. I'm already gone.

Celeste

"No fu--" Dylan growled low in her throat as she tossed the letter onto the coffee table. "Can you believe that self-centered nitwit?" She inquired, eyes attempting to burn a hole into the piece of paper written by the person liable for ruining her weekend. "She's *my* daughter? What the hell does that mean? I don't recall donating any of my eggs to Celeste."

"Don't curse in front of Robin."

"What?" Dylan turned blazing eyes on the doorman.

He swallowed yet found the courage to repeat his statement. "Don't curse in front of Robin. Yeah, she's very young but we never know what their little ears may absorb, so be mindful of what you say." He paused thinking back to the woman walking through the lobby with her baby. "Yeah, yeah. I knew she looked familiar. Celeste allowed her hair to grow out."

"Forget her hair. What am I'm going to do about this baby?" She pointed toward Robin who was preparing to take her umpteenth nap today. "I shouldn't be responsible for a baby. I wouldn't trust myself with a cactus! I barely trust myself with me!"

Wearing a thoughtful expression, Henry tapped a finger against his lips as he watched the adorable infant drift off. "She does kinda look like you Dyl. The eye color resemblance is uncanny. And you both have that tiny dimple in your chins."

"Henry there is no way that this baby can biologically belong to me. I've never had any children...I don't want any children." Standing up, Dylan grabbed the teddy bear littered pink and blue diaper bag, slinging the strap over her shoulder. The doorman asked her where she was headed. "Going to see someone who has ample child experience having raised three of her own. My mom." Getting a hold on Robin's method of transportation, Dylan was halfway to the front door when the man remaining on her couch called her back.

"Um, I'm wondering about that twenty you said that you'd give me..."

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### **December 18th 2005**

The small blue velvet bag clutched in her hand, Layne walked into a pawnshop, which happened to be open on a Sunday. The idle pawnbroker festively dressed in a Santa hat and a green sweater with reindeer across it, folded a section of the thick New York Times and laid it on the counter. Greeting his customer with a cheery 'Merry Christmas' he reached for the bag, carefully emptying its contents. Adopting a composed expression although he was beaming on the inside because of the costly jewelry before him, the pawnbroker examined each item.

"I'll give you \$1200 for everything," he commented in a voice, which sounded resigned as though he were offering a higher amount than he should.

Layne thoughtfully nodded. "Alright." Gathering the three bracelets, two necklaces each with its own charm and diamond ring, she tossed them back into the soft bag as the pawnbroker looked at her with bemusement. "I'll find another pawnshop that won't try to rip me off. You know these pieces are worth more than twelve hundred dollars. I've been screwed with enough today." Tugging on the small ropes in order to close the bag, Layne started to leave.

"Miss I'll give you \$2000." Relieved, he watched when she turned back to him. That jewelry was too beautiful to fall into the hands of another broker.

"The cheapest of these cost me about five hundred." It made Layne ill to think of all the money she had spent on Kirsten over the last four years whether it be in jewelry, clothes, a down payment on a brand new car or the eight months she took care of her because she had been laid off from her job and had difficulty finding another that paid just as well. And now two hours ago she had been abandoned at the airport for a first love. Layne couldn't wait to get rid of her jewelry, but she wouldn't let it all go for only two grand.

The pawnbroker sighed inwardly. His large profit was beginning to dwindle. "Okay...\$2700. That's my final offer."

Walking over, Layne placed the bag on the counter. "I accept your final offer."

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November 26th 2005

"Aren't you a cutie pie? Yes, you are! I could just eat you up!" Madeline Tate gushed, kissing the tiny fingertips as the baby seemed to smile at her. The moment that she was introduced to her, she fell in love with her newest 'granddaughter'. If only Reginald had lived to see her.

"Yes, me too," said the younger woman standing next to her, green eyes on the little bundle. "Dylan, go fetch us a couple of spoons." She and her mother shared a chuckle while Dylan perched on the arm of the couch rolled her eyes. Since she didn't move, she obviously didn't intend to appease her younger sibling's request.

Shaking her head from side to side, she watched the pair fussing over the baby. Never mind that she had been saddled with a child that didn't belong with her. Her mother and sister weren't interested in paying any attention to the major issue at hand. Robin was too adorable to think about anything else. Dylan cleared her throat several times before they looked her way.

"I have a plan but I need you two to help me out."

"What's your plan?" Her sister Angela asked, holding up the baby's birth certificate. "Daddy?" Angela grinned, thoroughly enjoying Dylan's resulting frown. Though her name couldn't be on the birth certificate without her permission, Celeste had thought of another route to link her newborn to her ex-lover. Her baby's full name had been typed up as Robin Elaine Tate. Celeste Marie Anderson was her mother and there wasn't an entry for father.

"Mom," she pointedly ignored Angela, "could you take care of the baby while I go search for her mother? Actually find a detective to search? Once Celeste is found and I talk some sense into her she can retrieve her daughter from you." So what if Celeste claimed in her letter that she was gone. Dylan would hire the best detective money could buy--or at least the best detective she could afford. She was certain that the baby's mother would be apprehended soon. Her mission was to find Celeste and then make her believe that she could raise her own child. She just needed to believe in herself. Dylan's speech still needed some work of course.

Madeline shook her head, the opposite of what her eldest daughter figured she would do. She spoke up before Dylan could argue. "You read Celeste's letter. Robin is your responsibility and because you've been allergic to that for 35 years, it's about time that you learn the meaning of the word now."

"What Mom is trying to say is grow up and behave like a woman." Angela was powerless to conceal her grin. She loved her sister, but it was fun to have something to tease her over. "I have four children eleven being the oldest--you can't handle one itty bitty seven week old baby?"

"I don't know the first thing about children!"

"You think motherhood comes with a handbook?" Madeline asked. "Angie and I both had to learn by trial and error. Now so will you. If I didn't believe that you could handle it, I would look after Robin but I know you could if you just tried. If you need help just call me or come right

over. We're only nine miles apart."

Nine miles might as well have been fifty for all the comfort the rather short distance gave her. Although she was beginning to truly panic, Dylan hoped that it wasn't revealed on her face. "Seriously? You want me to take that baby home?"

"That baby has a name and it's Robin," Angela mentioned. "You want me to baby-sit while you nab a detective? I'll give you the sisterly discount, which means that my services are free. When you're done we'll go shopping."

"What for? I'm not in the mood to shop."

"For the baby moron." Neither her mother nor sister figured out how she managed to sound affectionate despite the insult. "Diapers, formula, more clothing. Robin doesn't have much to pick from in that bag and she'll need warmer clothes. Too cold in San Fran for what Celeste packed."

Dylan quickly nodded, anxious to leave. "Sure. Are you going home now?"

"No, one of Calvin's friend's is celebrating his sixth birthday so I'm taking him to the party. Just call my cell when you're ready to pick her up." As if on cue Angela's five-year-old son rushed down the stairs making a beeline for his favorite and only aunt.

Wrapping his arms around her legs, he smiled up at her with one tooth missing toward the front. "Hiya Auntie Dyl."

Rustling his hair, Dylan smiled back. Being an aunt was the closest that she ever wanted to get to having children in her life. "Hey buddy. You ready for your friend's party?"

"Yep! You wanna come with me and Mommy?"

"Wish I could buddy, but I've got to go hire a detective."

Calvin frowned in thought. "What's a detective?"

"A detective is someone you give money to so they can find missing people."

"Who's missing?" He logically inquired.

"A friend of mine named Celeste."

Obviously a pro at asking questions, Calvin drilled his aunt further. Perhaps he would become a lawyer one day. One of the honorable one's of course. "Why is she missing?"

Dylan shrugged one shoulder. "Because she wants to be buddy."

The explanation not making any sense to him, Calvin looked perplexed. "But why? Who wants to be lost?"

His mother was about to intervene when Dylan indicated that she could handle it. Kneeling on the floor so that they could be closer to eye level, she softly smiled at her nephew. "I'm gonna tell you the truth 'cause you're a big boy." He confirmed that with a hearty nod. "I'm not really babysitting. Celeste is the--Robin's mother and this morning she left her on my doorstep because she wants me to have her. I'm not sure why she would do this, so I'm gonna try to find her."

Calvin's eyes brightened considerably. "You mean Robin belongs to us now?" When he first saw the baby, he looked at her as though she were a shiny new bicycle positioned underneath the tree on Christmas morning. Speaking of bicycles, he really had scribbled 'blue bike' on his wish list this year, so he kept his fingers crossed that Santa or Mommy or Daddy would leave one at their tree after they bought and decorated one.

Dylan quickly shook her head. "No, she's Celeste's daughter."

"But she doesn't want her, so why can't we just keep her?" Finders keepers as far as he was concerned.

Is your mother sure that you're only five? Dylan inwardly groaned. "Because it wouldn't be right buddy. Robin should be with her mommy and I'm going to make her mommy understand that they should be together. Celeste is just confused and I intend to help her."

"But for now," Calvin's own mother interjected as she caressed the baby girl's soft cheek with a finger, "Robin will hang out with us while Auntie Dylan goes to take care of some business."

Calvin smiled again. "Cool! She can go to the party?" When his mother assured him that she would, he proceeded to jump around the living room like a miniature kangaroo.

A few minutes later, hugging her mother, sister and no longer bouncing nephew goodbye, Dylan headed toward the front door when Madeline announced that she was forgetting something.

Blue eyes searched the room quizzically. "What Mom?"

"You didn't say goodbye to Robin."

Dylan stared at the older woman. "Mom, she's a week shy of being only two months old. I doubt she'll notice if I leave without letting her know." When Madeline silently gave her the look that she had come to know so well around the tender age of five, Dylan walked back toward the couch, leaned over the dozing baby and whispered goodbye to her.

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**December 19th 2005**

As the plane traveled through the darkened sky, Layne reflected on her day with her eyes closed. That morning--technically yesterday morning now-- without any warning she was dumped at JFK airport for an old boyfriend. Returning to she and Kirsten's home she spent the remainder of the morning and part of the afternoon packing everything that belonged to the redhead except for the jewelry she had bought, which she pawned.

After her trip to the pawnshop, Layne carted half a dozen large cardboard boxes to the nearest UPS where she paid to ship them to Kirsten's parents house. Her first inclination was to destroy Kirsten's belongings, but she thought that creating a bonfire in the backyard was a touch too dramatic. Plus, she didn't want to risk getting caught and end up spending the night in jail. It would be just her luck for that to happen.

Needing to get out of New York City, Layne returned to the airport with no destination in mind. It wasn't until she spied a woman wearing an 'I (heart) San Francisco' sweatshirt that she decided where to travel. An expensive coach ticket purchased to a nonstop flight that wouldn't leave until 1:15 a.m., Layne spent a great deal of the many hours she had to kill inside Starbucks reading a paperback novel and inhaling so much caffeine that there wasn't the slightest chance of her getting any sleep during the approximate six hour flight.

The cabin lights lowered because this was a red eye flight, Layne pressed the tiny button on the side of her digital watch to illuminate the time. Lit with a pale blue light was the time of 2:24. She sighed. So much time with so little to do but to think about the upcoming holiday, which would be torture because she was alone. The worst time of year to be alone was around Christmas. Before she met Kirsten she loathed the holidays. Now those negative feelings had returned with a vengeance.

"Excuse me? Is anyone sitting next to you?"

Layne glanced up to the softly smiling countenance of a woman who appeared to be around her age. She couldn't fathom why or exactly how, but Layne felt the most comfortable rush of warmth flow through her body in that moment. Speech delayed, she shook her head no.

"Would you mind if I sat with you?"

Again, her head shook. Giving herself a mental slap, Layne whispered, "No. I wouldn't." She wondered if she had met this woman before. Something about her was so familiar.

"Thank you." Smiling again, the woman occupied the aisle seat. "Patricia--the person I was sitting next to fell asleep. After I went to the restroom I noticed that you were awake and thought I'd come over to see if you'd like to strike up a conversation."

Layne surprisingly discovered that she didn't mind the company of this woman although a minute ago she hadn't any desire to talk to others. There was something very tranquil about her. "What's your name?"

"You may call me Rose. What's yours?"

"Layne."

"Layne." Rose allowed the name to roll over her tongue thoughtfully. "Is that short for anything? Elaine perhaps?"

"No. Just Layne."

The brunette nodded. "I like it. It's unique."

Layne didn't immediately realize that she was smiling. "Thank you. I've always thought Rose was a pretty name. So feminine and delicate."

"Thank you back Layne. Sweet of you." Readjusting herself in the seat, Rose rested clasped hands in her lap, twiddling her thumbs as she gazed toward her new companion. "Do you have family in San Francisco?"

Family. Not a topic that Layne preferred to discuss. However, she answered the question. "No, I don't. Just visiting the city. Never been there before. You have family there?"

Rose smiled in a way as though she were the keeper of some great secret. "I have family in many places. You'll enjoy San Francisco. I'm certain. It's a beautiful city filled with such diversity." Reaching out, she touched Layne's knee. "Whatever you do, make sure that you pay a visit to Tacky Taco. You will not be disappointed."

One eyebrow arched. "Tacky Taco?"

Rose grinned. "Yes, it's a Mexican restaurant. Everything there is to die for. I'll give you the address and directions from SFO." When she stood up to pull a small notepad and pen from the back pocket of her Levi's, gray eyes were drawn to her shirt. Layne stared in recognition.

"It was you," she half whispered as Rose reclaimed her seat. When the woman asked her what she meant, she continued, "Your shirt was the reason I selected San Francisco to visit. Now I know that I really have seen you before--inside the airport. What a coincidence that we'd meet again."

Rose nodded her agreement. Releasing the tray attached to the seat in front of hers, she opened her notepad and used the tray to write down the directions for Layne. The smaller woman had a sheet of paper folded and tucked into her pocket when a stewardess appeared next to them, a polite smile on her face as she regarded the pair.

"Good morning ladies. Could I offer either of you a beverage or a snack? Maybe a pillow if you wanted to get some rest?" Both declined a pillow, but Layne did order a Coke (she felt like asking the stewardess to add a splash or two of Jack Daniel's to the drink, but decided against it) while Rose asked if they had eggnog.

"We sure do." Leaning over, she whispered, "Would you like to add a little something special to it?"

Rose chuckled good-naturedly. "No, thanks. I'm not much of a drinker. Straight nog for me please."

"You've got it," the stewardess replied while moving back into an upright position. "I'll be back in a jiff with your drinks ladies."

Rose quietly watched Layne for a minute as she gazed through the small window next to her seat. The dejection she felt plainly showed on her face. "You're just visiting San Francisco a week before Christmas, but what are your plans for it?"

Layne shrugged keeping her eyes on the window. "Nothing is set in stone."

"The breakup is difficult for you."

That drew her attention. Layne stared at her, suspicion in her voice when she spoke. "How did you know about my breakup?"

Rose pointed at her bare left ring finger. "The skin at the base of your finger is pale and about the width of a standard sized ring. I assumed that you recently took one off. One reason a person would do that was if someone they were no longer with gave the ring to them. If I'm wrong I apologize."

The stewardess returned with their drinks and Layne waited for her to leave before replying. "No, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm sorry Rose."

"What for sweetheart?" The brunette inquired in such a tender voice. "You haven't done anything wrong."

"I sounded accusatory."

"Well, it *was* a peculiar statement for me to make considering that we met two minutes ago." Lifting her glass, she took a sip of the sweetened drink. She said nothing more, waiting for Layne to take the lead, which she soon did.

"We broke up this--yesterday morning. At JFK." Her voice was soft as she looked at the ice cubes clinking amongst the brown fizzy liquid. "She broke up with me." Layne glanced toward the other passenger to gauge her reaction from the admission of 'she' instead of the most likely expected 'he'. Rose merely wore a 'keep going, I'm listening' expression. Within a few minutes Layne had relayed the details of the break up and all that she had done as a result of it.

A warm hand covered hers and gently squeezed. "I'm sorry that you've had such an arduous day Layne. But you know what?"

Tears threatening to escape to her cheeks, Layne shook her head. "What?" She looked grateful when the other woman dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief that she seemingly pulled out of nowhere. When she finished, Rose placed the snow-white cloth in her palm for her to keep.

"Fair warning that this is going to sound trite, but everything truly does happen for a reason Layne," Rose said, her tone remaining gentle despite the candidness of her assertion. "You and Kirsten obviously were not meant to be together for the rest of your lives. It's my belief that your relationship with her prepared you for one filled with so much more meaning and love--you just have to go out there and search for it. Some we're supposed to be with for a while until we hopefully find that special love of a lifetime."

"I don't think I will." She appeared tired...defeated.

Smiling, Rose squeezed the hand she still held. "I wouldn't throw in the towel so soon if I were you Layne. Think of it this way...Kirsten did you a favor."

Watery gray eyes widened. "Really? Breaking my heart was a favor?"

An enigmatic smile was her immediate reply. A brief and simple 'yes' was her second.

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November 26th 2005

"Why do they charge so much?" Dylan asked, clutching at a pair of tiny pants. "These are for babies, which means less material goes into making them. So what's up with the high prices?"

Her sister rolled her eyes. "I don't know Dyl." She whispered 'cheapo' under her breath.

"I heard that." Dylan smirked, returning the pants to the rack. "And I'm not cheap. Merely economical." She smirked again when she heard Angela's disbelieving snort. "Babies grow fast right? So why buy these expensive clothes when she won't be wearing them in two minutes?"

Angela indicated Robin who was slumbering inside her new stroller, which was three times the price of a stroller that Dylan wanted to purchase. One look at its thin material and Angela was afraid that the baby would fall right through. "So what do you suggest Dyl? Let her go naked until the rate of her growing decreases?"

Dylan rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "That's not a bad idea." A fist connected with her bicep. She rubbed the not so sore spot. "You're mean."

"Ha! Look who's talking, Scrooge."

"Take it back."

Angela defiantly shook her head. "I will not." Her eyes settled on a pinstriped pink and white

jumper, which she snatched from a rack within a millisecond. "Is this cute or what?"

Dylan answered with a noncommittal shrug. You've seen one miniature clothing item, you've seen them all. "It's fine I guess."

"Danger Dylan. You're close to marring the ultra cool personification that you've built by acting *so very* enthusiastic over shopping for your baby."

"Firstly, I couldn't mar my coolness if I tried. The cool factor is so deeply ingrained in my soul that it's not going anywhere." She grinned through her sister's expected eye roll. "Secondly, she's not *my* baby. She's Celeste's and some most likely random--" Dylan's eyes opened to the size of a pair of blue saucers. "Holy mother of..." Long legs feeling a bit weak, she wanted to sit but since there wasn't a chair around them, she chose to lean against the wall.

"What?" Concerned, Angela watched the blood drain from her sibling's face. "Dylan what's wrong?!"

Eleven months ago

Juggling a grease stained paper bag filled with boxes of Chinese food and two 16-ounce bottles of chilled Coke in one arm, it took Dylan a minute to get the front door unlocked. As was usually the case when her girlfriend wasn't at work, she expected to find Celeste seated on the couch watching television or reading a magazine but the t.v. screen was blank and the living room undisturbed.

It was almost eleven o'clock, so maybe she had already gone to bed. Out of town the last couple of days because of a comic book signing her agent set up, Dylan wasn't supposed to return to San Francisco until tomorrow morning, but wanting to surprise Celeste she obtained an earlier flight. And despite the fact that she had probably eaten dinner already, she always had extra room for Chinese--her favorite food.

Depositing her aromatic loot in the kitchen, Dylan headed down the hall to her bedroom. The door ajar, she heard a noise--a moan. Celeste must have fallen asleep with the television on. Grinning, Dylan placed a palm on the door, beginning to push it further open. The following moans led her to believe that her girlfriend had been watching Cinemax or one of the 'special' DVD's Jimmy had supplied his cousin with.

*Dylan's libido escaped into the abyss the moment her eyes landed on her bed. **Her** bed. They were doing it on **HER** bed! Standing at the entrance of her bedroom door, Dylan was somewhere between revolted and completely revolted.*

In television shows and movies, there was a variety of ways that people dealt with coming home and face to face with their partner's infidelity. Some simply turned around, left and pretended that they hadn't seen it for reasons only they may be aware of. Some confronted their cheating spouse right there, causing the immoral duo to frantically crawl out of the bed and scramble for

their clothing as they tried to come up with a plausible reason for what they had just been caught doing, though none existed. Others drastically snapped doing something that would presumably have them introduced to a prison cell for a minimum of 5-10 years.

Too pissed to leave without them knowing and not pissed enough to risk being handcuffed and taken to jail, Dylan opted for the confrontation. Teeth unclenching, she opened her mouth. "Are we having fun guys?"

Using the man four years her junior for a chair, Celeste hurriedly looked over her shoulder while the young man anxiously peered around her. "Shit...Dylan you weren't supposed to be home until tomorrow." Getting off of him, the strawberry blonde stood up and searched the carpet for her panties, which were half concealed by the bed skirt.

"I'm so sorry for interrupting your screwing session. Should I leave my apartment and return in the morning when you and my brother are done? Or would you like some extra time? Will noon be enough?"

"Sis, it's not what it looked like," her brother shakily stated, pulling on his pants and briefs at the same time.

"Of course it wasn't. You were naked wrestling--a wonderful sport. How stupid do you think I am Reggie?" When Dylan took a step toward him, he jumped back knocking the lamp off the nightstand in the process. Twenty-five bucks down the drain. If required to she would terrify his unscrupulous ass into reimbursing her for breaking it.

"N--not stupid Dyl." Their matching blue orbs interlocked. "Look, it only happened a few--" A second later Reginald Tate Jr. found out what 'punch your lights out' truly meant when he slumped to the floor, dead to the world.

Back to the present

"You really think Robin could be Reggie's daughter?" Angela asked. Sharing a paper basket of chili cheese fries, they occupied a booth within the food courtyard on the second level of the mall.

Dylan nodded, her lips wrapped around the straw partially buried inside a thick chocolate shake. She swallowed. "It's possible. It explains why people seem to think that this baby--Robin looks like me. Out of the three of us, Reggie and I look the most alike." Thinking back to that day again, she groaned. "And the time they had their week long affair correlates with Robin's birth date. *And* it explains why Celeste thinks she should be with me. In her twisted way I'm the reason why this baby exists. Like it's my fault that she cheated on me with my own damn brother." Shoving a cheesy fry into her mouth, she asked Angela where their sibling was.

"I don't know." To her credit, Angela's expression revealed nothing. Unfortunately, Dylan remained convinced that there wasn't something to be revealed, so again she asked. "Dylan, I

swear."

Wiping her chili scented digits with her napkin, Dylan tossed the soiled balled up paper on the table and sat back, a dark brow rising in suspicion. "You think I believe you Angie?"

Angela raised her own eyebrow, however, she deemed it didn't look anywhere near as intimidating as her sister's. "Think I care if you believe me?" She didn't give the older woman a chance to respond. "Hypothetically speaking, if I did know where Reggie was, why should I tell you? You broke his nose."

"Hypothetically my a--" She glanced at Robin who had awakened but seemingly paid no attention to their conversation. "Butt. Reggie deserved it. Of all the women in San Fran he fu-- sleeps with my girlfriend! My flesh and blood brother of all people!" Out of the corner of her eye she noticed that the small group seated at the booth near theirs curiously looked her way, so she lowered her voice. "Angie, I need to find him. He needs to know about Robin. Promise I won't break any other part of his body. Just wanna talk."

Sighing, Angela nibbled on the tip of a fry, contemplating whether she should tell when Reggie practically begged her not to the day he left San Francisco, a splint covering his bruised and fractured face. So distressed was he to leave the town where his irate sibling resided that bits of the clothing he haphazardly packed could be viewed from the sides of his suitcase. Angela frowned when Dylan pulled the basket of food away from her. "Hey what are you..."

"No more munchies until you tell me where our wayward little brother is hiding out."

"He's not hiding out. He's living his life elsewhere."

Dylan appeared triumphant. "So you do know where he is! Tell me." As an afterthought she added 'please'. Angela kept her mouth shut, aggravating the other woman. "Why are you protecting Reggie? Giving him money and--"

"How do you know I gave him money?"

"I saw it written in your checkbook a few months back. A copy of a two hundred dollar check with the memo 'for Reggie'.

"And what were you doing looking in my checkbook?"

Dylan knowingly smirked. "You're not redirecting this conversation. If it's crossed your mind I wasn't stealing. On that particular day I was over at your house when the paperboy came to collect payment. You were busy admonishing Natalie for encouraging Calvin to insert his head through the banister where he was at that time stuck."

"Oh, yeah. I recall that." Angela nodded, remembering that day as clearly as if it had occurred just yesterday. Crisco had come in handy for more than cooking chicken that day.

"Yes. You had the check filled out already, but it was still attached to your checkbook, so you asked me to tear it out and give it to him. That's when I saw the copy of the amount you gave--I say gave because I'm sure he never repaid you--to Reggie. So, I'm asking you again. Where is he?" Dylan was 99% positive that Reggie wouldn't be thrilled to learn that he might have a daughter, but he did have the right to know. She doubted that Celeste had discovered where he was and told him.

Drumming her fingertips on the table, Angela thought for five more seconds before caving. "New York City."

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### **December 19th 2005**

Suppressing a yawn, Layne carefully watched the other passengers vacate the airplane she'd walked off of a few minutes ago. She was on the lookout for Rose, but so far she hadn't seen her walk into SFO.

When the pilot alerted them that the plane would be landing soon, Rose decided to head back to her seat. Gracing Layne with what was most certainly the best hug of her life, the woman smiled tenderly and walked down the aisle toward the back of the plane. Scooting into the empty seat, Layne was able to see where she was seated next to Patricia who was now awake and reading a magazine. And that was the last time she saw Rose.

When the crewmembers entered the airport, Layne began to frown. That was it. They were closing the door. So where was she? She hadn't missed Rose. Layne had searched every face that had been on the red eye flight.

Locating her airline, Layne walked right up to a woman who looked cheerful and bright-eyed despite the time. She then spied the gigantic container of coffee sitting by the employee's computer and inwardly smiled. That probably had something to do with it.

"Morning Tammy," Layne read her badge as she casually leaned against the desk. "I'm looking for someone. Think you can help me?"

"I sure hope so. Just maybe I can. What do you need?" Tammy looked borderline flirtatious, a grin playing on her crimson tinted lips as she eyed what she silently called a lethally cute little blonde.

"This woman and I were on the same flight together, which just arrived not too long ago from JFK airport and we spent most of that flight talking, but I never caught her last name. I know it might be against policy, but you could please look it up for me? I'd be *so* grateful."

Tammy couldn't hide her disappointment. So the lethal blonde was interested in someone she met during the flight. Oh, well. She consoled herself with the fact that there were plenty of fish in the sea. However, few were as fetching as the one before her. Making sure that no one was

listening, she asked Layne for her acquaintance's first name.

The blonde gratefully answered, "Rose."

Both of the employee's eyebrows rose as she studied the results on her screen. She then glanced up toward Layne and back to the screen in perplexity. "Hm, honey, tell me you're not crushing on a 73 year old."

"Huh?"

Tammy tapped the screen with a French tip manicured nail. "The only Rose on flight 181--is that your flight?" Layne nodded. "Okay, the only passenger that goes by that name is Rose Miller and she's 73."

"That's not my Rose. I'd say that she was in her thirties. What if you tried Roslyn, Roseanne, Rosanna or something?"

Tammy shook her head. "Already done. Just Rose Miller. Maybe she gave you a false name?" She offered as gently as she could.

Layne shrugged. Perhaps she had, although she couldn't come up with a reason why Rose would lie about her name. *You may call me Rose*, was what she said when asked about her name. Not plain old 'it's Rose', but you may call me Rose. Could that have been her way of getting around the customary inquiry without technically telling a lie? Either that or she was extremely well kept for someone in her early seventies.

Layne had a thought. "Patricia. She was seated next to a woman named Patricia, but she sat in the vacant seat next to mine during the majority of the flight. Could you search for those who were booked next to someone named Patricia? She could have been mid-forties."

Endlessly patient, especially with cute little blondes, Tammy resumed her search for the elusive 'Rose'. "I've come up with three Patricias. One was seated next to her husband and another Patricia was 24 years old and seated on a row of three seats, the middle seat vacant. The last *was* 46, but she was seated alone."

A blonde head eagerly moved back and forth. "That has to be her. Rose was her seating companion."

Tammy shrugged, at a loss. "Perhaps, but if so she had the wrong seat."

Layne was on the verge of conceding defeat that she would never find Rose when she spied a stewardess rolling what was probably her own suitcase. She was the same stewardess that took their drink orders. She could confirm that Layne wasn't losing what remained of her mind. Remembering her name, she cupped her hands around her mouth and called out the employee's name. She had to do so twice before the woman turned around quizzically. Making a u-turn she walked up to Layne, that polite smile in place.

"Hi, thanks for coming over. Do you remember me by any chance?"

The stewardess seemed to think for a moment and then her eyes lit with recognition. "You ordered the Coke. Seat 35C." She was often told that she had the memory of an elephant. She gave credit to a daily intake of ginkgo biloba.

"Yes. Do you recall the seat number of the woman who sat next to me for most of the flight?"

The stewardess's smile faltered as she started to frown. "You sat alone." When she glanced in Tammy's direction, the woman just shrugged.

"I know there wasn't anyone reserved to sit next to me, but she came over a little while after we were in the air. Her name is Rose."

"Ma'am, every time I passed by your row, you were alone."

Running a hand through short golden locks, Layne aimed to hide her agitation. None of this made any sense. "You remembered me ordering a Coke but you don't remember that Rose ordered an eggnog?" The other woman stared with a blank expression. "You asked if she wanted something special added to it."

"I don't recall such a conversation. I'm so sorry ma'am. I never ever saw you talking with anyone."

Tammy asked Layne if she would like her to page security. The events of the last twenty-four hours slammed into her. Every ounce of patience drained into an imaginary sink, Layne whirled on Tammy. "What for?! So they can haul me off to a loony bin?" She started to speak again and the passenger cut her off. "No. I've noticed the looks you two have been giving each other. Why don't you just say it? You think I'm crazy!" Layne released a shaky breath, the tears welling within her eyes. "Shit, maybe I am!"

The stewardess dared to touch her arm the two seconds Layne allowed before stepping backward. "Ma'am, why don't we have a seat and--"

"Thanks for the offer but I'd rather not sit!" As curious passerby looked in their direction, the tears fell. The sympathetic glances from Tammy and the stewardess only agitated her further. "I just want to find my friend but you two are hinting that she doesn't exist. It sucks when you've lost everyone and then you can't even hold on to an 'invented' friend. Everyone leaves...everyone." Layne decided to leave before she had a total breakdown in front of strangers. "One more question. Either of you know how far the Golden Gate Bridge is from here?"

"Uh, about twenty miles give or take," Tammy quietly answered while wondering why she wanted to know. The passenger thanked them and headed off. She kept walking when Tammy voiced her question. She and the stewardess exchanged equally concerned and helpless looks.

Seated on the lid of a toilet five minutes later, Layne reached toward the roll of tissue paper to snag a few sections when she remembered the handkerchief that Rose had given her when she cried on the plane. Now if she weren't real, Layne shouldn't be able to find it.

She didn't know whether she should laugh or cry when she pulled the directions to Tacky Taco and the handkerchief from her pocket. It wasn't her handwriting and how would she know how to direct herself to the restaurant when she had never been there? For the first time she noticed the initials stitched in silver thread on the soft cloth. Neither letter was an 'R' for Rose. So who in the world was D.T.?

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November 27th 2005

"Dylan. Dylan," she softly called. "Dylan," she called a little louder once five seconds passed without comment. When that didn't work, she tapped her on the forehead. A soft grunt and the other woman stirred, long lashes blinking several times. She looked around in confusion before she remembered that they were on a plane headed to New York City.

Wiping at her eyes, she looked toward the left where her sister was seated. "What?" Her voice sounded thick so she cleared her throat. "Did you slap me on the head?"

Angela slowly batted her eyelashes. "Now why would I do something like that to you?"

"Cause you're mean?"

"That's the second time in twenty-four hours that you've called me mean."

Dylan stared for a moment. "Then this should reveal something about your personality that you should work on changing for the better little sister."

Between them, Robin lay sucking her pacifier as she checked out her surroundings within her new car seat, which converted into a stroller. Awake since the plane took off down the runway, she showed no signs of drifting to sleep. When a finger stroked her cheek she looked up at her possible youngest aunt and displayed a toothless smile once the pacifier escaped from her mouth and rolled down her chest.

Angela waited to see if Dylan would assist the baby in retrieving her spit shined implement. When Dylan only looked away, Angela picked up and cleaned the pacifier before gently reinserting it between soft rosy lips. The only times that Dylan had vaguely interacted with Robin was to carry her inside the car seat or push her around with the stroller. She hadn't picked her up, fed her, changed a dirty diaper...nothing. In fact, she rarely looked the baby's way as though she were afraid that Robin was a pint-sized Medusa who could turn her into stone with one glance.

Deciding to join Dylan on her trip to NYC to visit their brother (her main reason to chaperone so that a fight wouldn't break out between the two) they booked a flight leaving early the next morning. Although she and their mother agreed that Robin was Dylan's responsibility, she took the baby home with her for the night after her sister hinted that she would prefer her to. This pleased Calvin very much. So much that he neglected his bed to sleep in the same room with his just discovered 'cousin'.

"Dylan I've made a decision," Angela started, this being the reason she wanted her sister to wake up.

"Yeah?"

"Regardless of what we discover in New York with the paternity test, I'll take Robin home with me. You don't have to keep her until you find Celeste. It's obvious that you two aren't bonding."

Dylan ignored the last part of that. "What if I don't find her and the baby isn't related to us?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

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### **December 19th 2005**

She didn't bother renting an automobile, so Layne took a taxi to the Golden Gate Bridge that evening, having spent the day sightseeing. Paying the cabbie and adding a nice tip, she grabbed her luggage and exited the car. Glad that she had thought to pack a jacket and was wearing it, she pulled up the attached hood, allowing it to frame her face. Pulling her luggage behind, she stepped onto the empty walkway choosing a direction.

About midway through the massive bridge, Layne walked up to the railing gazing toward the strait, which appeared darker than it would during the daytime. The cab driver insisted that she return in the morning to stroll along the bridge since pedestrians were supposed to be there only during the daylight hours and the gates would be closing at six o'clock. However, when Layne graced him with the largest tip he had received in months, he shut up. If she wanted to walk the bridge in freezing temperatures at night then that was her business.

Layne removed the item covered with a paper bag from her suitcase. Pulling it out, she stuffed the bag back into the suitcase before she looked at the glass sheathed amber liquid. A stop at the liquor store and she ended up having that Jack Daniels anyway. Good old Jack Daniels...pain numbing J.D. Layne smiled ruefully. Pathetic, but he was the closest she felt to having a friend right now.

Carefully arranging the bottle of whiskey on the railing, Layne climbed it, within seconds seated on it. That wasn't the most comfortable position, but it would have to do. The whiskey remaining undisturbed, Layne wrapped her chilled fingers around the railing as she swung her legs to and fro. As she enjoyed the view as much as she could enjoy anything with the mood she was in, she

wondered if she were to disappear if anyone would truly miss her. She thought about everyone that she knew, ultimately shaking her head.

Not a soul.

Lifting the bottle, she ran her fingers over the label. "Just you and me buddy. Merry Christmas Jack."

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November 27th 2005

Because Angela had taken the baby to the restroom to change her diaper, Reginald Tate Jr. was apprehensive about walking up to his other sister without Angela there acting as a buffer. True, she hadn't attempted to break his nose again, but this didn't mean that Reggie wasn't on high alert. Dylan wasn't exactly behaving warm and friendly toward him, which he completely understood.

Last year he had betrayed her and would never forgive himself. Now that unforgivable action may have resulted in a child. A child his sisters had been correct about--he was nowhere near ready to be someone's father.

Biting the bullet, Reggie soundlessly walked further into the waiting room, which was empty except for he and Dylan. Damn. No witnesses in case she decided to get physical. He was debating whether to leave until Angela returned when inquisitive blue eyes met his.

"What?"

His gulp was loud enough that she had to have heard it. "Um, could we talk? About the baby?"

"Okay." Folding her arms over her chest, she waited for him to elaborate.

Reggie didn't bother to sit because this conversation wouldn't last long unless Dylan chose to extend it. "If the DNA test proves that I'm the father, I can't really be her father. I know I'm almost thirty, but you know that I've never wanted kids and obviously Celeste didn't want me to have or even know about her anyway. So...it's up to you and Angie what you wanna do. I'll relinquish my rights. Just send me the papers or whatever."

Dylan remained unsurprised. The moment Reggie learned of his possible daughter that morning when they showed up on his doorstep, he looked like someone had just informed him that he had a week left to live. "Okay."

"So...can I take off now? You and Angie will call me tomorrow with the results? Or did you want me to come back to this lab?"

"We'll call you."

Reggie nodded, her brevity putting him more ill at ease. "Alright, I'll go. You have my cell number." Dylan nodded. "Okay, well...bye Dyl."

She actually raised a hand to wave. "Bye." She watched her brother turn to leave and then change his mind, heading back toward her. Opening his green and blue Velcro wallet, he extracted a twenty and ten-dollar bill, which he tried to give Dylan. She wouldn't accept. "Don't want your money Reggie."

Insisting, he thrust the bills into her hand, keeping his fingers wrapped over hers. "It's not much, but please take it anyway. You can buy you and Angie some lunch. I got paid Friday and I'll only end up doing something stupid with it, so with you it'll be put to better use."

"Okay." Dylan tried to take her hand back yet he wouldn't let go. She looked up, Reggie finally surprising her when she observed his handsome face. The last time Dylan remembered seeing tears in his eyes was on the day they buried their father nearly four years ago. "Reggie..."

"Dylan I..." His dark head shaking, Reggie squeezed the hand containing thirty dollars that no longer belonged to him. Hot tears slid down his lightly bearded face as he tugged his sister's hand, silently urging her to rise. When her rear failed to budge from the chair, Reggie sent her an imploring look. "Please," his voice softening, he tried another tug. "Hug me Dylan. I need a hug from you." The crack in his voice effectively melted a chunk of the glacier surrounding the part of her heart sealed off from her brother.

Dylan had barely stood up when the tall man rushed into her arms, holding on like someone trying to cling to life itself. Slowly, she raised her arms and wrapped them around his torso as she felt his tears dampening the skin of her neck. His body shook as he released the anguish held inside since the day he annihilated the trust and love between he and Dylan.

"I'm sorry Dyl," Reggie whispered, his face pressed into the side of her neck. "I'm so sorry for what I did. I didn't...I never wanted to hurt you. Love you, I do. I miss you."

Eyes glistening with tears, Dylan noticed Angela pushing the stroller away from the room to give them some privacy. Inhaling deeply, she clutched the nape of her brother's neck, gently squeezing. "I know you didn't want to hurt me, but you did. You hurt me more than Celeste because you're my family."

Reggie took a step backward so that he could see her. Hands on her shoulders, he sniffed in need of a tissue. "I'll never do anything like that again. I swear Dyl. You, Mom and Angie are the last people I ever wanna hurt."

Dylan seemed thoughtful, not giving him a swift reply. When she did speak she eased his despair somewhat. "Why don't you come home for Christmas? Mom would love for you to be there. Your niece and nephews would too." Angie's children loved their uncle. He almost always had miniature Hershey's in his pockets whenever he visited. However, they loved him just as much on those rare occasions that he forgot to purchase some of the chocolate little candies.

"Really?"

She nodded. "Yes. Really. You could stay with me while you're in town if you want." If someone had told her even an hour ago that she would be inviting her brother home for Christmas, she would call him or her crazy.

Reggie beamed, his face twice as handsome because of it. "I believe I'll take you up on that." Again he grabbed her hand, but released it within a few seconds. "Thank you Dylan. I know we have a long way to go, but--" Two fingers sealed his lips together.

"I love you too Reggie," Dylan quietly stated. "And I didn't realize until today--stubbornness wouldn't permit me to realize that I've missed you." If he beamed anymore she would require shades to look at him. "See you next month okay?"

"Okay. Great. I can't wait." Another quick hug and Reggie headed out. A couple of minutes later Angela wheeled Robin in.

Smiling, she threw an arm around her older sibling's shoulders and planted a large wet kiss on her cheek. "I'm so proud of you for mending things with Reggie. Never saw that coming."

"Neither did I."

From the convertible stroller Robin gurgled her agreement.

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It was Angela's turn to wait while her sister partook of the DNA laboratory's restroom. Eyes a faint pink from crying, Dylan washed her face with cool water before she used the tiny bottle of Clear Eyes that Angela had in her purse. After several attempts, she successfully put two drops in each eye.

She was wiping the wasted drops from her face when the entrance to the restroom opened and an employee walked in. Dylan recognized her as the technician who took DNA samples from the inside of hers and Reggie's cheeks. Because they didn't have a sample of Celeste's DNA to compare Reggie's with, which would make the results more accurate, Dylan was having a test conducted as well. Although her results wouldn't be irrefutable proof that she had a biological relation to Robin because she wasn't her parent, it could help in determining whether they were likely to be relatives.

"We meet again Dylan," the tech amicably stated, eyes falling on the small bottle placed on the counter. Pointing at it she asked, "You suffer with dry eyes? I have that problem around this time of the year. Sometimes I wipe so much, I visualize that my eyeballs will fall out rolling across the floor like those 25 cents gumballs."

That made Dylan laugh. "No, Kirsten. I uh...got a little weepy." Grabbing the Clear Eyes, she

put it inside her jacket.

"Oh, yeah?" Walking up to the long row of sinks, Kirsten rested her hip against the counter.

"Want to talk about it? Nervous about the results?"

"I guess. Yeah, I am nervous."

"What are you hoping for?"

Dylan mulled over the question. She realized that she didn't quite know what she was hoping the test results would reveal and said as much. "If she's my brother's child, she's family regardless of how he feels about being a father. I guess my sister will seek guardianship. If she's not my brother's child and her mother doesn't return..." Dylan moved her shoulders up and down once. "I don't know. I don't know what we'll do." Blood or no blood, she couldn't imagine taking Robin to child welfare, where she would undoubtedly be placed in a foster home. Although there had to be good ones, Dylan had heard her share of horror stories concerning foster homes. The guilt would consume her as she imagined which Robin had ended up in.

"Celeste--that's the mother's name right?"

"Yeah."

"She left Robin with you? I mean on your doorstep?" Dylan nodded. "May I ask why you're evidently not going to seek guardianship?" Kirsten smiled a bit. "I thought she was your daughter when I first saw you two."

"I wouldn't make a good mo--guardian."

"How will you know for sure unless you try? You might surprise yourself Dylan."

*Yeah, maybe surprise myself by screwing up more than I suspected.* "Do you have children?"

"I did," Kirsten softly replied. "A girl. She passed away last year, ten days before Christmas. She had SIDS."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I...I can't imagine..."

"It was worse on my partner. She blamed herself--still does--but she didn't do anything wrong. She read so many books while she was pregnant with Kate that she could give Dr. Spock tips." Kirsten thoughtfully paused, twirling a lock of red hair around her finger. "We are grateful for the time we had with our daughter. Kate gave us three beautiful months."

Dylan suddenly felt like crying again. "Will you and your partner have another baby?"

"No," the technician resolutely answered. "Listen Dylan," she touched the woman's arm, "don't be so quick to denounce yourself as a good parent. You need to believe in yourself. As parents

we learn along the way. There would be times when you'd screw up, but guess what? You're only human." Kirsten smiled at her. "You're supposed to screw up. Hell, it's practically an obligation. Give yourself a break because I assure you that you can do a hell of a lot more than you think." A couple of pats to Dylan's arm and she headed toward a stall.

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Insistent wailing woke Dylan up at the outrageous time of 2:14 a.m. She peeked from underneath the covers toward the crib provided by their hotel placed in front of the window. Through the bars she noticed one little fist thrusting into the air, its owner demanding some attention. Since Angela was sleeping in the full-sized bed five feet from hers, Dylan looked at her, willing her to awaken with that look. It didn't do any good. Angela neither moved nor made a sound.

When did she become a deep sleeper? It wasn't like she had time to practice with four rugrats (affectionately referred to as) running around. Dylan could remember when they were children her sister could wake up if a cotton ball fell on the floor so this didn't add up. A burglar wouldn't be able to make it pass the window. However, she couldn't just allow the baby to ball her head off until she was too tired to cry anymore.

Throwing the covers back, Dylan was grateful that they had left the heater on auto. She felt comfortably warm moving around the small bedroom in boxer shorts and a short-sleeved undershirt. Once she reached the cherry wood crib she glanced over her shoulder to check her younger sibling's condition because if she was awake she could take over. Still comatose. Dylan smirked. Or pretending to be.

Hands on the railing, Dylan gazed toward the fussy baby. Cheeks reddened, Robin looked back, pleading to be comforted.

"What's the matter Robin?" The brunette whispered. She waited a moment as if she expected Robin to reply. Of course, she only continued to cry. Sighing, Dylan thought about waking her sister up, but if she didn't want to be disturbed than she could (hopefully) handle this on her own. After all, Angela had helped her so much already and taking a couple of days off work to accompany her to New York on the spur of the moment was wonderful of the busy woman with her own large family to take care of.

"Are you wet?" Undoing the snaps on her soft pink romper, Dylan gently inserted an index finger underneath the baby's diaper. Quickly removing her finger, Dylan nodded to herself. Robin definitely needed a fresh Pampers. "Okay, okay. It's gonna be all right. I'll take care of it." After a trip to the bathroom to give her hands a thorough washing, Dylan carefully lifted the baby girl who had quieted for the most part and carried her to the changing table, which already held everything that she would need.

Dylan gave herself a pep talk. She wasn't a stranger to changing diapers. Not many, but at some points in their infancy she had cleaned all of her niece and nephews tushies. This would be a piece of cake right? She nodded in reply to her own question, agreeing with...herself.

Seconds short of ten minutes later, Robin had been rid of her soiled diaper, cleansed with baby wipes and secured with a dry Pampers. Her look of contentment vanished, replaced with cries when she was placed back inside the crib. Obviously, this was Robin's way of saying that she wasn't ready to go back to bed. The moment Dylan reclaimed her, the cries ceased. She looked up when the woman who very well could be her aunt sighed.

"What is it Robin? Aren't you tired? It's late." The baby began to whimper. "Are you hungry? Let's go find you a bottle." Thinking that was the solution to her problem, Dylan carried Robin into the small living room, their destination the kitchenette. Half a dozen times she tried unsuccessfully to get the baby to accept the bottle of warm milk, but Robin wouldn't have it. She kept turning her head from side to side, softly whimpering each time the rubber nipple brushed against her mouth.

Surrendering to defeat, the brunette dropped the bottle on the counter, her eyes moving to the bedroom door, which she had kept cracked. She stared longingly, willing her sister to come to her rescue. All of her staring didn't make the woman snuggled within the bed on the other side get up and enter the front of their hotel room. A fussy infant cried, needing her attention. Blinking, Dylan looked down at her.

"Okay Robbie, you've got me." She felt a smile tugging at her lips. "You like that for a nickname kid? Robbie." She started to stroll across the carpet, recalling that babies tended to gain comfort from motion. "Your mother selected a pretty name for you, but Robbie is cool for a girl's nickname." Robin yawned causing Dylan to laugh. "Am I boring you? Or are you just tired?" It was then that she had another idea. Perhaps this wouldn't fail. "You want to hear a song? Maybe that'll send you to dreamland. What kind of music do you like?"

Dylan thought about some of the many songs that she knew by heart, songs that had anything to do with the word 'baby'. She couldn't remember the last time that she had sung for another person. Most of her singing was reserved for shower time or while she drove without passengers. "Okay, how about this?"

*Baby hold on to me
Whatever will be, will be
The future is ours to see
So baby hold on to me*

Dylan began to tap her foot to the rhythm of the rock song, Robin gently swaying in her arms.

*Baby, what's these things you've been sayin'
About me behind my--*

Robin's sudden cry assured the person holding her that she had had enough of the song. "You don't like Eddie Money, eh?" Robin continued to cry. "Alright, let's try another tune. Ooh, maybe you'd prefer a lullaby?" Did she know any lullabies? Dylan searched the dusty child related files within her brain. Locating one that she knew the lyrics to she blew the particles of dust from its portfolio. "Got one!"

*Hush, little baby, don't say a word
Dylan's gonna buy you a mockingbird*

*And if that mockingbird won't sing
Dylan's gonna buy you a diamond--*

Diamonds were not Robin's best friends. Her cries were louder with the lullaby than the Eddie Money song. Dylan returned to the files. When she started Goodnite Sweetheart, Goodnite, she didn't get passed the first line. "Aw, Robbie. Not making this easy are you?" She paced the carpet, feeling a pair of watery blue eyes watching her. It occurred to Dylan that the baby girl might not be a fan of lullabies. Or maybe she just didn't like those particular songs. Well since they were the only ones Dylan could recover from her internal file cabinets, she thought it best to come up with something else to sing.

"Ah, it's the holidays right? Think we should sing something Christmassy?" Robin just stared at her while smacking her lips together. "Alright. I'll take that as a yes." A cabinet containing much less dust was opened and within seconds Dylan found a carol, which she happened to enjoy listening to around this time of the year. She didn't recognize that her audience had doubled when she began, her lilting voice drawing the interest of both.

*Silent night, holy night
All is calm all is bright
'Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from Heaven afar,
Heavenly ghosts sing alleluia
Christ the Savior is born
Christ the Savior is born.*

*Silent night, holy night
Son of God love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth
Oh, Jesus Lord, at Thy birth.*

A bright smile on her lips and tears shining in her emerald eyes, Angela soundlessly slipped back into the room. She would wait until later to compliment her sister on the beautiful mini performance. She couldn't have sounded much better if she had an orchestra accompanying her.

Dylan smiled as well, watching the infant finally drift to sleep. Go Silent Night! Instead of putting Robin back to bed, she carefully sat down in the recliner after pushing back the heavy curtains so she could view the nightlights of the city. Reflectively gazing through the picture window, she absently rubbed Robin's soft cheek.

"Robbie, it's not that I don't like you," she said, aware that the baby was fully asleep. "I think you're adorable, sweet and you smell good even when you have a poopy diaper." Dylan smiled down at the bundle nestled within her arms. "But you know, I just...the reason I've ignored you is because I'm afraid. I'm afraid that I'll do something stupid and you're too precious for me to screw up.

"I never wanted children though I love being an aunt. My niece and nephews have spent the night before, but I have the luxury of knowing that it's temporary. I can easily send 'em back. But my own children." The woman shivered. "I'd be responsible for them around the clock until they're at least eighteen. I won't bull--I won't lie. That terrifies me kid.

"So as you can see there's no way that I could keep you. You deserve better than me. You could do so much better, which is why I and your Aunt Angela think you should live with her. At least until we find Celeste." Releasing an exasperated breath Dylan looked through the window just in time to witness a falling star. She closed her eyes as she thought of a wish.

My wish is that...I wish that Robin would have a blessed life.

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### **December 19th 2005**

Perched on her railing, Layne watched the bright star soaring over the sky. Thinking that she should make a wish even though she doubted that it would ever come to fruition, the blonde softly spoke.

"I wish that my life would take a turn for the better." She snorted derisively. Layne tried to shy away from self pity, but she could only absorb so much tribulation until getting to that point where she wondered 'why me'. She had reached that point tonight. What had she done to deserve this loneliness? Throughout her life it had been by her side on and off (more on than off). Layne was tired of being alone. Ending up alone.

Oh, yes. She still had Jack. Picking up the unopened bottle, Layne wrapped her hand around the top ready to break the seal.

"You always drink alone?" Asked the person not sounding more than a few feet away from where the moody woman sat. "And seated on the railings of a bridge?"

"What's it to you?" Layne asked, turning her head to the right and looking over her shoulder to where a young man stood. His hair briefly caught her attention. The mop of dark brown locks reminded her of curly fries. *Wonder if it's painful to comb all that out...*

Although catching the hint that he wasn't wanted, he smiled. "I'm a curious kinda dude."

Layne glanced behind him to a parked blue car, the make of which she couldn't decipher in the dimmed light. So why had this young man pulled over on the Golden Gate Bridge? To help her? Her thoughts led to Rose, who she was 80% sure didn't exist despite the directions to Tacky Taco and the handkerchief. Was he a figment of her imagination too? A male version of Rose?

"Did Rose send you?" Layne noted that he seemed genuinely confused by the question.

"Who's Rose?" Shoving his hands into the deep pockets of baggy black jeans, he inched toward her. "I know a Lily." His smile made him appear even younger. "She's a friend of my sister's. Hot too. Older than me, but I prefer my women seasoned. Now I just have to figure out how to get Lily to be my woman. Been trying for ten years."

"You get points for persistence." Still trying to decide whether he and his car were real, Layne chuckled. "What're you doing here..."

"Jimmy. Jimmy Tate."

He offered a last name unlike Rose. However, that didn't prove his existence. "Okay Jimmy Tate. What are you doing here?"

"I was on my way home and I saw you sitting here by yourself. Something told me to stop and come see how you were."

"Thank you Jimmy. That's very kind of you, but I'm fine. You go on home. It's cold out here."

"Doesn't bother me. I'm cold-natured." Like Elvis would say, he was shaking like a leaf on a tree. "Did you drive here?" Layne shook her head. "I'll give you a lift then. The pedestrian walk is gonna close in a few minutes." Jimmy wasn't routinely slapped with the stupid stick. Spotting a hooded figure as he drove across the bridge, his gut told him that the person was a prospective jumper. Unfortunately, the Golden Gate Bridge was a popular location for those who wanted to end their lives. If he had anything to say about it, there wouldn't be a successful attempt that evening.

"I know it'll close at six. I'll be leaving soon."

Jimmy frowned. The way she said that didn't settle well with him. He actually felt nauseous. Grabbing the neck of the Jack Daniels, his pitching skills aided him when he threw it. They watched the bottle flip through the air until gravity called it toward the water. A splash and it disappeared beneath, never to be seen by either of them again.

"Why did you do that?" Layne inquired. She sounded more curious than angry that her unopened whiskey was thrown away without her consent.

"You don't need alcohol. Especially when you're sitting on the ledge of a bridge that has a two-hundred foot drop."

Bringing her upper body forward, the blonde looked below. Removing his hands from his pockets, Jimmy prepared himself to catch as he closely watched her, hoping that she wouldn't decide to let go. "Is that the downward distance?"

"Y--yes. Hey, what's your name?"

"Layne." A pause. "Layne Bishop."

"Well Layne I'd like to treat you to a cup of coffee or hot chocolate. How does that sound, huh? Whipped cream, marshmallows...I promise you can have a cherry on top if you want."

Continuing to stare downward, she didn't give the frantic young man an immediate response. When she did look toward him there was a trace of a smile on her lips. "Jimmy have you heard of a restaurant called Tacky Taco?"

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November 28th 2005

She had another niece. For the hundredth time today Dylan mentioned this little fact to herself. The results from she and Reggie's DNA samples strongly indicated that Robin was a bona fide Tate. Along with reminding herself that she had another niece, she questioned 'what now'.

On the plane ride home it was her turn to awaken her sister. One squeeze of the shoulder and Angela was wide-awake. "What's up? Are we there?"

"Not yet. We need to talk. I've been thinking while you slept."

"Ow. Did that hurt you?"

"That's so freaking hilarious Angie." Dylan smirked. "Seriously. I need to talk with you about our niece." Between them like the last trip, Robin was catching up on her beauty sleep.

"Alright sweetie. I'm listening."

"Um," collecting her words, Dylan took a couple of sips from her glass of Sprite. Slowly placing it on the table she turned toward her attentive sibling. Fingers drummed an unsteady beat on her thighs while she tried to push the words out of her mouth. "I uh, I'll take her--you know, like on a trial basis."

Angela raised one eyebrow and then decided to add its twin. Her ears were surely playing tricks. "Please rephrase that."

As if it gave her courage, Dylan swallowed the remainder of her beverage. "Celeste left her with me. You and Mom said that she was my responsibility and I've come to realize that you're right. You have your own family and I'm older with no one to look after but myself. I should do this. I should at least try to do this, which is why I tacked on the trial basis. Robin stays with me, but I'll need daily input from you and Mom, okay? Don't be surprised if I call around midnight. First thing tomorrow I'll go wherever I need to go to obtain guardianship."

Dylan fished a piece of ice from her glass as her sister began to smile a very proud smile. At age 35 she was finally becoming a grownup. *Who would have think it?* "What made you change your mind?"

Strong teeth crunched the ice cube into tiny pieces. "That's just it. I think I've misplaced it somewhere."

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### **December 19th 2005**

Braking at a stoplight, Jimmy covertly glanced toward his introverted passenger. With the hood lowered he couldn't shake the feeling that he had seen her somewhere before. She sure was pretty. Obviously sad though. He wondered what events in her life had been responsible for Layne wanting to end it all by jumping off a bridge.

"I wouldn't have jumped," the blonde commented as though she had read his inward musings. She smiled at him though the sadness remained visible. "I admit that I thought about it during my taxi ride to Golden Gate, but I honestly believe that I wouldn't have gone through with it. My life is shitty right now, but..." She shrugged. "It's mine. What's the use of throwing it away?"

Relieved, Jimmy might have reached over to embrace her if the light hadn't chosen that instant to turn green. "Dude I'm so glad to hear you say that Layne. My sentiments exactly too. There isn't any use doing that. No matter how much crap life throws your way, you gotta keep fighting. Don't give up."

Her smile brightened a fraction. What a cutie he was. Not having any siblings, Layne wished that she had a little brother just like him. "I won't Jimmy."

The silence resumed until Jimmy thought of something else to say. "Is there anyone you'd like to call? I have plenty of minutes on my cell if you wanna use it."

Layne shook her head. "Thank you, but there's no one Jimmy."

"You sure? A boyfriend? Parents? Sister or brother? A friend maybe?"

"I'm gay, but no girlfriend either. I never knew my parents. No siblings and...no friends really." Her friends were originally Kirsten's friends; therefore with their breakup those friends disappeared.

"Were you adopted?" Jimmy gently asked. His heart was breaking for her. How could she be so alone?

"No. More foster parents than I can remember though." A week after she turned eighteen Layne was informed none too gently that she was officially on her own. Since her last foster parents would no longer receive monthly checks for sheltering her, she wasn't any good to them. Fortunately, Layne had prepared for being let go on her 18th birthday by having held one job or another the last three years and saving most of what she made in a steel cash box, which had to be opened with the small key she kept in her possession at all times.

The day she left her final foster home, she moved into her first apartment, which she had scouted out weeks before. It was tiny enough that the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom seemed to be in such close proximity of each other that one could almost sit on the bed brushing their teeth while watching their eggs scramble in a frying pan, but at least she had a place to call home. Layne had known many of the kids she met in foster care to end up on the streets once they reached adulthood.

Like many who grew up in foster homes or were adopted, Layne felt an urge to locate her biological parents. Obviously they never wanted her, but at least they could answer her questions concerning the precise reason she was given away. A few months prior to her 19th birthday, she was successful. However, Jonathan and Ella Brown wouldn't be offering her any answers because they were in a fatal car accident back in 1977 when Layne was five years old. Most of her resentment departing within seconds of discovering this, she spent the next several days crying as though she remembered them.

What she did learn was that Jonathan and Ella was a young married couple around her age when she was conceived. They chose to give her away three months after her birth, so Layne had deduced that they couldn't handle being parents and thought this was best for their new baby. She searched for other relatives but came up with nothing. The common surname of Brown wasn't exactly helpful.

"I'm sorry Layne."

"Thanks Jimmy, but it's alright." It really wasn't, but she tried to pretend as though it was. Depressed enough without thoughts of her biological parents, Layne sought to change the subject. "So tell me something about you. I already know that you're one of the sweetest young men I've ever met." She noticed his blushing cheeks in the darkened car.

"Don't let me fool you. You just need to get to know me better!" Jimmy was delighted that his reply made her laugh. "Let's see...I'm 24, single and searching and I'm an employee in my dad's lawn care business. Been doing that for four years now."

"So you mow lawns and whatnot?"

Jimmy nodded, the mop on his head bouncing in every direction. "Yeah. I have a good list of

steady clients. Along with mowing their lawns I trim and shape hedges, cultivate flower gardens and I've recently gotten into installing sprinkler systems."

"Can you create those interesting designs out of hedges?" Layne grinned. "Like Edward Scissorhands?"

The young man chuckled. "Not quite that good, but I do alright. What do you do for a living Layne?"

"I'm a freelance muralist."

Jimmy's face screwed up in thought. "Is that somebody who paints pictures on walls?"

"Correct."

"Wicked! Where can I find your work?"

Layne chuckled. "You'd have to go to NYC and surrounding cities. This is my first day in San Francisco. Too bad I didn't bring my portfolio. I have pictures of every mural I've ever created in there."

"Internet maybe?"

Layne lightly slapped her forehead. "Now why didn't I think of that? I have a website. It's sketchy because I put it together myself and I'm lacking in Internet design competence, but you can see some of my murals there." She removed one of the business cards, which she liked to keep a few of in her wallet and handed it to Jimmy. With a basic background of a bucket of blue paint with a wood-handled paintbrush sticking from it, the rectangular card had the heading 'Bishop Designs' arched across it. Below that in a small black font was the muralist's full name, cell and office number and both email and website addresses.

"I could fix it up for you. Your website," Jimmy offered, already having decided that he would do it for free.

"On top being one of San Francisco's most prolific lawn care specialists, you're a web designer as well?"

Through his reddening face Jimmy grinned. "I'm not sure what prolific means, but it's the perfect description of me!"

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December 19th 2005 (continuance)

Cell phone in hand, Dylan checked for any messages that she might have missed, which would have been difficult since she had it on vibrate and the ringtone volume at the highest level.

However, just in case...

"What are you doin'?" Her friend asked as she returned to their table at Tacky Taco. Reseated, Lindsay Stansfield's expression switched between irritation and amusement. She was convinced that if Dylan could, she would glue that phone to her palm. Practically having to drag her out of her apartment so she could hang out with grownups for a while, Lindsay had to continually remind her that Angela, a mother of four was more than capable of taking care of Robin for a few hours.

"Just checking for messages." Dylan sipped from a glass containing her virgin strawberry margarita. She'd never had a virgin before. Margarita that is.

"And did you find any?" Lindsay inquired, already knowing her answer.

"No." A brief pause and then she asked her friend if she should call her sister just to make sure that everything was alright.

"Everything *is* alright. If it weren't Angela would call you. I know ya love that baby, but ya don't have to be with her 24/7 Dyl." Lindsay muttered something under her breath about her friends turning toward domestication.

Putting the menu down, Dylan looked at her. "Huh?"

Lindsay attempted to refrain from explaining with a quiet 'never mind', but the other woman insisted. She traced the ring of moisture left on the table from her iced tea glass. "Adriana--she's late by the way--is dating this woman who has two small children and last week mentioned that they're thinkin' 'bout movin' in together. Eleven months--doesn't that seem soon to you?"

Dylan shrugged. "Seems alright to me. A little month shy of a year of dating." She produced an even bigger shrug when Lindsay frowned, not liking that they weren't in accordance. "Well, it does."

"And my friends Erin and Court are having a baby and every other word outta their mouths is about pregnancy, babies, parenting techniques, cloth or disposable diapers for his or her delicate bottom? Now as excited as I am for 'em, it seems like lately that they only have baby on the brain. I wonder how much that'll increase once Erin gives birth next spring." She looked quite miserable. "They probably won't hang out with friends again until that child is in preschool. Or high school. Nah, college."

Chuckling, Dylan selected a warm tortilla chip from the festive basket of red and green ones. "Did someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning? Everything alright with you and Nancy?" She thought about pointing out that Lindsay and her girlfriend had been together longer than the married couple she just spoke of who were into domestication, but she kept this thought to herself.

"Fine...so far."

"Meaning?"

"Meanin' that I'm just waitin' for that day when she pops the question or hints that I should. So far, I haven't gotten the impression she's ready to get hitched. I love Nancy and all, but marriage is a giant leap and I wanna wait 'til I'm sure that we're absolutely ready for it."

"Maybe she's subtle. Or you're oblivious. I'd bet big bucks on that last one." Dylan barely dodged a chip hurled toward her forehead.

"Don't play with your food," their just arrived mutual friend Iris said while hooking the strap of her purse on the back of a chair waiting for her behind. Coming from an uber neat family she leaned down, retrieved the chip and then wrapped it inside a napkin to be thrown away. Sitting, she rolled dark eyes at the pair. "30+ women should display more intelligence."

"Bite me." The Southerner teasingly grinned.

Iris chuckled despite the effort not to. "Where's Adriana?"

"I don't believe this shit," Dylan grumbled.

"Be cool Dyl. You're that hungry? She's not that late. Probably traffic or her two acquired kids holdin' her up." Lindsay realized that her friend wasn't looking at her, but over her shoulder. She would hate to be the person receiving that glare. Both she and Iris turned, not immediately seeing what had the now fuming woman's attention.

Without a word, she was up and on the move, long legs carrying her quickly through the restaurant as her friends watched inquisitively from their table. Lindsay and Iris shared a gasp when Dylan stopped in front of a table with two customers familiar to them. What were they doing at Tacky Taco together? Better yet, why was one of them still in San Francisco?

Lindsay's eyes opened comically wide. "Pardon my coarse language, but the shit's gonna hit the fan now!" Iris nodded in agreement, looking toward the table although she wouldn't be able to hear them.

Dylan began to speak when the duo looked up at her. "This is what I'd call partial *déjà vu*. Only because you're with another member of my family and this time I caught you with your clothes *on*." Because she didn't want to draw the attention of other customers and the Tacky Taco staff, Dylan pulled out a chair and sat, her cousin on her left side and her ex on her right. She distributed her glower between them, because both were in the doghouse. "How nice of you to treat her to dinner first Jimmy. Make sure you put little jimmy on 'cause I don't want another baby left on my doorstep."

Her cousin stared, obviously bemused. "What? I dunno what you're talking about Dyl."

She looked at him as though he just asked what two plus two equaled. "You dunno Jimmy?"

Without removing her eyes from him, she jabbed a thumb toward his eating companion. "That's what I'm talking about. Of all people what are you doing with her?"

Jimmy nervously glanced toward the similarly bemused blonde. "Uh, we're just here to eat dinner. She got a recommendation for Mexican. You know Layne?"

"Who the hell is Layne?"

"I am," the blonde softly admitted. She wished that she hadn't said anything when those blazing blue orbs settled on her.

"Layne? Your name is Layne now?" Scaring the proverbial crap out of them, Dylan laughed. They were grateful that it didn't last long.

"Now? It's always been Layne. Do you think I'm someone else?"

"Give it up Celeste. I wasn't born yesterday."

"Whoa hold on. You think she's Robin's mother?"

Dylan clenched her hands together to reduce the temptation to slap him upside his curly head. "It's a fact Jimmy. Except for the hair color change and the much shorter style, she looks exactly like her 'cause she *is* her!" It occurred to Dylan that maybe her cousin wasn't aware of who he was dining with. He saw Celeste on a few occasions during the time they dated. He didn't remember her face? She asked him.

When Jimmy started to answer in the affirmative, he realized that he didn't actually have a clear picture of his cousin's ex-girlfriend. However, Layne's earlier familiarity now made sense. But--she couldn't be Celeste, right? There wouldn't be any point in pretending that she was someone else. Plus, anyone who wanted to be in disguise should do more than alter their hairstyle.

Layne incredulously looked at the young man. "You're suspicious of me too? You saw my business card with my name printed on it. Layne Bishop. Not Celeste..."

"Anderson," Dylan helpfully supplied. "Why are you still in San Francisco? I thought you'd live two thousand miles away by now." Last week Dylan informed her private detective that she would no longer require his services. Unfortunately, he hadn't found any leads on where Celeste might have gone. She wasn't the world's best mother, but she was a pro at playing hide and go seek.

"I just arrived here this morning. This is my first trip to SF. I reside in New York City."

Dylan's eyebrows lifted into her hairline. Could it be a coincidence that she lived in the same city as Reggie? Doubtful. "See Reggie much?" She smirked in response to the other woman's blank stare. "Allow me to guess. You don't know who Reggie is? Perhaps you're suffering from amnesia Celeste."

"Stop calling me Celeste."

"Just because you've given yourself a different name doesn't mean that you're not the same selfish bitch I know and despise."

Tossing her cloth napkin on the table, Layne rose and stormed away from the table. She had just made it outside when Dylan and Jimmy caught up with her. She jerked her arm away when Dylan tried to grip it. The taller woman took an involuntary step back when she was pushed in the chest.

"Do not touch me," Layne warned, appearing just as incensed as this stranger she wanted to slug. "Don't you ever put your hands on me."

Dylan apologized before could stop that part of her brain which felt remorse from sending the signal to convey it to her lips. She didn't owe Celeste an apology. That should have gone the other way around. "Look. We need to talk."

"No we don't, because I don't know who you are. I don't know what you're talking about. Jimmy could you open your car so I can retrieve my luggage?"

Keys in hand, Jimmy headed into the parking lot while Dylan asked the blonde if she cared about her baby at all. She was unprepared to witness the sorrow, which entered those haunting gray eyes.

"I love my baby with all my heart." Layne threw her hands up in the air. "What is this about? I honestly don't know where you're coming from and I can't fathom how you would know anything about my daughter. Who are you?"

Groaning, Dylan briskly rubbed her palms up and down her face several times before dropping them. "You admit that you have a daughter, but you won't admit that you know me?" Layne didn't speak. "Fine. I'll play this your way. My name is Dylan Tate and your baby was left on my doorstep on November 26th and with my family's guidance I've been taking care of her ever since. I tried to find you, but last Thursday I surrendered. I should have listened to what you wrote in the letter you left with the baby. Don't try to find you because you're already gone. But now, here you are."

"Is this some sick joke?"

Again, Dylan was caught off guard. "What?"

"You saying that you have my daughter. That's..." Layne stood there slowly shaking her head as Jimmy quietly approached with her suitcase. "I can't even find the correct word for it. My daughter passed away last December." Because she had the brunette speechless, Layne pulled a photograph from her wallet, holding it in front of the woman's face. "This is my daughter Katherine. Do you have her Dylan? Because I was under the impression that she was being taken

care of by angels, which you most certainly are not." Putting her photo away, Layne grabbed her suitcase's handle.

"Um," Jimmy chose to take advantage of the resulting silence, "Cuz I think you have the wrong person. That baby isn't Robin. Why would Celeste be carrying a picture of another child?"

"She just happens to look identical to Celeste?" Jimmy shrugged. Layne glared. Dylan cursed. "This isn't a sick joke. I wouldn't joke about a child. I have a baby--she's ten weeks old. Her name is Robin and her mother Celeste left her in my care last month. A couple of days after I had her I found out that Reggie, who is my brother, is her father through a DNA test. However, he doesn't want to be a father so I being Robin's aunt attained guardianship. You're telling me that you are not Celeste although you look exactly like her?"

"Yes."

"That's hard for me to believe."

"Well you better try harder. I don't have any other children. How can I make you understand I'm not the person you've been searching for? I'd like to do that so I can be on my way."

Dylan looked thoughtful. "Celeste has a tattoo. A red and black butterfly in the middle of her lower back."

Without comment, Layne turned around and pulled up her blouse halfway to expose a smooth unmarked back. As if she suspected trickery, Dylan moved closer, bending over so that she could inspect the area where the butterfly should have been. So far, possibly one point went to Layne, yet she wasn't thoroughly convinced. Surely no two strangers looked this much alike.

"You could have had laser surgery."

Gray eyes rolled. Like being dumped days before Christmas and then making a fool of herself at SFO airport that morning wasn't enough to deal with. Now she was being accused of abandoning a baby that she never laid eyes on. One day she would be able to reflect back on the end of 2005 and laugh about these peculiar happenings right? Uh huh. "Anything else then? Anything else distinctive about her?"

"Kind of strawberry-shaped birthmark on the back of her left shoulder."

Layne revealed her left shoulder, which was devoid of a birthmark. "Did I have that removed as well?" She smirked. "FYI, I did have a birthmark on my right shoulder, but it faded years ago."

A frown in place, Dylan folded her arms over her chest. "Your age?"

"33."

Her eyes narrowed. "Same as Celeste."

"Fantastic," was the younger woman's dry response. "Here." Taking out her wallet again she slapped it into Dylan's palm. "Go through my wallet. Do you sincerely think if I were Celeste that I would go through all the trouble to create not only a new I.D. card but also credit cards, business cards, my social security card? All of that is fake?"

Taking her up on the generous offer, Dylan rifled through the wallet. To her untrained eye everything looked authentic. Two credit cards, an ATM/debit card, drivers' license, social security card, business cards and two photos, both of the baby named Katherine. The second photograph included the blonde with shoulder length hair. Holding an obvious freshly arrived from the womb Katherine in her arms, she smiled for the camera while reclining in a rocking chair.

The photograph wasn't a fake. Layne or Celeste was holding a baby who although just as pretty as her Robin, wasn't her.

"Does she know how to draw?" Focused on the photo, Dylan had to ask her to repeat the question. "Celeste. Has she ever displayed any drawing talent?"

Dylan shook her head as she returned the wallet to its owner. "I'm a comic strip artist and sometimes she--"

"Don't forget that you're now a comic *book* artist too." A proud smile lit up Jimmy's previously tense face when he reminded his cousin about the acclaimed comic book based on her strip that was published last year. It seemed to take hundreds of revisions (at least to him) but finally Dylan was content with what she had created. The comic book did so well that her agent, fans, friends and family (especially Jimmy) encouraged her to publish a sequel.

"Right Jimmy." The brunette's cheeks looked a bit rosy. "So sometimes Celeste would doodle in my sketch pads. I'll put her talents this way--she couldn't draw well enough to give a kindergartener competition."

Her suitcase unzipped and quickly rummaged through, Layne produced a notebook with a mechanical pencil clipped to it. She asked the other woman to give her something to draw as she found a blank page. Taking the risk of getting her pants dirty, Layne kneeled on the ground using her thigh as an anchor for the notebook. Pencil hovering above paper she waited for Dylan to speak. She expected for her to come up with something such as a horse, oak tree, a basket of fruit or a stately house...

"A fully loaded taco. Doing a dance."

Layne stared in disbelief. "You want me to draw a dancing taco?" She watched as Dylan shrugged and thought she heard Jimmy faintly chuckle, but since she only had eyes for his accusatory cousin she couldn't be sure.

Dylan pointed toward the luminescent Tacky Taco sign. "In honor of one of the best Mexican

restaurants in San Francisco."

"O...kay. Give me a few minutes." Lead introduced to the paper, Layne began to draw, her hand effortlessly moving along the page. Dylan and Jimmy observed with fascination as the image of an animated taco steadily formed. Loaded with ground beef, lettuce, diced tomatoes and shredded cheese, the taco had a pair of round bright eyes on the front of its crispy shell along with a smiling mouth. Lean although shapely legs extended from the bottom of the taco shell complete with laced up sneakers. In its slim fingers the dancing taco held a Walkman, earphones on either side of the top of its shell.

When she finished Layne signed her name in the lower right corner of the page, tore it from her notebook and handed it to Dylan. Putting her belongings away, she eyed the woman studying her drawing.

"Let me guess Dylan," Layne started as she stood. "During the months you haven't seen me I took an art class and that's why I now can draw. Am I right? Is this what's going through that head of yours?"

Dazed blue eyes remained glued to the dancing taco. "You used your right hand without any problems," she softly replied.

"I should. I'm right-handed."

Lowering the blonde's artwork, Dylan stared at her. "Celeste is left-handed."

A hand on his cousin's shoulder, Jimmy squeezed. "Cuz I'm believing more and more that you're barking up the wrong tree. She looks like Celeste yeah, but she's not her."

When Dylan refused to quickly concur with the young man Layne groaned. Why wasn't there a way to fast forward through the rest of December? If a magical remote control existed she would be willing to pay a good sum of money for it. "I'll take a DNA test and then you can leave me alone once you get the results back."

"You'll really do that?"

"To get rid of you? Absolutely. Where did you get the test done with your brother to prove paternity?"

"That was in New York. I'll have to find a lab here."

Layne offered her a business card. "Call me when you have a place and I'll meet you there."

Bidding them both a goodnight, she started to leave when predictably Dylan called her back.

"What is it now? I've had a long day and I'm tired. Right now I just want to get a hotel room and go to sleep."

"How do I know you're not gonna try to skip town?" Dylan tapped the card in her hand. "These

phone numbers and Internet addresses won't help me in tracking you down."

A light chuckle passing her lips, Layne sifted a hand through her hair making the short blonde locks stand at odd angles. "I'm going to give it to you straight Dylan. I don't owe you shit. I've agreed to this DNA test just to get you out of my face. So to answer your question you don't know that I'll leave. But you have no alternative but to practice a little blind faith. And if you try to follow me I won't hesitate to call the police to have your paranoid ass arrested for harassment. Now goodnight Dylan." Taking a deep breath she turned to Jimmy. "Jimmy despite the events of the last twenty minutes it was nice to meet you. Thank you for being so kind. Have a good night."

"You too Layne. It was nice meeting you," he responded, wearing an apologetic expression. "Could I give you a ride?"

"No thank you. During our drive to this restaurant I noticed a hotel, which is within walking distance. If they don't have any vacancies I can just call a taxi to another." A small wave only meant for Jimmy and Layne began to walk toward the street, her suitcase traveling immediately behind.

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The festive Jingle Bells ringtone on her cell started as she was unpacking her suitcase. Just after Thanksgiving she had selected it to play every time she received a call. She would have to change it although Christmas wasn't over yet. Christmas...bah hum bug.

Tossing a rolled up pair of socks in the drawer she grabbed the tiny phone flipping it open. "Hello?"

"Hi. Is Celeste there?"

She smirked into the receiver. An attempted trick. How endearing. "No it's Layne, Dylan. I don't have the slightest idea where Celeste is."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I heard you speak less than an hour ago. I remembered your annoying voice." She actually thought it was sexy, but Dylan didn't have to know that.

The comic ignored her reply. "One of Jimmy's best friend's mother is a physician who specializes in DNA analysis and she's willing to see us tonight. So can you meet me?"

Layne glanced at the clock. "Tonight? It's almost nine!" Her longing gaze drifted to the bed. She could almost hear it calling out her name. *Layne, oh Layne...lay your head on my pillow.*

"If we collect yours and Robin's DNA tonight we can have the results by tomorrow afternoon. The sooner we do this the sooner you can get my paranoid ass out of your life right?"

"Well when you put it that way..."

~~~~~

Dylan knocked on the door and then walked inside the office when she noticed the blonde seated before a large desk sipping coffee from a mug with the name of the laboratory printed around it. Murmuring a 'good afternoon' she occupied the chair next to her. Putting the mug on a coaster, the other woman looked toward her right studying empty arms.

"Do you really have a baby?"

Dylan raised an inquisitive brow. "Pardon?"

"Robin. I've yet to see her." When Layne arrived last night, she discovered that Robin's DNA had already been collected and that she was on her way back to her Aunt Angela's home. However, Dylan didn't leave until Layne's part of the process was completed. Probably because she wanted to guarantee that the 'so-called' muralist truly left her buccal swab.

"Miss her?"

"I can't miss her because I've never met her Dylan," Layne managed to patiently reply.

"Oh, that's right."

Layne would have chosen that moment to roll her eyes but another knock stopped it. Stark white lab coat swaying behind her, Dr. Kwan pleasantly greeted the pair as she settled behind her desk, laying the portfolio that she brought on top of it. Tucking the arms of her reading glasses behind her ears, she opened the portfolio containing the test results, although she had already scoured over them. Paternity tests Dr. Kwan was used to, but DNA collected to prove maternity was rare. And Dylan and Layne's type of case was completely new to her.

"What do the results say Dr. Kwan?" Dylan asked.

"Well," the doctor glanced between the two. Neither of them appeared nervous, yet she expected that to change within the span of a minute. "We conducted two tests on Layne and Robin's samples and the results were in accordance of each other. Layne to an accuracy of 99.9% you are Robin's biological mother."

The blonde could have sworn her heart stopped for several seconds. "You mean I'm *not* her mother."

"No. I mean you *are* her mother. If you weren't, I would have said 100%."

Dylan shook her head. "You almost had me fooled Celeste."

Layne ignored her. "The results are wrong. They have to be."

"Layne I can assure you that this is an exemplary and wholly reliable DNA lab and we do not make those types of mistakes. If this test stated that you are the mother then you are indeed."

"Dr. Kwan," scooting her chair closer to the desk, Layne gripped the edge of it, "Robin is not my child. There's a huge difference between a potential mother and potential father denying parentage. A man can swear up and down that it's not his baby, but if a woman does odds are she isn't because unless she's a pathological liar or unbelievably dense she should know when and if she gave birth. I have once but that was fifteen months ago and Robin's two and half months old so you do the math."

Thoughtfully chewing on her bottom lip, Dr. Kwan looked down studying the results as though the numbers would change at any moment. She was positive that these results were accurate yet Layne seemed sincere in her adamancy that she wasn't the mother. However, the figure of 99.9% proved differently.

"There isn't another explanation?" Layne asked, nervous fingers tapping on the sides of her coffee mug.

"The only other way that you could have such a secure genetic code match to Robin is for your identical twin to be her mother. Identical twins have identical DNA; therefore in something such as a paternity case where a pair of twin brothers may have had relations with a woman around the same time and she conceived, the paternity results could not exclusively confirm one of them as the father. It could be either twin because their DNA is virtually indistinguishable.

"From what you and Dylan have told me, either you or Celeste is the mother, though I had the impression that you didn't know her. Was I wrong? Is she your twin sister?"

"This is turning into an episode of the Jerry Springer show crossed with a far-fetched storyline straight out of a daytime soap opera," Dylan commented before Layne could speak. When she had Dr. Kwan's attention, she continued. "Celeste's parents died when she was little--like around four or five. She didn't have suitable relatives to take care of her, so she was put up for adoption. Fortunately, a married couple adopted her within a few months. She never mentioned having any biological siblings. In fact, I think she actually told me once that she was an only child."

"Were they in a car accident?" Layne tentatively asked.

"Why are you still pretending? You already know."

Her skin paling, the blonde looked ready to lose the contents of her stomach. "Excuse me," she whispered as she rose and hurried out of the office.

Minutes later, Dylan found her within the restroom inside the stall furthest from the entrance. The unpleasant sound of retching caused her to peek underneath the door where Layne was on her knees, hands gripping the sides of porcelain. She didn't make her presence known until a

shaky hand flushed the toilet.

"Are you alright now?"

Glancing over her shoulder, Layne spotted the woman on hands and knees, her head between the gap separating the bottom of the door from the tiled flooring. "Not really." *And I don't know why you're asking. Not like you care.*

"Just because we've learned the truth, that doesn't mean that I'm going to force you to take Robin back. So you don't have to worry." She had to scramble backward to avoid being struck when the door quickly opened. Walking past without so much as a glance, Layne went to a sink where she rinsed her mouth and washed her face with cool water.

She wordlessly accepted a Listerine breath strip from the pack held out to her and dropped the thin green sheet on her tongue where it dissolved within seconds. The refreshing burst of flavor in her mouth was quite welcome.

"Did you hear what I said?"

Layne nodded. "But we haven't learned the truth Dylan. At least not the truth you believe."

"Cryptic much?"

The blonde looked reflective. Her next words were sure to blow the comic's mind. "No worry here. I'll take her."

"Take her?"

"Robin."

Dylan stared at the younger woman as though an extra head had just sprouted from her neck. "What? What do you mean?" She inquired, sounding on the brink of alarm.

"Those tests results claim that I'm her mother right? So I believe that it's my responsibility to take care of her." Layne pointed toward the exit. "Mind taking me to see Robin?"

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Parking next to the curb in front of her mother's home, Dylan shut off the ignition and removed her seatbelt yet declined from opening the door. When Layne started to, she asked her to wait. Without comment, she placed her hands back in her lap and looked toward the driver curiously. Layne had spoken very little since they left the laboratory and Dylan had said even less. She was still trying to wrap her head around the fact that Celeste wanted to resume being a parent.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing..."

"Pretending like you want to be a mother again."

"I'm not pretending," Layne sincerely replied.

"Why now?"

"Why not?"

Groaning, Dylan thumped the steering wheel with an open hand. "Damn it Celeste. What are you up to? You didn't want to be a mother last month yet now you think Robin is your responsibility? You tried to lie last night!" The blonde floored her with a resulting smile.

"Dylan I've never lied to you."

"How could you say that with a straight face? You fooled around with my brother for weeks behind my back. What's that called?"

"Cheating. But I've never cheated on you because I was never with you. And I was definitely never with your brother because I'm a lesbian and I've known that since I was in grade school. Men do not appeal to me."

Dylan presented her with a stare that had Layne guessing that she wanted to ask her if she was a Coke short of a six-pack. However, she didn't get the opportunity to relay any questions because light tapping on the passenger window interrupted the tense moment. Turning toward the right, Layne smiled into the beautiful face, which gave her a good estimate of how Dylan might look in twenty-five years. That was if she let her live that long.

Layne was about to open the door when the drivers' side door slammed, Dylan marching around the front of her car like someone on a serious mission. She had whispered something into her mother's ear by the time her passenger exited the car waiting to be introduced. Although Dylan probably assumed that she knew her, unless Celeste never met her mother.

Lost in thought, Layne was startled when palms cooled by the chill in the air cupped her cheeks as Madeline studied her face. Neither of them spoke during the ten-second observation.

"I need to ask you some questions. Will you be truthful with me?" Layne barely kept from laughing when a snorting Dylan was quickly chastised with one warning look from her mother.

"Yes ma'am."

"It's Madeline or Maddie honey. I'm not quite old enough to be called ma'am." When she winked at the younger woman Layne did laugh.

"Yes Maddie. I'll be truthful."

"Last month did you give your baby to Dylan?"

Layne's head moved from side to side several times. "As of last month I didn't have a baby to give your daughter."

"Dylan tells me that you're a muralist. Tell me a little about that. Did you take art classes?"

Although thrown by the unexpected change in topic, Layne went with the flow. "Ever since I was a child I enjoyed drawing, sketching, painting. By the time I entered my teens I was selling pencil drawn portraits of people on the street for five to ten dollars. Soon I learned that business was more lucrative during the weekends in popular parks.

"In 1995 I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from NYU and within a year of graduating began my muralist business called Bishop Designs, which isn't an imaginative name but it works for me. Throughout the years I've occasionally hired people to assist me, but for the most part I enjoy working solo. I have a website if you would like to view some of my murals."

Madeline readily agreed that she would before again changing the topic. "The DNA test proved that you're Robin's mother. How do you explain that?"

"It's simple. I'm her aunt. I just discovered today that her real mother Celeste is my identical twin."

If she was nonplused, Madeline didn't allow it to show. It was difficult to tell which of the younger women was more surprised when she reached for Layne's hand, sandwiching it between both of hers. "Welcome Layne. It's nice to meet you."

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Stupefied, Dylan watched as her mother cleaned her granddaughter's bottom, quietly handing her a diaper when she was ready. "Mom?" Downstairs Layne waited to be introduced to the baby.

"Hmm?"

"Please tell me that you're not buying her story. It just so happens that she's Celeste's long lost twin given up for adoption three months after birth? Give me a break. What are the odds?"

Clothes readjusted, Robin was lifted into her grandma's arms. Resting a cheek against grandma's chest, she turned bright blue eyes on her auntie, smiling all gums when Dylan kissed the back of her small fist. "When did you stop believing in miracles?" Grandma Maddie asked while swaying Robin from side to side, which she enjoyed.

"I don't remember telling you that I believed in miracles."

"Robin isn't a miracle? Look what she's done for you."

Groaning, Dylan rubbed a hand over her face. "Mom yes, of course she is. I feel blessed that Robbie is in our lives, but a long lost twin sounds ridiculous. God only knows why she's playing us, but that's Celeste in your living room. And she wants to meet her 'niece'? She has to be taking some type of mind-altering medication. And you won't believe what she said--Mom...Mom where are you going?" Mouth hanging open, Dylan watched her mother leave the bedroom. Muttering illegibly she followed.

Choosing to stop at the bottom of the stairs, Dylan folded her arms on top of the banister while studying the three females interaction. She refused to think about how the blonde once again had a golden opportunity to disappear, but she hadn't taken advantage while they were upstairs. She could have been on her way to the bus station, airport or hitching a ride out of San Fran, yet she decided to stay. Nope, Dylan wasn't giving her an ounce of credit. It didn't prove a thing.

Neither did the fact that when Madeline showed her the baby 'Layne' failed in showing recognition. It was as though this were truly their first meeting. Dylan listened as she asked the proud grandma if she could hold her, unconsciously holding her breath when Robin was transferred into the woman's arms. When the baby girl greeted Layne with a smile and soft coo, Dylan aware that it was childish, thought her undeserving of such a winsome expression. That was until she spotted the tears gleaming in the gray eyes. Standing nearby, Madeline also watched.

"Hello beautiful," Layne spoke as she moved toward the sliding glass doors leading out to Madeline's flowery backyard. "I'm your Aunt Layne and it's such a pleasure to meet you." Burying her nose in soft dark locks, she deeply inhaled the gentle lavender fragrance of Robin's shampoo. She closed her eyes recollecting, two tears squeezed out and falling into the baby's hair. With a shuddering breath her lips puckered for a kiss left on top of Robin's head. "Oh, baby," Layne reverently whispered. "Sweet, sweet baby."

Another kiss on her head and Layne passed her to Madeline while further tears escaped. Excusing herself, she went back to the glass doors, opened them and stepped out into the backyard. She would have closed the door, but a stronger hand pushed it toward the opposite direction. Guessing which Tate that hand belonged to, Layne neglected to look, instead watching the rich verdant grass dampened from the earlier light rain they had. She heard the other woman mention how cold it was out there yet didn't comment.

Disappearing inside the house, Dylan quickly returned with a knit afghan that she wrapped around the smaller woman's shoulders. Keeping her hands on the immobile shoulders, she peered at the blonde's face, stained with her tears. "Layne please don't cry."

She might as well have said 'Layne please cry harder'. Encouraging her to turn around, she embraced her, holding on tight while Layne proceeded to moisten her shirt. Because she hadn't opted to retrieve an afghan for herself, Dylan soon began to feel like someone had dropped a tray full of ice cubes into her clothes. Layne's cries having downgraded to sniffles, the brunette unthinkingly picked her up, beginning to carry her into the house much like a groom would do for his new bride on their wedding night. *What the hell am I doing? She can walk!*

Relieved that her mother wasn't in the living room to witness her gentlewomanly behavior, she gently placed Layne on the couch, grabbed her a couple of tissues from a nearby box and then sat next to the quiet muralist. Dylan hoped that she would speak first. Seconds later her hopes were answered.

"I could have walked you know," Layne said, although faintly smiling. She dabbed at her cheeks with the soft tissue.

Dylan returned the smile. "Yes, I know."

"You called me Layne."

"Well duh. It *is* your name." Dylan made a show of rolling her eyes, which had the other woman chuckling.

"Does that mean you believe me?" Her question was responded to by a silent nod. "Why?"

"It started when my Mom gave you the baby. I've never seen Celeste interact with Robin or any other children, but I strongly disbelieve that she could display half the tenderness that you just did. And you didn't fake that. You were 110% genuine." Dylan shook her head. "It's still weird that you and Celeste could be--well have to be siblings, but I think you've been telling the truth all along." Layne just stared, seemingly without blinking. "What?"

"I'm thinking," raising her index finger, she scratched her chin with the blunt nail, "all this verifiable information that I'm not Celeste. No tattoo, no birthmark, I draw, which she doesn't. You could easily have a background check done on me and it'll show that I've been residing and working for many years in New York City under the name Layne Bishop and there are people there, specifically my clients who know me as Layne Bishop, yet you base your belief on tenderness. That's...remarkable Dylan."

Dylan cocked her head to the side, brow furrowed. "I can't tell. Are your pissed?"

"With you?"

"Yes."

"No."

Silence interrupted for several seconds. The way she said 'with you' had Dylan wondering. "Are you pissed with someone else?"

"More hurt than pissed, but the anger is mixed in there somewhere."

The brunette had to coax her to continue. "Who are you talking about?"

"My parents." Lowering her head, Layne looked at her lap. "The couple that should have been my parents. All these years I've convinced myself that their giving me away was for my best interest. They tried to take care of me for three months, but then decided due mainly to financial woes that I'd have a better chance with adopted parents. But...I now find out that I had a twin...and they kept her," the last part whispered, Layne's eyes refilled. "Why didn't they give us both up or try harder to keep us? Why choose only one?" She rubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands. "That's what hurts so damn much. They kept Celeste and raised her until they died while I...shit." The afghan quickly folded and dropped on the couch she stood up.

"Where are you going?"

Layne started to answer when she realized that she didn't have one. Instead she shrugged. "I'm not sure. I have some thinking to do. My hotel I guess."

"I'll drive you."

Layne shook her head while Dylan took out her keys. "You don't have to. I can call a taxi." The brunette started to argue when she forestalled her with a raised hand. "It's alright Dylan. I'll be in touch, okay?"

"Okay. But you're not leaving the house now are you? You'll wait for the taxi in here?"

"No. I spied a Starbucks nearby. I'll walk there."

"Too cold."

Layne softly smiled. "I'll walk briskly. Remember I'm a New Yorker."

~~~~~

Bathed, dressed in her pajamas and cradled in the gentle arms of her Aunt Dylan, Robin enjoyed her fine dinner of formula while listening to the hummed rendition of Silent Night. Within minutes her suckling ceased, as her eyelids grew heavy. It was time to call it a night. Putting the bottle in the kitchen, Dylan raised her until her chin was tucked on her shoulder, which was covered with a towel because of past spit up experiences, and began to lightly pat Robin's back until she released a tiny burp. Smiling, she walked her back and forth in the living room, caressing her back as she drifted to sleep.

Dylan's thoughts drifted to Layne, wondering what she was doing at that moment. She hadn't seen nor heard from the blonde since that afternoon at her mother's house. She repeatedly checked her cell for Layne's messages, which were never there. Perhaps she would call in the morning. When she did get in touch what would she say? Did she mean what she said at the lab? Did she really want to take care of Robin? Take her all the way back to New York? That was so far away. Too far.

A knock on the door tore Dylan away from her musings. Sleeping baby in her arms, she headed

toward it. Maybe Henry the doorman was checking in on them before he went home for the evening. He had routinely visited her apartment since Dylan chose to be Robin's guardian.

A blue eye looked through the peephole. So, she had thought up on her. A deep breath and Dylan pulled the door open, pasting on a welcoming smile. "Good evening."

"Evening back at you," Layne replied although her eyes were on the baby. "I hope it's not too late." It was 7:48, but she felt like it should have been later. She supposed that she was still operating on Eastern Standard Time.

"No, come on in." Once Layne was inside, Dylan asked if she would like to hold Robin, which she eagerly said yes to.

Unaware of her new carrier, the baby girl continued to sleep, her cheek resting against Layne's shoulder. Asking her guest if she would care for anything to drink, Dylan headed into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. When she returned to an empty living room, alarm seized her for a second until something told her to check the spare bedroom, which had been turned into a nursery. She breathed a sigh of relief upon observing Layne as she placed Robin inside her crib before starting up the mobile of illuminated colorful stars and different shaped moons (full, crescent, half). The tune from the children's song Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star proceeded to play.

"She's such a beauty," Layne softly commented, her back still turned to the woman standing just inside the room. Agreeing, Dylan walked further into the nursery, standing next to Robin's other auntie. "She looks just like you." Reaching over the railing, Layne touched the slight indentation in Robin's chin with a finger.

Since that sounded like a compliment, Dylan blushed, glad that the main source of light in the room hadn't been switched on. "She looks like Reggie, but because we have similar features she could pass for my..."

"Daughter?"

Dylan focused on the circulating mobile. "Yes." During the brief silence she thought back to the photographs she spotted in Layne's wallet, guilt slamming into her like an 18-wheeler. "I'm so sorry about your daughter. I should have believed you when you showed me those pictures. Instead I kept hounding you and I feel like such an ass. Layne, I'm sorry. I really am."

"It's alright Dylan. In your shoes it would have been difficult for me to believe it as well. Celeste and I are identical."

"Do you want to find her?"

The blonde looked thoughtful. "Although she's the first living relative I've discovered-- besides Robin that is-- I'm not sure that I do. I don't know if I'll actively search for her. You know anything about her adoptive parents?"

"No. I never met them and Celeste didn't speak much about them. I think they live in Florida."

"Is the coffee ready?"

"Let's go find out."

"Layne?" Dylan hesitantly spoke her name.

"Hm?" Blowing across the mocha surface of the heated mug filled with some of the best coffee she had drank in a while, Layne looked toward her.

Dylan stopped and started three times before she was able to get her question out. "Do you have any plans where Robin is concerned?" Her heart forgot to beat for a second when the petite woman nodded soberly. Unknowingly distressing Dylan further, she sipped from the mug.

"I'd like to take her home with me to New York and start the adoption process." Putting the mug on the table, she searched Dylan's face trying to decipher her expression. "How does that sound to you?"

*Nowhere as good as it would have on the day I found Robin on my doorstep!* "Just like that you're prepared to adopt her?"

"Yes, Robin is family, my niece. And based on DNA she could practically be my biological child."

Dylan nodded while unaware of the frown giving her forehead a slight crinkle. "Right. So...you'll take her to NYC...raise her there." She was busy thinking of the 'many' reasons why Robin shouldn't go to New York. Too much crime there, the streets were congested with people and automobiles, the latter aiding to an already out of control pollution problem. It was too expensive. Now granted Robin wouldn't have to worry about her finances until she reached adulthood, but someday if she chose to stay in New York, she would be forced to deal with the price of living. And how expensive would it be for her in the year 2024?

"Dylan I'm not taking her away for good." When Layne was certain that she had her attention, she continued. "I didn't have the opportunity to grow up in a family and because I went without, I especially know how vital that is. Robin has two loving aunties, a wonderful grandmother, cousins...it's important for her to have you all in her life. So we'll come here often to visit and you guys can show up at our NYC doorstep whenever you feel like it. Between visits we'll regularly call each other, send emails and letters, IM...everything we can think of." Clutching Dylan's knee, she squeezed it. "You're her family."

Feeling like a bobblehead, the brunette moved her head to and fro. "When will you leave?"

"I'm not certain. I need to make an appointment with an attorney first so I can learn how to go

about adopting her."

Although heartbroken that her Robbie would be leaving soon, Dylan sought to be supportive. "I could help you with that if you want."

Layne's resulting smile lit up her face. "Thanks Dylan. I want."

**Continued in Part 2**

**Ambrosia's Scrolls  
Main Page**

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## ~ Blessings In Disguise ~

by Ambrosia

Disclaimers: Hate to sound possessive but all characters within this story belong to me (grin). If they remind you of someone that ya know, that's just a co-in-ki-dink.

Feedback: If ya'll feel so inclined, you may send your comments to me at [SumrBrezze@aol.com](mailto:SumrBrezze@aol.com). Thank you and very Happy Holidays! (Um, yes I'm pathetically late...or early)

### **Part 2**

The scent of cinnamon too compelling, she stretched an arm toward the tray only to have her hand slapped away. Dutifully putting it in her lap, she frowned toward the younger woman standing behind the broad kitchen counter wearing a bright red apron with tiny Santa's printed all over it. "What's up with you Angie? You've been bit-- er, grumpy since I walked through the door."

Her sister shook a spatula at her menacingly. "Do not touch my gingerbread cookies. They're for the party Saturday."

"I know that, but you couldn't spare just one? I could be your taste tester." Lips pressed together, Angela shook her head. Dylan waited a moment, hoping that she would begin cooling off like the enticing baked goods. "So what's got you in such a bad mood?" She said nothing. "Angie?" The spatula slamming on the counter made Dylan jump in her seat.

"You." Untying her apron Angela tossed it on the floor. "Damn it Dylan, you're the one responsible for my bad mood!"

"Uh, what did I do this time?"

"Just when I think you're finally growing up, you backlash."

"What?" Her craving for cookies beginning to evaporate, Dylan thought back on the week. However, she couldn't think of anything that she could have done to upset her sister.

"You're a hypocrite." Dylan's confusion prompted her to elaborate. "You're doing the same thing that Celeste did. You're handing that baby off to someone else."

Confusion took a sharp turn toward annoyance. "You make Robin sound like a used shirt! I am not handing her off. She's going to be adopted by her maternal aunt and I think that's in her best interest. Layne has experience, which I'm lacking." During their meeting with an adoption attorney earlier in the week, it was decided that the simplest way to go about adopting Robin would be for Layne to temporarily move to San Francisco since the city was Robin's birthplace. The finalization of her adoption could take months, even a year but Layne was willing to stay in California regardless of the amount of time. Dylan could hardly contain her pleasure that her niece wouldn't be leaving so soon after all.

"Experience is something that you have to gain and Dylan that's just what you've been doing for the last few weeks and now you're ready to throw in the towel. Hey, let Robin's other aunt take her across the United States so you can get back to doing what you do best."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you can revert to being playgirl extraordinaire. You're experienced with that aren't you?" Someone with the IQ of a pebble couldn't miss the sarcasm in Angela's words. "I'm sure all those nightclubs and women have missed you coming around. Just dust off your dental dams and go for it."

Too wary of what might spew from her mouth if she allowed herself to respond, Dylan stood up and exited the kitchen. Less than a minute later her sister heard the front door slam shut.

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Purposefully avoiding anything on the vast buffet table that she was aware of her sister making, Dylan selected a few appetizers to cover the Christmas tree on her decorative paper plate. Walking up beside her, her other sibling dipped a red tortilla chip in the warm container of spinach dip, strands of cheese stretching as he brought the chip to his lips, inserting the entire triangle with a loud crunch. It made Dylan smile, thinking about how much Reggie could eat. It wasn't unusual for him to have three servings during dinner. Reggie Sr. used to joke about his son eating them out of house and home.

"Try Uncle Phillip's spinach dip sis. It's great." Proving that he enjoyed it, Reggie coated another chip. After Dylan mimicked him, he asked if she was okay. Swallowing, she nodded. "You sure? You've been quiet and you're usually the life of the party." She wasn't even wearing her Santa hat. Every year when their mother had her traditional Christmas Eve party, Dylan put on the red and white hat.

Sighing, Dylan picked up her plate and moved toward the empty stairs with her brother. Seated on the fifth stair up, she balanced the plate on her lap. "Angie and I had a disagreement Thursday, which I ended up walking out on. We haven't spoken since."

"Are you too proud to make the first move toward reconciling?"

"I'm not proud." Fingers splayed, Dylan put a hand on her chest. "I'm the one owed an apology here. She thinks the reason I've conceded to Celeste's sister adopting Robin is so that I can have my bachelorette lifestyle back and that is total bullshit."

"I never said you had to apologize." He swiped a buffalo wing from her plate, tearing the tender meat from the bone as he spoke. "Just go find her and open the lines of communication. If you can talk to me again after what I did talking to Angie should be a piece of cake. You know how she's apt to put her foot in her mouth without thinking first. I'm sure she didn't mean it."

"That's right little bro. She didn't mean it." A couple of dark heads simultaneously looked up toward the woman standing before them. Reggie appeared sheepish that he had been caught talking about his sister behind her back while Dylan tried to appear unconcerned by their visitor. When Reggie started to apologize Angela immediately stopped him. He was correct. She did have a habit of using her vocal capabilities without consulting her brain.

So the two women could have some privacy, Reggie left to invade the buffet while Angela occupied his place on the stair. Removing a small gift-wrapped package from her pocket she gave it to Dylan. "Merry Christmas Dyl."

Turning the silver wrapped box in her hands, she resisted the urge to shake it to guess what could have been inside. This would show enthusiasm. Hey, she never proclaimed to not be stubborn, just not proud. "You're a day early."

"It's your Christmas Eve present then. Open it."

A couple of tugs on the red ribbon and it easily slipped from the box. Pulling the top off, Dylan pushed back the tissue paper inside, revealing a white gold heart shaped locket encrusted with tiny diamonds down its center on both sides. One side was engraved with her initials D.T. A thin white gold chain was attached to the delicate locket.

"Angie...it's beautiful." Putting her plate aside, she wiped her hands thoroughly on a napkin before touching the jewelry. "But it looks too expensive. I can't--"

"Yes, you can and you will," her sister interjected. "And don't even think about asking me how much it cost. Open it."

"I already did."

"The locket moron." Again Angela showed her talent for lacing her insults with much affection.

Unfazed, Dylan gently opened the polished heart finding that one picture had already been inserted. A headshot of her youngest niece smiled back at her, a smile so grand that her little pink gums were visible. Removing the jewelry from the box, Angela offered to put it on her sister. When she finished, she hugged her, gently kissing her cheek.

"No matter what happens Dyl, this way Robin will always be with you. What I said the other day was stupid and so erroneous. I understand that you're only thinking about Robin's needs. If you ask me you're the world's best auntie."

Dylan smiled through the tears, which managed to sneak out as she fingered the locket hanging around her neck. "You're just saying that because you're biased."

"I can be where family is concerned, but it's true. I'm sorry Dylan. I acted like an idiot."

The older woman shrugged as she moved in for another hug. "It's forgotten."

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"Have they freaked you out this much?" She asked sounding amused.

Layne looked over her shoulder questioningly. "Hm?"

Closing the sliding glass door all the way, Dylan walked toward her. "It's cold as a witch's ti--breast out here yet you seem to enjoy standing on my Mom's back porch. Just wondered if the family was freaking you any." She grinned. "Can't blame you--there are plenty of Christmas spirits floating around inside and I'm not talking about the supernatural kind."

The blonde chuckled. "It's a hearty party. There's supposed to be spirits. But to answer your question, no I'm not freaked in the least. Just wanted a moment." When Dylan asked if she wanted her to go, Layne shook her head no. "I don't remember you having that on earlier." She indicated the locket and chain duo. "It's beautiful."

"That's what I said. Angie gave it to me. Check the inside."

Undoing the tiny clasp holding the two sides of the heart together, Layne smiled upon seeing an adorable face. "Even more beautiful." Dylan readily agreed as the younger woman admired the picture a moment more before closing the heart. Her hands coming to rest on the brunette's chest, Layne searched her face. "Is this what you want Dylan?"

Although she hadn't the faintest idea what Layne meant, her heartbeat picked up speed. Surely the muralist could feel it thumping against her palm. "Want?"

"Me to adopt Robin. I can tell that you love her and you were so happy when I voiced my choice to stay in San Francisco until it's official."

"What I want is what's best for Robin and that is you. Like you said when you and she finally return to New York we'll keep in close contact." Glancing downward, Dylan realized that she had placed her hands on either side of Layne's waist. When she looked up she noticed her cousin observing them through the sliding glass door. She raised an inquisitive brow so he opened the door enough to stick his head through, a grin forming.

"Ladies, based on your intimate position I'm assuming that you've already seen it." Their expressions led him to retrieve his assumption. "Look up." A pair of gray and blue eyes looked toward the ceiling of the covered porch, quickly locating the sprig of mistletoe hanging above them. Every year once Thanksgiving was over, Madeline brought out the mistletoe, putting bits of it strategically around her house--even in the garage. His grin widening, Jimmy informed the pair stuck under one of Madeline's sentimental traps to pucker up. "You've gotta do it. It's a tradition." When his cousin sent him a frown, Jimmy chuckled as he left to rejoin the party while wondering if they would really go through with it.

Layne and Dylan looked at one another, each unsuccessfully trying to read the others' mind. Dylan found herself highly attentive when the smaller woman licked her lips, her heart seemingly racing twice as much as it was minutes ago. *How can she make my heart race so fast? I barely know her!* "Layne we don't--" She ceased speech when petite hands slowly slid upward until their fingers linked around the nape of her neck.

"To my knowledge it's bad luck for two people standing underneath mistletoe to ignore the tradition of sharing a kiss," Layne commented in a hushed voice.

She felt a rush of heat move through her although she should have been chilled. "And we don't need anymore bad luck Layne."

"No Dylan, we certainly don't." She paused. "Of course that could be a superstition."

"Just to be on the safe side though..." She unknowingly gripped Layne's waist more, pulling her closer.

Layne nodded, already closing her eyes in preparation. "Right." Dylan's forehead lightly bumped against hers as she lowered her head. Three seconds, which felt closer to an hour passed by before their lips joined with each woman presuming that the obligatory kiss wouldn't last more than a second--two seconds at the most. Instant attraction lengthened their calculations.

Layne's fingers stroked up and down her mistletoe partner's neck while their lips engaged in a leisurely dance. Although their mouths were partially opened, neither woman brought her tongue into play yet there weren't any complaints. The kiss was electrifying enough without further exploration. A gentle brief nibble on the taller woman's full bottom lip that had her eliciting a tiny moan and Layne pulled back, allowing her fingers to brush against a warmed nape a few moments more before forcing herself to put her hands inside her jacket pockets. She missed the contact when Dylan in return let go of her waist.

"We should um," a flustered comic pointed toward the house, "go back inside before we get

hypothermia or something..."

*Is that all you have to say?* Obviously she had been the only one affected by the kiss. Layne concealed her disappointment behind a small smile. "You're right. Let's go." She was about to move toward the glass doors until the other woman touched her shoulder.

"If I wasn't positive before I am now." Unsurprisingly, Layne stared, Dylan imagining the large question mark that could have been looming above her head. "That wasn't a Celeste Anderson type of kiss."

Layne continued to stare, cocking her head to the side. "And how should I take this information?"

Her mouth threatening to curve into a smile, Dylan squeezed the shoulder below her hand. "On a scale of 1-10, that was a mind-blowing 12 point Layne Bishop type of kiss whereas a Celeste kiss registers around a 7. Just thought you should know that." Winking at her, she took the speechless woman's hand and began to lead her toward the house. "Come on, I'll get us a couple of Christmas spirits!"

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December 25th 2005

Robin made out like a bandit on Christmas morning because the majority of the presents underneath the six-foot tall tree her aunts picked out three days ago belonged to her. If she could speak she would have denied that she was spoiled though--just supremely well loved. Also if she could talk, she would have claimed that the present she was currently playing with was her favorite. From both her Aunt Dylan and Layne it was the greatest!

Laying on her back on top of the cushiony activity mat containing a variety of animals, Robin was busy playing with the colorful chimes hanging above, fascinated by the soft sounds they made when she kicked them. Dylan and Layne cheering her on had her feeling encouraged to kick the chimes even more. She just loved an audience.

After a few more minutes of kicking, Robin decided to give her legs a rest as she noticed the other toys hanging from the padded crossbars. The vibrant parakeet caught her interest the most, so she reached up and gave it an experimental squeeze. When it squeaked widened blue eyes stared for a thoughtful moment before Robin gained enough courage to try again. Of course the parakeet squeaked again--she gurgled with delight. Her aunts shared a grin, glad that they had selected the perfect baby gym for their niece.

The only presents left under the brightly lit tree belonged to Dylan's family members, which she, Layne and Robin would see later on when they went to her mother's house for Christmas dinner. Dylan eyed the tree, switching her attention to Layne just along enough to confirm that she was preoccupied playing with the baby. Leaning toward the tree she slid her hand beneath the tree's skirt and pulled out a small package she hid there Friday. Without a word she put in front of

Layne, lightly clearing her throat to get the other woman's attention.

Layne glanced toward Dylan and then her eyes became riveted on the gift, which she could wrap her hand around. A smirk was sent Dylan's way. "Thought we weren't buying gifts for each other?" This had been Dylan's bright idea and despite wanting to buy her something for Christmas although she knew next to nothing about her, Layne went along with it. She learned of the comic's birthday, so when her 36th rolled around she would definitely receive a present from her no matter if she wanted one or not.

Dylan shrugged having the audacity to grin. "Yeah, but I couldn't not get you anything. Plus, technically it's not a gift."

"Really?" The blonde's smirk broadened. "'Cause it suspiciously resembles a gift. It's in holiday gift-wrap paper with a bow stuck to the top and has a tag reading 'To: Layne, From: Dylan'. You don't consider that a gift?" Dylan shook her head no. "Dylan..."

"C'mon Layne, open your not so much of a gift. If it makes you feel any better I only paid \$3.62 for it."

"Really?" Layne placed the present in the palm of her hand.

"Yep. Go ahead."

Curiosity winning, she began to reveal her gift. Plucking the lid from the white box Layne unexpectedly pulled out a key attached to a keychain with a quip on it. Softly chuckling, she read it aloud, glad that Robin wasn't old enough to grasp its true meaning, "Birthdays only come once a year...aren't you glad you're not a birthday?" Catching Dylan's sassy grin, she shook her head in amusement. "Ms. Tate you are naughty, but I can't wait to put my other keys on this ring."

"Doesn't that make you naughty too?"

Layne pretended not to hear the question. "So what is the key to?"

Dylan tapped the carpet, which she was seated on. "My apartment. I'm sure you've achieved a steady great income from your occupation and can afford it, but why stay in a hotel when you can live here for free? Until you and Robbie are ready to go to New York." Adding that last part left a sour taste in her mouth.

Touched by her thoughtfulness, Layne leaned toward her for a brief hug. Dylan found that the only reason she silently complained about that hug was due to the briefness of it. Fiddling with the keychain, Layne regretfully shook her head. "Thanks so much Dylan, but I can't stay here."

"Why not?" Was the other woman's expected response.

"I'm filing for adoption of Robin and a crucial part of that process is having in home investigations and home studies performed to ascertain if my home will be beneficial toward the

child I seek to adopt, so that gives me a clue that I need to find my own place although I already own a home in New York. However, since I'm filing for adoption in California, I think I should secure a place here. I've been perusing apartments in this area."

"Did you find anything?"

"Not yet. I don't think the holidays is the wisest time to go apartment hunting, so it's best to wait until after the 1st."

"Well, until you find what you're looking for, my invitation remains open." Dylan tried a smile on her. "Robin and I would love to have you." Grabbing her gift, she held the tip of the key in her hand as she swung the keychain back and forth in front of Layne's face as though she were trying to hypnotize her. "You want to live with Robin and I. You want to live with Robin and I...yes, you do. Your eyes are getting heavy...very heavy..."

"Okay, okay." Starting to laugh, Layne retrieved her new key. "Before you make me slip into a trance, yes I want to live here for a little while. Thank you Dylan."

"You're welcome."

"Pardon me a sec." Effortlessly getting to her feet, Layne headed to the couch where her thick roomy jacket lay. Because of what it contained, she was glad that Dylan hadn't attempted to hang it up in the closet upon her arrival earlier that morning. *Okay, I'm a hypocrite. So shoot me*, Layne thought as she peeled back the side of her jacket to find a slim rectangular present about the size of a 13-inch television screen. She just hadn't felt right not getting Dylan a thing for Christmas when the comic had given her so much in such a little amount of time. The trunk of her rental car held presents for Jimmy, Madeline, Angela and her children.

Returning to the area littered in wrinkled gift-wrap from Robin's presents, Layne gently placed another in front of Dylan. Mimicking the blonde's earlier smirk, she traced the tag attached reading in alternating green and red ink, 'To: Dylan, From: Layne'. "Well, isn't that the pot--"

"Calling the kettle blah, blah, blah." Layne hadn't forgotten how to smirk. "You cheated and so did I. We're even. Please open it. If it makes you feel any better I only paid \$3.00 for it. Not that I'm one to keep tabs, but I beat you by sixty-two cents." She was blabbering because she was nervous about the reaction she would receive concerning her gift. She just hoped that Dylan didn't realize it.

More paper joined the carpet as Dylan unearthed her present. She was unable to immediately speak once she held the simple solid wood oak frame by its edges as she gazed at the watercolor painting protected behind a sheet of spotless glass. A portrait that didn't extend much further than their shoulders, was of herself and Robin. Painted so distinctly, it could be mistaken for a photograph at a glance. In the portrait, big blue eyes gazed up at Dylan as she looked down at the small face, lips curved in a tender smile.

"Ah, Layne," Dylan began, her voice growing soft. She looked up, eyes filling with tears. "I'm

assuming that you gave me the cost of the frame because the painting," she shuddered, eyes falling on the smaller person in the portrait and then switching to the baby having a grand time inside her gym, "it's...priceless."

Finding an interesting piece of lint on the carpet, Layne ducked her head, her cheeks suffusing with red. "So you like it?" She asked, sounding timidly adorable to Dylan's ears.

"Sweetie, I love it." Before Layne could fully raise her head, she found herself wrapped in a heartwarming embrace.

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### **December 31st 2005**

Having decided to stay in on one of the most exciting nights of the year and not disappointed by their choice, Dylan and Layne munched on the bowl of popcorn settled between them as they watched Dick Clark's New Years Rockin' Eve, although occasionally channel hopping to other televised celebrations. Upon seeing him for the first time since his stroke last year, Dylan and Layne cheered as a courageous Dick Clark returned as partial host, in their opinion making a fantastic comeback considering what he endured.

Layne looked down at the bundle seated in her lap, dark head tucked against her bosom as she slept, unable to resist the Sandman so she could ring in the New Year with her aunts.

"Someone's sleeping," Layne quietly spoke. "I'm going to put her in her crib. Be back in a minute."

"Okay." Putting the little amount left of puffed kernels on the table Dylan scooted over to collect her New Year's kiss early from her niece. "Sleep tight you little party pooper," she whispered, gaining a smile from Layne.

The brunette soon learned that Layne's idea of a minute was more than the customary sixty seconds. In two and a half minutes she would be ringing in the New Year alone (which she'd never done before) as the gigantic Waterford crystal ball settled at the bottom of its tower and the immense crowd standing in frosty Times Square went wild at the arrival of 2006. Granted she and Layne hadn't conversed about what they would do at the stroke of midnight, but Dylan thought at the very least she could get a hug and kiss on the cheek. Instead it was just she and a bottle of Mumms champagne bathing amidst crushed ice in a bucket she swiped from a hotel during her last vacation.

One minute remained. She looked over her shoulder down the hall toward Robin's closed bedroom door. Either Layne was inside still getting her settled in or she was...well somewhere else in the spacious apartment. Okay, so maybe she didn't want to celebrate the birth of a new year with her. That was all right. Dandy even. Dylan grabbed a decorative pillow, wrapping her arms around it tightly as she quietly sulked. She would kiss the damn pillow at midnight then!

She stared at the television, suddenly envious of every happy couple in every part of the world celebrating New Years Eve together.

The countdown commenced. 10...9...8...7...6...5...

A pair of warm palms touched her shoulders. Instead of jumping out of her skin at the unforeseen contact, she pushed against the back of the couch. 4...

Releasing her death grip on the pillow, Dylan looked up; feeling like this moment was taking place in slow motion. 3...

She noticed the gray eyes she had been wishing to see again for the last couple of minutes. 2...

Standing behind the couch, Layne lowered her head, heart pounding against her chest as she vaguely thought of what she was about to do. 1...

Dylan wordlessly closed her eyes, heart pounding against her chest as she anticipated the feel of Layne's mouth, having thought about it since their 'required' mistletoe kiss. HAPPY NEW YEAR was jovially shouted through the television's speakers while the pair in Dylan's living room rejoiced with the most sensual upside-down kiss known to man. Okay, well the most sensual upside-down kiss known to them at least.

Like the mistletoe kiss no tongue was involved, yet being able to nibble on each other's bottom lip concurrently was a fascinating experience. Putting her hands on the back of Layne's head, Dylan extended the kiss until half past 12:01. 'Happy New Year' was whispered against her lips and once she was able to speak, she responded. Smiling, Layne walked around the couch, uncorked the bottle of champagne and poured them each a glass, the foam coming dangerously close to spilling over as she handed Dylan a flute.

"Should we toast?" She asked, sitting beside the taller woman, her flute poised.

"Absolutely." Dylan raised her glass of chilled champagne. "To a bright 2006 filled with great health, love, happiness, triumph," switching the flute to her left hand, she reached for Layne's hand with the other, "new friendships...and family." She paused linking their fingers together thumb stroking the back of Layne's hand. "You're adopting Robin yet I want you to know that the Tate family is in the process of adopting you as well. You're not gaining just a niece but an entire clan. You see Layne, you have more family than you realized."

Tears sliding down her face, Layne swallowed around the lump in her throat. "I don't know what to say..." She appeared astonished yet at the same time jubilant.

"Say cheers." Beaming, Dylan put her flute near the blonde's.

Layne dutifully clinked their glasses. "Cheers."

Thighs nearly touching, the pair silently watched the party unfolding on television as people

celebrated the beginning of a new year. Five minutes into it, Layne turned toward her companion.

"Hey Dylan?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you for considering me as a part of your family. If I had a lifetime to do so, I couldn't adequately explain to you just how much that means to me. I feel so blessed to have met you all." She briefly closed her eyes when lips pressed to her cheek.

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January 12th 2006

Pacing through her living room with the phone pressed against her ear, Dylan prayed that her call would be one of those taken that evening on the nationally broadcasted radio station. Surely about to wear a hole through her carpet, she thought about how imperative it was that she be able to speak via the airwaves. Perhaps this wouldn't work--there was a great chance that it wouldn't--but she had to give it a try. They had to reach Celeste.

The letter that she delivered along with her daughter on Dylan's doorstep November 26th wasn't enough to establish termination of her parental rights. Reggie had already signed the necessary papers to terminate his rights, however, Celeste's attendance and signature were required in order for her sister to proceed with filing a petition to adopt Robin.

In the event that Celeste could not be located a judge could terminate her rights in her absence. That was where their problem lay. Celeste's rights remained in effect until six months had passed from the last time that she had contact with her child, which was the end of November. Once the six-month period was completed her rights would be stripped due to abandonment.

Dylan had been busy the last week. She took out boldfaced ads in several newspapers and the Pennysaver asking her ex-girlfriend to contact her and even managed to track down a couple of her old friends who resided in San Francisco. Of course neither of these panned out because they hadn't seen or heard from Celeste since early 2005. However, obtaining Dylan's landline and cell phone number they promised to call if they learned anything.

She was a desperate step away from printing Celeste's picture on a stack of paper and distributing them around the S.F. area. Although that probably wouldn't do them anything good if she had truly left town, which Dylan was certain of. She could be anywhere...she could be relaxing kicking back on a white sand beach in Argentina and if she were in Argentina what Dylan was now trying to accomplish would be a waste of time. And if she were in Texas it could also be a waste of time if she wasn't currently listening to the radio and to that particular station.

Shit, I'd have better luck locating a straight republican living within the Castro district. The brunette swiftly revised her internal musings. Or actually just any republican. The music

abruptly ending brought Dylan out of her thoughts. A producer from the radio station began speaking; alerting her that she had been selected as their next on air caller depending on her choice of topic. Getting permission on what she wished to talk about or actually whom she wished to talk to, Dylan waited, hoping that she wouldn't sound like an idiot during her live radio debut.

She heard the host Martin 'Marty' Withers give a short introduction, welcoming her to his informal talk show fittingly named Chew the Fat. She never heard of Marty until her Internet research that morning led her to his widely broadcasted show, but she kept her fingers crossed that Chew the Fat could help.

"So Dylan I hear that you're searching for an ex who has gone astray?" The 32-year-old prematurely silver haired man started, (Dylan saw pictures of him on the radio station's website) his accent indicating that he originally hailed from England. A brief look at his bio told the comic that he had been residing in Florida for twelve years, where he obtained his first job as a radio disc jockey.

Dylan nodded, shortly remembering that she had to speak. "Yes. I need her to sign some important documents. I really appreciate you giving me this opportunity to hopefully reach her through your show. Thanks so much Marty." She felt the host's smile through his reply.

"You're welcome Dylan. Go right ahead."

"Just talk?" The pacing resumed in earnest.

"Just talk." Marty softly chuckled. "Or as I like to say chew the fat. Tell her what she needs to know. Pretend like she's the only one who's listening."

"Okay." She nodded again, this time to herself. "Celeste I hope you're out there listening somewhere because I really need to talk with you in person. I realize that you said in your letter that you were gone for good, but I need you back in San Francisco--only for a bit. It's a long story, but I'll keep it short here."

Dylan ran long fingers through her hair while deeply inhaling. "You have a twin sister that you were never told about and she coincidentally resurfaced last month. She was placed for adoption when she was a baby because your bio parents weren't able to care for you both. Anyway, Layne wants to adopt and take Robin back to her state. She already loves her like she was her own daughter. That's where you come in. She's unable to continue with the adoption process until you sign away your parental rights. If you don't she'll have to wait until June because the law states that a biological parents' rights can't be forcibly terminated until they've been intentionally missing for six months.

"Celeste you put your newborn in my care and now I think it's best for her to be in the care of her Aunt Layne who is capable of providing her with everything that she needs. She's such an amazing, loving, thoughtful person with a heart of pure gold despite having so many obstacles to overcome in her life. And I'm sincerely not trying to be callous when I say that she's twice the

woman you and I could only dream of being. I'm begging you Celeste--please, *please* help. Do this one thing for Robin. She deserves this chance at a happy stable life. Your signature, your blessing could make that happen." When five seconds passed without his caller speaking, the host asked if she was done. "Yes Marty."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do Dylan. I'm going to repeat your speech to Celeste at the beginning of Chew the Fat everyday until you two make contact, which I'm positive you will. When you do find your baby's mama just call and let me know and I'll stop playing it."

Dylan had to chuckle at the 'baby's mama' comment. "Thank you Marty. That's appreciated."

"Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

She gave the question a moment's thought. "No. That about covers it."

"Alright. Well, we're taking a brief commercial break after I play a song. Would you like to request something Dylan?"

Her tongue was too quick for her brain to censor it. "Evil Woman seems appropriate," she muttered, not really believing that the host could clearly understand her. Unfortunately, Dylan detected the melody leading into Electric Light Orchestra's groovy semi classical seventies hit before she could complete her next blink. She wasn't able to tell Marty that she didn't honestly mean for him to play the song. He wouldn't allow her to get another word in. *Great Dylan. Beg her for help and then allude to her being an 'evil woman'. Just great. She'll come running back now.*

"Thank you for your call Dylan and good luck to you. Ladies and gents...Celeste...this one is for you. Compliments of my new friend Dylan in San Francisco here is ELO's Evil Woman!"

You made a fool of me, but them broken dreams have got to end...

*Hey woman, you got the blues, cos' you ain't got no one else to use.
There's an open road that leads nowhere, so just make some miles between here and there.
There's a hole in my head where the rain comes in,
You took my body and played to win,
Ha ha woman it's a crying shame,
But you ain't got nobody else to blame.*

E-evil woman, e-evil woman, e-evil woman, e-e-vil woman.

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### **January 16th 2006**

Dylan almost sloshed a bit of her extremely potent coffee onto the rapidly forming strip, which would soon appear in a profusion of newspapers when the doorbell rang in an otherwise eerily

quiet apartment. Before she gained a tiny roommate whenever it was quiet she didn't refer to the silence as eerie. There just wasn't any noise. She had grown used to and relished the variety of sounds Robin made whenever she was awake.

Now she was spending more time in the apartment her Aunt Layne found and began renting last week, so the sounds were fewer. However, Dylan wasn't too heartbroken considering that the muralist's apartment was only one floor below hers. Talk about convenient for her 'Robin Fix'.

Dropping her pencil in a glass jar whose original purpose was for housing dill pickles, Dylan headed toward the door reaching it just as her visitor buzzed again. Throwing the door open she initially smiled brightly at the blonde standing on her welcome mat. It dimmed before either of them spoke.

Noticing, Dylan's visitor smiled anyway. "Good afternoon Dyl."

"You came."

Moving across the threshold she closed the door. Placing a hand on Dylan's chest, she flashed the beautiful face a grin. "Not lately babe, but if you're offering to help I'm very willing to participate."

Dylan purposefully took two steps backward so the unsolicited appendage couldn't touch her. "Cut the crap. The first thing you do is flirt with me?" Tugging her glasses off, she folded the arms, walking over to the coffee table to lay them there. "Much seemingly hasn't changed with you."

Her unexpected guest shrugged, following and inviting herself to sit on the couch since apparently no one else in the room would. "According to someone I *am* an evil woman, so..."

Dylan thought about offering an apology for the song played in Celeste's 'honor' yet dismissed the idea. Sharing the same space with her for five seconds and she was already irritated. "So you heard the live message from me?"

Celeste shook her head, which no longer held any traces of the strawberryish dye she was accustomed to wearing. Her hair color was now closer to that of Layne's, perhaps a shade lighter. "I've been working at a restaurant in a Vegas casino and another employee who's always listening to the radio told me about this woman named Dylan who was looking for her ex Celeste. She innocently mentioned it because that's my name and I don't think there are too many Celestes walking around as opposed to the Marys, Lisas and Sarahs of the world. She was tickled that Dylan wanted the host to play Evil Woman after she finished."

Looking so comfortable on her ex-girlfriend's couch, she folded one leg over the other, gray eyes gazing toward the high ceiling as she continued. "The next day--Friday-- I made sure I was tuned in when Chew the Fat came on and heard you for myself. Your story sounded so outlandish that I didn't have it in me to simply ignore you. That evening I used my tips to fill up my car, worked overtime on the weekend since I requested to have the next several days off and then started the

drive here early this morning."

As though she believed there wasn't enough room on the couch for the both of them to sit, Dylan occupied its arm. "I'll give you outlandish, but it wasn't a story. Everything I said was the truth." Celeste proceeded to stare toward her for so long that the brunette had to will her body not to fidget under her unblinking perusal. "What? What are you thinking?"

"You never loved me, did you?" Celeste's voice sounded gentle, deceptively like her twin sister.

"Is that what you were thinking?"

"It's what I'm inquiring."

After a moments thought Dylan decided against sugarcoating her reply. "I cared for you, but no I was never in love with you. It didn't take long for me to figure out that I most likely never would be."

If Celeste was hurt by the admission she didn't show it. "I heard something in your voice on that radio show that never applied to me. Love. Love for Robin yes--that's no surprise-- but she wasn't the only one."

"I just met Layne if she's who you're talking about. It hasn't even been a full month yet."

An indecipherable expression flitted across Celeste's face. "Are you trying to convince yourself, me or the both of us?"

"Celeste..."

The petite blonde smiled, throwing her further off kilter than she had during the last few moments. "I'll sign whatever I need to. I want Robin to be happy as well. Now before this evil woman returns to sin city when will it be possible for me to meet my better half?"

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February 14th 2006

"Which tie?" One at a time she held each of the strips of silken cloth in front of her shirt. "Or should I even wear a tie? Too much?"

Seated on the older woman's bed, Angela felt like telling her that she could go naked, but that wouldn't be helpful. Never could she remember Dylan putting so much energy into choosing an outfit. This evening she had modeled a great deal of her wardrobe asking for Angela's opinion each time. She would be late for her own Valentine's date with hubby if her indecisive sibling didn't settle on something within the next thirty minutes.

Don't know why I'm here anyway. She's not really listening to me. "On a scale of 1-10 how

casual is this date? A 1 being formal, 10 being super casual."

"It's a friendship date," Dylan corrected while scrutinizing the ties in her grasps.

"Okay, how would you rate your 'friendship' date?" Angela rolled her eyes. Not for the first time she wondered why they were making this so difficult. Were they that clueless that they were into each other? Little Robin had probably figured it out by now.

"A 7 or 8 I guess."

"What activities have you selected?"

"I made reservations for a dinner cruise." Although asked repeatedly over the last couple of weeks, she refused to tell Layne where they were going for Valentine's Day, citing that she wanted it to be a surprise. She just hoped that the muralist wasn't prone to seasickness. Just in case Dylan had made a trip to a pharmacy for medication.

"An evening cruise? I'm so jealous." Angela grinned, leaning back on her elbows as she appraised her sister again. Black slacks, a crimson button down blouse and the two ties in her hands. One was black with small red arrow struck hearts and the other black with an all over pattern of juicy red and pink kissing lips. In Angela's opinion a blaring no on the both of them. Before she could give voice to her opinion Dylan seemingly read her mind, tossing the themed ties back in her closet. She then told her to strip so removing the slacks and blouse Dylan put them back on a hanger.

Standing nearby in her underwear she watched Angela rifle through the clothes, frowning in concentration as she searched back and forth. "This cruise doesn't have a dress code? Like no jeans, t-shirts, shorts, or sandals allowed?"

"Who in their right mind would wear shorts and sandals on a winter cruise in San Francisco?"

Angela smirked. "I didn't hear an answer in that smartass rejoinder."

Dylan argued that her reply didn't fall under the category of smartass before she answered. "It's pretty casual from what I've read in the brochure. Fashionable jeans are fine--you know the kind without rips and holes, but I definitely read that shorts were prohibited."

"Jeans." Her younger sister counted seven pairs of jeans in the closet. Four were variations of blue, two black and a bold pair of stark white ones. Angela usually shied away from clothes with a majority of white in them, because it rarely took long for her to get some type of smudge or stain on them. No matter how careful she tried to be, it never failed. She was convinced that if she just sat in a chair all day dressed in her white clothing, she would still end up with dirt. However, perhaps Dylan could pull it off. Taking the jeans from the hanger Angela looked them over. They looked new.

"Bought those back in October because they were on a sale too good to pass up. Haven't worn

them though."

Smiling, Angela tossed the pants in her direction. "You can break them in tonight. Now let's see...what top to wear?"

Dylan pulled on the boot cut jeans, which caused her legs to look longer than usual. She left them unzipped and unbuttoned at the low waist, waiting for her sister to pick out a shirt. "Not that red blouse I just had on?"

"No." Her search ended within the minute. "You don't have any pink blouses?" Angela's eyes strayed toward the dresser drawers as she wondered what clothes lay folded inside them.

"You know I'm not much of a pink lover." Checking her watch, Angela asked her when they had to board the cruise ship. "Boarding starts at 6:00. It leaves Fisherman's Wharf at 7:00."

Getting her cell phone from her purse, Angela called her significant other to let him know that she would be running a little late. When she suggestively mentioned that she would make it up to him with a couple of tiny details Dylan covered her ears and then her eyes for good measure.

Once the call ended Angela gave her upper arm a light slap. "It's safe now. The grownups are done talking naughty." As though mistrustful, Dylan slowly lowered her hands and raised her eyelids. Releasing a laugh, the younger woman grabbed her purse. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Stay put Dyl."

"Where're you going?" Half dressed she followed her into the living room.

At the front door Angela turned around. "You'll learn where I've been when I return big sissy." She snickered as she quickly left the apartment, quite certain that she heard a frustrated growl.

Removing her purchase from the shopping bag, Angela wielding a pair of scissors carefully snipped off the tag while her sister continued to protest about money being spent on her. She wanted to and had attempted to pay her back, but she stubbornly refused. It was her idea so Dylan would just have to accept the garment.

"Here you go." Angela put the new sweater on her lap. "Put that on, find some socks and shoes to go with, brush your hair and you're all set." She smiled when a pair of lips smooched her on the temple before uttering a soft thank you.

Two minutes later, Dylan was in the bathroom brushing her dark locks until they shined as she admired her sweater through the mirror. Even with the two shades of pink the turtleneck was gorgeous. Actually she felt fond of pink while swathed in the thick soft material. Alternating narrow and wider pink and white stripes ran horizontally across the sweater with the collar and cuffs all pink.

Dylan was putting her hair in a ponytail when the other woman walked into the bathroom

deciding to use her sink for a chair. "Should have gotten her flowers. Didn't think about it earlier." How could she have forgotten when she spotted more than one person on the streets selling rose bouquets? *I am a dumbass. No wonder I'm still alone at 35.*

Spurting a dollop of cherry almond scented lotion into her palm, Angela began moisturizing her hands while sending her sibling a knowing look. "Flowers for a friendship date? Nah, I don't think that's necessary. You're not like Oliver. He bought Mom--" She bit her tongue too late. *Oh well. She had to learn the truth sooner or later.*

"Oliver? Mom? Flowers?" Confused, Dylan stared at her. "Who is this Oliver and why is he bringing our mother flowers on Valentine's Day?"

"Um, I should go. Have a date..." Angela was about to jump from the sink when the tall woman hurried between her legs, effectively thwarting her attempt to flee. Sighing, her mouth began to run like a refrigerator. "Remember the man who gave Robin plane rides at Mom's Christmas party? Sort of smelled like Old Spice with a hint of BenGay?"

An image of a kindly older gentleman wearing a green sweater with a large headshot of Santa Claus on the front appeared in her mind. "You mean the guy who looked like he could be George Clooney's dad or uncle?"

Angela snapped her fingers. "That's who he reminds me of! Dr. Ross." She then nodded. "Yes, him. He's been courting Mom since last July." She watched as Dylan's eyebrows shot upward. "Mom was worried about telling you because she didn't think you would be comfortable with the idea of her dating. Eventually she planned on telling you about Oliver though. He's the first man she's seen romantically since Daddy passed away. Three years she was alone, so I for one am so glad that she and Oliver found each other. Dyl he's a good man."

"He makes her happy?"

"Deliriously so. He's been wanting to meet you formally...as her boyfriend."

"Wow." Dylan shook her head, trying to absorb this. "Mom has a boyfriend. She's babysitting Robin and it's their first Valentine's." Madeline had been the reason that she decided to ask Layne to go out with her on a friendly Valentine's date. She said that it would give her the opportunity to spend quality time with her granddaughter and she didn't plan to let the baby go until the next morning--late morning. In fact, she might just wait until noon.

Speaking of the baby, Layne received a healthy dose of good news on the first day of February during her first home study visit with the social worker assigned to her case. Usually the home study portion of the adoption process where a social worker visited the home of the adoptive parent(s) and interviewed them, family members and ran thorough background checks could last three months, perhaps more. Afterward if the social worker believed that adoption with the family was in the best interest of the child, then they were placed in the home for a probationary period of six months while the social worker continued to make routine visits. If everything went accordingly, then after the six months had been completed the adoption would be finalized.

Fifteen minutes into the home study and Evangeline Porter concluded that they could skip this step of the adoption process, explaining that in most states including California of course, where a person is looking to adopt a family member their case could be treated with less formality. The social worker already completed a background check on Layne and found nothing that could exclude her as an adoptive parent. However, she had uncovered plenty of evidence that a few of Layne's foster parents had no business taking care (used loosely) of parentless minors. It infuriated her and broke her heart at the same time. Amazing that Layne hadn't allowed her first eighteen years to cast a huge dark shadow over her life. Despite hardships she had become a flourishing warmhearted individual. And in Evangeline's opinion she was the epitome of a survivor.

Moments into their talk which seemed closer to a tête-à-tête than a conventional interview, Evangeline had a hunch that Layne Bishop, identical twin of Robin's biological mother would make the perfect parent for the baby. In sixteen years as a social worker, her hunches had to date never failed her. She didn't need a three-month home study, so they could advance right to the probationary period. By August Layne could legally be Robin's new mommy.

Angela started to smile. "Oliver is going over her house to cook them dinner. Robin should be excited. She loves that plane game where he flies her around."

"Huh. I'm still gonna have to lecture her about keeping secrets like this from me, but seems we have a fortunate mom. Found two fine companions in a row."

Her sister agreed. "I've found mine who I should get home to before he gets it into his head to file for a divorce and I believe yours is waiting on the floor below for you to ring her doorbell. And if you're lucky Dyl maybe she'll allow you to ring something else too." The suggestive wink that Angela added after her comment wasn't necessary.

Smirking, Dylan gently pinched her cheek. "We're just friends Angie." As she left the bathroom she heard the reply 'We'll see'.

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"This is so amazing," Layne breathed, smiling at the woman seated across from her at the dainty round dining table. Unconsciously trailing fingers over the delicate lace tablecloth, her smile grew. "Thank you for inviting me along."

Dylan smiled back. "Can't think of anyone else I'd rather be here with." The miniature lamp between them illuminated Layne's blush. Picking up the menu she asked her if she had decided on a meal plan, of which there were five to choose from including one for those practicing a vegetarian lifestyle.

"They all sound delicious but I'm leaning toward the pan-roasted turbot. You?"

"The filet mignon because I don't recognize any of the others except for the salmon and I'm not



sure I'd like that."

"Well darling this is your chance to branch out. You should try something new, like me. I've never heard of turbot but I'm going for it."

Silently hoping that her dinner companion would refer to her as 'darling' more often, Dylan put her glasses back on to read. "What kind of meat is that?"

"I think it might be a fish."

"Pan-roasted turbot in red wine sauce served on top of a bed of spinach with vegetables on the side." She then read what accompanied the salmon plate. Words such as chutney, rice with toasted coconut and Bok choy failed in tantalizing her taste buds. No, she wanted to be certain that she would enjoy her Valentine's meal, so there wouldn't be any branching out done on her part tonight. Looking apologetic she informed Layne of her plan to stick with the dependable filet mignon.

The blonde laughed after swallowing a drink from her glass of lightly lemon-flavored water. "That's cool Dyl. We'll take baby steps." She grinned. "Maybe I could get you to sample my turbot."

*I'd rather sample your lips again.* Christmas, New Years, shoot why not Valentine's too? "Hmm, maybe you could."

"You should try Ollie's food. He's a great cook. Last week we had...um," gray eyes widening a fraction, Layne occupied her mouth by taking slow sips of water, feeling the stare yet refusing to meet Dylan's eyes.

"Ollie? Is that a nickname for Oliver?"

"Uh, maybe."

An eyebrow rose. Everyone was letting the cat out of the bag tonight! "Layne--"

"Oh, look! Here comes our waiter," Layne over gleefully stated, smiling at the sharply dressed man approaching their table. "You're getting the filet mignon, right?"

"Uh huh."

Putting a halt to the revealing conversation, they put in their main course orders along with Layne trying a pre-dinner Greek shrimp salad and Dylan opting for a safe garden salad with ranch dressing. Their waiter encouraging them to have a glass of wine, Dylan selected with his assistance a Merlot to go with her steak and Layne the Chablis.

"So who is 'we'?" The brunette asked once their waiter moved away.

Layne chose to fake a case of dumbitis. "We?" She pointed at herself and then the other woman. "I am Layne Bishop and you are Dylan Tate, that is who 'we' are." She smiled and Dylan smiled back, although it could have been a grimace. "Alright, I'll tell you the truth. Last week I went to Maddie's house for dinner--it was Oliver's 64th birthday but he insisted on doing the majority of the cooking with Mom as his co-chef. From Ohio, most of his family is back there so he decided to celebrate at Maddie's and Reggie, Angie, a couple of his friends and I showed up. By the way, Oliver is...sort of dating your mom."

"Since July."

"How did you know? I thought..."

Nodding, Dylan unfolded it and spread the linen napkin on her lap. Although common sense told her that one didn't exist in their family she felt like the black sheep. "Until tonight I was oblivious that Mom has a personal life. Angie spilled the beans earlier by accident. So three out of four of Mom's children were invited. That's just super. Was she that nervous about telling me? Have I ever indicated that I want her to be alone for the rest of her life if she can't be with Dad on this earth? And why do you look like a proud peacock?" The minor irritation diminished when Layne covered and began caressing the back of her hand.

"You said three out of four of her children." Voice softening she added, "That includes me."

And with that said the irritation became an emotion of the past. "Of course it does. I *have* mentioned that you're family, correct? Proof is that she has you calling her Mom." It took Madeline 5.8 seconds to go from 'it's Madeline or Maddie honey' to 'feel free to call me Mom'. Dylan couldn't be happier although she had to admit that she didn't view Layne as her sister. She had a zero urge to kiss Angela the way she frequently thought about kissing the blonde.

They wouldn't need the lamp if her smile grew any brighter. "Correct."

"You're a Tate. Deal with it." Dylan was beaming as their waiter returned with the salads.

"I can deal with that just fine," Layne replied, letting go of Dylan's hand to use the peppershaker. "Are you terribly upset over Oliver? About just learning of his relationship with Mom?"

Dylan shrugged. "No, not *terribly* upset. Just wish she had shared this with me earlier. I would have accepted it. She was so accepting of me coming out to her so many years ago, I owe it to her!" She joined in on Layne's chuckle.

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Two treats on a small red heart-shaped paper plate in her hand, Dylan gazed toward her companion unnoticed from her approximately fifty foot distance inside the ship's nightclub, which had been darkened as the DJ played one romantic ballad after another. She looked so lovely sitting there in her outfit of gray and pink while bobbing her head to the music.

Dylan had to pick her jaw up from the floor when Layne answered her door ready for their date...ahem...friendship date. From head to toe the muralist was a total knockout. Gray pinstripe flare pants delightedly clung to her curves, an equally delicious upper body covered with a long-sleeved pale pink buttoned cotton shirt underneath a fuchsia sleeveless cable knit sweater. Dylan truly wished that she had flowers to go along with her compliment 'wow, you look spectacular'.

Reminding her feet to move she arrived at their table within seconds, standing behind Layne while she remained clueless that the brunette had returned. Dylan covered her eyes with one hand as she set the plate on the table. Though startled, the younger woman began to smile, recognizing Dylan's blending scents of peach body wash and baby oil. She was about to speak when something cool pressing against her mouth startled her again. She was asked to open up and without hesitation did just that. Cool smooth sweetness caressed her tongue until she was asked to bite. Layne sank her teeth into the morsel; the sweet juiciness of a strawberry combined with decadent hardened chocolate excited her taste buds so much that she softly moaned. Her eyes would have closed if they weren't already being held captive by Dylan's palm.

"Mm, a chocolate dipped strawberry?" A shiver raced through her when lips touched the edge of her earlobe.

"How does it taste?" Dylan whispered into her ear, causing another shiver just because of the way she uttered the word 'taste'.

Layne found it necessary to clear her throat before answering. "Scrumptious," it came out as an unintended whisper. She blinked when the hand was removed, watching Dylan settle into the chair across from hers. The remainder of the chocolate-coated fruit was presented to her, but instead of removing it from Dylan's grasp she bit into the strawberry, finally plucking the small piece left on her third bite. Her feeder was just a bit disappointed that she was such a careful eater that her tongue neglected to brush against Dylan's fingers. Still she offered a large smile.

"What were you up to besides getting us such tasty treats? Took you a little while." Picking up the remaining strawberry she instructed Dylan to bite, which she did, taking half of it.

Didja miss me? "You wanna know?" Layne nodded. "You *really* wanna know?"

Layne smirked. "Yes, please."

"Aw, you said please. That's mighty sweet and polite of you Ms. Bishop." She laughed when the blonde pretended like she was going to throw the half consumed strawberry at her. "Okay, I'll tell you if only so you won't start a food fight in here and get us kicked out into the frigid bay. But you must promise to close your eyes until I start speaking again. Will you do that? Promise me that you won't open your eyes until you hear my voice."

Although mystified by her peculiar response Layne promised, even crossing her heart. Her lips turned upward when Dylan leaned in to clench the rest of her strawberry with pearly teeth. Once swallowed she spoke. "Eyes closed now." The muralist dutifully shut her eyes and though she tried to concentrate on listening she was oblivious that Dylan had left the table. If someone

happened to focus on her they might have thought that she was either asleep or praying.

Layne estimated that five minutes had passed without hearing her friend's voice. What was she doing? Just sitting there staring at her? Maybe this was a silly test to see how long she could keep a promise. She began counting internally. One hippopotamus, two hippopotamus, three...

Now six minutes! "Alright Dyl, I'm contemplating breaking my promise so speak now or forever hold..." She trailed off upon finally hearing Dylan speak; saying something about 'is this thing working'. However, she obviously wasn't seated at their table. Her voice sounded amplified through a microphone. Eyes opening, Layne looked around and within two seconds located her date standing on the stage with a band that hadn't been there six minutes ago. She heard that a locally known band was supposed to take over for the nightclub's DJ soon, so perhaps the quartet of thirtysomething men was it. However, why was Dylan up there with them? Layne reminded herself to shut up and then she could find out.

"Evening and Happy Valentine's Day everyone," Dylan started, the stage highlighted with a pale blue hue. Indicating the group who had their respective instruments ready to play, she continued, "Out of the kindness of their hearts, these gentlemen have agreed to let me sing a song before they wow you with their talent." Through the crowd Dylan's eyes connected with Layne's. "Layne we haven't known each other that long but I consider you my best friend and since I'm nowhere near perfect in expressing my feelings with words I'd like to dedicate this song belonging to Lifehouse for you. Thank you for your friendship. If I had all the time in the world I couldn't explain how precious it is to me." She glanced over her shoulder. "Guys. Please."

On cue the band began to play music that a lot of the nightclub inhabitants including a teary eyed Layne recognized. Some of the couples began to dance while she sat there mesmerized, having had no idea that Dylan could carry a tune so well. Her voice...an angel couldn't possibly have sounded more ethereal.

*What day is it? And in what month?
This clock never seemed so alive
I can't keep up and I can't back down
I've been losing so much time*

*Cause it's you and me and all of the people
With nothing to do
Nothing to lose
And it's you and me and all of the people
And I don't know why
I can't keep my eyes off of you*

*All of the things that I want to say
Just aren't coming out right
I'm tripping on words
You've got my head spinning
I don't know where to go from here*

As Dylan commenced with the chorus a second time, her eyes shut so that images of Layne could run through her mind more vividly, the woman she was singing her heart out to had to wipe her damp face with a tissue that someone nearby offered her. Overwhelmed (though positively) and touched beyond words, she wanted to sprint onto that stage, throw her arms around Dylan and kiss her sweet mouth.

*There's something about you now
I can't quite figure out
Everything she does is beautiful
Everything she does is right*

*Cause it's you and me and all of the people
With nothing to do
Nothing to lose
And it's you and me and all of the people
And I don't know why
I can't keep my eyes off of you*

*And me and all of the people
With nothing to do
Nothing to prove
And it's you and me and all of the people
And I don't know why
I can't keep my eyes off of you*

*What day is it?
And in what month?
This clock never seemed so alive*

All hands inside the nightclub began to furiously clap while Dylan took a quick bow and then blew her cherished friend a kiss. Standing because the woman on stage deserved the grandest ovation, Layne produced a gentle smile as she reached upward to catch the invisible kiss. And so she wouldn't lose it, she tucked it inside her shirt since her outfit didn't have any pockets.

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Layne hardly felt the cool air around her as she leaned on the railing belonging to the top deck of the ship, alone since everyone else had the good sense to remain on the warmer levels, most inside the ship's several rooms. The warm fuzzy sensation from Dylan's vocals kept her body temperature bearable as she gazed out toward Golden Gate Bridge in the distance. Studying the bridge, she thought back to that fateful night in December when she could have done the most nonsensical thing.

Fate. Layne suddenly smiled. Fate had brought an abundance of joy into her life. An adopted family, friends, Robin and Dylan--she had so much to be thankful for. God willing, a few weeks

into summer she would be granted a second chance at motherhood. Although there was a trace of a smile on her lips, tears gathered beneath her eyelids as she thought of her first child who was lost to her and her ex-partner so tragically. Next month she would have been a year and a half old. Layne could imagine she and her little sister Robin playing together, growing up together.

She raised her head until she was looking into the darkened sky. *My beautiful Kate. I know you're residing happily with the angels now, but I miss you so much.* A tear escaped while arms wrapped around Layne from behind. She leaned into the touch, instantly knowing whose body was pressed against her without looking. One arm quickly rose so that a gentle thumb could remove the moisture from her cheek.

"Sweetie what's wrong?" Dylan asked in a whisper.

"I was thinking about how blessed I am." Again without looking she could tell that her friend was unconvinced.

"And this made you cry?"

"Tears of joy." She felt herself being turned around and did so without resistance. Blue eyes studied her for a moment followed by a headshake.

"No, I don't think so," Dylan quietly spoke. "I witnessed the joyful tears inside the club. These are different so what made you sad?"

"I just started to think about my daughter."

"Katherine."

As Dylan stroked her cheek, the blonde smiled. "We haven't spoken of her since the night we met and yet you remembered her name." The cheek stroking was replaced with a hug. Layne was asked if she wanted to talk about her daughter. "I've talked a therapist's ear off already." Several weeks after their baby's death Kirsten insisted that she make an appointment with a psychiatrist to discuss her grief and after a week of steady insistence she agreed, going for once weekly sessions until deciding that she didn't require anymore by the following spring.

"Well I still have the both of mine and I'm more than willing to give you one." Dylan smiled, detecting the quiet chuckle. "Tell you what. Why don't I round us up a couple of hot coffees and then we can find a quiet place to talk? How's that?" Standing on tiptoes, Layne kissed her forehead in reply.

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Because dinner had concluded and the dining room held very few people inside its walls, Layne and Dylan ended up there with two mugs filled with aromatic liquid caffeine. While Layne spoke of Kate, the few months she and her partner had with her and her passing, Dylan thought of the DNA technician she met while in New York. Wasn't her name Kirsten too? Or was it Kirstie,

Kristen, Krista? No, no it was definitely Kirsten. When they talked in one of the laboratory's bathroom she mentioned that she had a daughter who passed away due to SIDS the previous December. Coincidence? In a city with a population as large as NYC, surely it had to be.

"Layne by any chance does Kirsten have long curly red hair and work as a DNA tech at the NYC Genetics Center?"

"Um...yes." The blonde nodded while trying to figure out how Dylan knew those two pieces of information. "At least she did as of December. I couldn't tell you if she's still there. How did you know?"

"Unless this is one very large coincidence, I think I met your ex when Angie and I were in NYC to see my brother and ask him for a paternity test. A woman named Kirsten performed the test and later on I had a chat with her in the restroom. She gave me some advice about parenting, tried to convince me that I might be able to take care of Robin if the results indicated that Reggie was her father. I asked her if she had any children and she said that she and her partner had a daughter named Kate. However, she passed away at three months of age because of SIDS."

"Did you get her last name?"

"She wore a badge but I don't remember what it was. Had to be your Kirsten right?"

Not my Kirsten. Layne smirked on the inside. *She's with high school sweetheart Darren now.* "I doubt there's another redheaded Kirsten working in that building who lost a child in the same way at the same age." Glancing toward her purse she thought of the cloth that she had been carrying around since it was given to her on the plane ride to San Francisco. A few occasions she thought about presenting it to Dylan, but was afraid of the woman's reaction when she shared with her the story on how she received it. She might deem her a nutcase, which could be true. "Dylan there's something I need to show you." Pulling her purse closer, she unzipped an inner compartment and removed the laundered handkerchief, her best proof that Rose existed.

"Does this mean anything to you?"

Accepting the handkerchief, recognition dawned even before Dylan spotted the initials D.T. "This is mine," she reverently said, eyes glued to the soft cloth as she ran her fingers over it. "My Dad gave it to me on my 14th birthday. It was inside a gift-wrapped box placed on the saddle of my new bicycle. My Dad always carried around a handkerchief with his initials R.T. on it and for some reason I just loved that. So for my birthday along with the coolest bike in S.F., he had a handkerchief monogrammed for me." The tears in her eyes stunned Layne when she looked up at her. "I've kept it all these years, but a few months ago it went missing. I searched my apartment from top to bottom, the pockets in my clothes, my car but I couldn't find it anywhere. How..." Dylan shook her head, the tears falling. "How did you get it?"

"Ah, you wouldn't believe me if I told you." So Rose had to exist somewhere out there. It wasn't like she blacked out before meeting Dylan, traveled to S.F., broke into her apartment and swiped the handkerchief only to return a few months later thinking that a fellow passenger on that trip

offered it to her. Could this situation get any stranger?

Dylan took the napkin from underneath her mug to wipe her eyes instead of using the convenient handkerchief. "Try me."

With a great sigh, Layne recounted all that happened starting from the moment she met the enigmatic Rose on flight 181 until she ended up inside an airport bathroom sitting on a toilet lid as she wondered if the events of the last few hours had been a hallucination. She held her breath waiting to see how the brunette would reply. She was relieved when the blue eyes staring at her glanced toward the recovered handkerchief.

"So a woman who may or may not exist gave you my handkerchief on your flight here?" Layne wordlessly nodded. "Huh. Rose...Rose, do I know a Rose?" Dylan said aloud, though it was obvious the question was solely posed to herself.

"Even if you did, it seems that I'm the only person to see her on that plane."

Dylan expelled a loud breath. "The flight attendant had to be wrong--she was on that plane. Like you said she gave you directions with unfamiliar handwriting and a handkerchief. *My* handkerchief. My handkerchief that was lost in San Francisco yet Rose coming from New York had it in her possession."

"Are you positive that it's yours? Could be another D.T."

"In the precise stitching of the letters and design of the handkerchief as mine?" Dylan shrugged. "Maybe, but I have my doubts. I don't know. Maybe I did meet and have something going with a Rose months ago and when we parted ways she took my handkerchief." Standing she placed the handkerchief inside her pocket and then put an arm around her friend's shoulders upon reseating herself. "Layne I think we'll have to place this within the file categorized as unsolved mysteries. What I do know is that all of these mind-boggling coincidences point to the fact that we were destined to meet and that's pretty damn neat." She offered the younger woman a smile. "Rhyme not intended."

Smiling back, Layne cocked her head, listening to the music led by a piano beginning to play through the speakers. She hadn't heard that song in such a long time yet it was one of her favorites by the gifted musician about to break into song. "Would you dance with me Dylan?" She chuckled because Dylan was out of her seat before she could finish her question. Wanting to dance underneath the stars, Layne took her hand leading her companion out to an uncrowded deck.

Hoping that they didn't decide to get a mind of their own by slipping lower and toward the rear of Layne's body, Dylan placed her hands on the blonde's hips. Layne initially put her hands on her shoulders yet by the second verse of Stevie Wonder's Ribbon in the Sky had relocated them to the nape of Dylan's neck. Both were inwardly pleased since the small maneuver brought them closer. They barely noticed the few couples passing by as they melted into each other, bodies ignoring the chill surrounding them.

*This is not a coincidence
And far more than a lucky chance
But what is that was always meant
Is our ribbon in the sky for our love*

"Layne aren't you forgetting to give me something?" Dylan watched as the muralist's brow scrunched in thought. "How could you neglect to do this?" She teasingly added, confusing her friend more. "Mistletoe at Christmas--check. Midnight on New Years--check. Dinner cruise on Valentines-- unfortunately no check. Yet." She beamed when Layne started laughing.

"Please, *please* forgive me Dyl."

"I will if you rectify this situation." The hands on her neck began to push so Dylan leaned down far enough so that their lips could easily meet. And they would have succeeded had the dancing pair not been interrupted. One inch from Layne's mouth, Dylan straightened with a tiny groan, sending the sharply dressed without a tie photographer a tight smile. A glance toward her friend and she noticed that hers was looser. *I can't quite hide the fact that I'd like to toss him over the rail.*

Not one to usually succumb to intimidation, the photographer introduced himself and explained what he would like to do. Everyone aboard was entitled to have a complimentary 8X10 photo taken, which after development would be mailed to them within the next couple of weeks. He couldn't remember taking their picture, so the photographer asked if they were interested. No one had turned him down because the price was most definitely right. Another affirmative answer and he began to quickly set up his equipment.

"Do you live together?" He asked. If they didn't he would send an identical photograph to each address.

Layne shook her head. "No, she lives on top of me." Her cheeks flushed hotly while Dylan tried her best not to laugh. "I mean above me--um, we live in the same apartment building but she's on another floor."

"Oh, I just bet she does honey." The photographer grinned and Dylan almost lost it. Then Layne might want to toss *her* over the rail. "Mm, if I were a hetero I'd be conjuring up all kinds of images of the two of you right now in a plethora of...arrangements." He glanced between the two, his unabashed grin taking control of the lower portion of his face. "Such a dazzling couple you make." Neither Layne nor Dylan thought it necessary to correct him.

Writing down their mailing information and checking off their names from the long list of passengers attached to his clipboard, the photographer asked them if they had any poses in mind. When they agreed that they didn't, he suggested that they return to the position they held when he arrived. As though planned, Luther Vandross and Beyonce's version of *The Closer I Get to You* started to play as Layne and Dylan put their hands in the right places, the front of their bodies once again touching.

The photographer stood behind his tripod, observing the couple as they stood as still as they could. Black and white. He wanted to develop the photo without the assortment of colors. He could envision their photograph in black and white--elegant and most importantly romantic. They consented to his idea of receiving a b&w photo instead of color, although he gave them the option of one color and one without.

"Dylan I'd like you to slightly tilt your head downward toward Layne. Right, just like that. Now give her a ghost of a smile as you gaze limpidly into her eyes. Perfect." He bobbed his head with approval. "Layne your head is already at the perfect angle as though you're about to receive a kiss from your ladylove. Now I want you to part those lips just a hair. Dylan lower your head a little more. I want you to feel her breath on your face because your mouths are so close. Perfect. Hold that ladies." One eye squinting, the photographer aimed his lens at the couple who were staring at one another with such fervor that he felt compelled to promptly snap the picture so they could kiss already.

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The elevator arriving at Layne's floor, the duo walked out, their arms linked as they strolled through the quiet empty hallway. Both were pondering how this night would come to an end when they stopped at the door leading into the muralist's temporary home. Layne produced noise when she jiggled the keys in her hand. Spying the keychain, which she gave her for Christmas Dylan grinned. Reading her thoughts without the advantage of being a mind reader, the blonde chuckled.

"Yes, I'm so glad that I'm not a birthday. Although there have been many times when I felt like one." *That's right. Go ahead and talk about how sex deprived you've recurrently been throughout your adulthood.* "Um, I have something for you." Layne briefly thought about running inside her apartment and slamming the door when dark brows rose in...was that interest? Now it sounded as though she were propositioning Dylan. *This just keeps getting better!*

"Dylan," she sighed, tapping her door with an index finger, "I have a present for you in my apartment." The eyebrows appeared to climb higher. Groaning, Layne promised to return in a second and before her date could answer she had the door unlocked and went inside. It actually took her sixty-eight seconds to return, but Dylan wasn't counting.

"I meant to give it to you before we left, but I forgot. Happy Valentines Dylan." She handed her a thin white folder with a red ribbon tied around it.

The brunette smiled. "Aw, you didn't have to get me anything." She was already tugging on the ribbon. Opening the folder, the first thing she noticed on a sheet of paper was her full name typed in bold script. The words 'star deed' across the top of the sheet caught her attention next. Her face shining much like a star, she looked toward Layne, kissing her cheek before she spoke. "You named a star after me? That's so incredible. I've heard of this but no one has ever..." Trailing off, she quietly read the entire certificate.

A five-digit catalog number preceded the name of her constellation Leo, the Lion, which was also her astrological sign. Below that was her boldfaced name with smaller writing underneath it explaining where her star could be located. The numbers and letters bunched together made zero sense to Dylan, but she vowed to figure out what they meant so she could try to track down her star. Also, the purchasing of a telescope might come in handy.

To the left of an embossed golden seal proving that the certificate was authentic was a message from her friend.

*I know that you're a star,  
Because you brighten up my life.  
Always, Layne  
February 14, 2006*

"Oh, Layne. This is so sweet. You brighten mine too," she whispered as she pulled the smaller woman to her for a long embrace. "Thank you so much. I'm gonna frame this and hang it on the wall." She didn't want to let go because it felt so right to hold her, but Dylan finally released her friend. She was delighted when Layne took her hand back, squeezing it gently.

"Thank you for tonight Dylan. If I were to make a short list of the best nights of my life, this I guarantee you would be on it--at the top. The cruise, the food, the music, the atmosphere...you...it was all so wonderful. I had the best time."

"So did I," Dylan replied in a shy tone. She had half a mind to ask Layne if she wanted to come up to her apartment for a nightcap just so she could prolong their time together. However, the other more sensible half of her brain convinced her not to offer a drink. Layne would remain in San Francisco until summer so it wasn't necessary for them to spend every waking moment in each other's presence. *So say goodnight Dylan.*

"Guess I should get home."

Layne softly smiled. "You don't have far to go at least."

Smiling back somewhat, Dylan shook her head. "True." *Ahem, say goodnight Dylan.* "You like waffles?"

Although appearing surprised by the question posed after midnight, Layne gave a positive response. "As a matter of fact I do. I usually eat the frozen kind." She laughed at her friend's disapproving expression. "Hey it's quick and easy to pop one or two of those suckers in the toaster."

"I'm no cooking maven, but I can cook some mean waffles."

"You don't say? Are they better than the nice waffles?"

"Haha. Say I do. So could I invite you to my place for breakfast in the--well later this morning?"

*Once you get her answer, promptly head upstairs.*

"I'd love to. What time and what should I bring?"

"Nine and nothing."

"Nothing? What about mimosas?"

"That has orange juice and alcohol in it, doesn't it?" *I'm in!*

The blonde nodded. "Champagne. And I have an unopened bottle and a half-gallon of Tropicana in my fridge. It's easy to fix the drink."

"Sweet. You can show me how." *All right, move your feet toward the elevator Dylan.*

"It would be my pleasure."

The way she said the word 'pleasure' caused goosebumps to arise on Dylan's skin. *Truly do say goodnight before you get the chance to make an ass of yourself.* "Great. I'll see you at nine then." Stealing a kiss from her companion's cheek, she wished her the sweetest dreams before beginning the short trek to the elevators. Layne didn't close her apartment door until Dylan's car was on its way upward.

Out of her shoes and socks ten minutes later, Dylan was pushing her pants down her thighs when the doorbell rang. Either her mother was dropping Robin off awfully early (doubtful), a neighbor was doing some midnight cooking and wanted to borrow something like a cup of sugar or it was the sweet blonde whom she left not long ago.

Hurriedly rearranging her pants she sprinted into the living room. A glance through the peephole had Dylan smiling. Unless Celeste had come back again from Las Vegas, it was the muralist. She opened the door, greeting her with an abundance of eagerness, her smile bright enough to make a light bulb jealous if light bulbs had emotions. *Dylan, you've forgotten what the meaning of playing it cool is.* The playgirl had left the building and more than likely she would never return. Strangely, Dylan found herself not caring all that much. How had Layne managed to do this to her within the span of two months?

"I just remembered that I forgot," stopping, Layne chuckled over how that sounded. "Um, I forgot to give you something else."

The goosebumps paid her flesh another visit as she checked Layne's empty hands. "You'll spoil me."

Neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the declaration, Layne walked inside the apartment, shut the door followed by pushing Dylan backward until her legs bumped into the couch. Seated on its arm, she had her thighs spread with Layne stepping between them. Unaware of her ragged

breathing, she waited to see where the petite blonde was headed. In 6.9 seconds she was headed straight for her mouth, eliciting a swift approving moan.

Dylan hugged Layne to her, squeezing her thighs on either side of her body while the kiss deepened, proving that the third time was the charm. She thought she had goosebumps before. The moment Layne's tongue glided between her moist lips she wanted to carry her off to the bedroom where she would continue to have her way with her through the duration of the night and probably after the sun rose. Actually trying this would probably earn Dylan a stinging cheek so she refrained from picking Layne up, instead just enjoying the kiss that ended before she could begin a passionate investigation of the younger woman's mouth. Would she have to wait until St. Patrick's Day now for another chance?

Instead of slapping it, Layne stroked her cheek. "Forgiven?"

Dylan smiled while thinking that the day of Irish celebration was over a month away. "Yes. Forgiven and forgotten." *I wonder if Presidents' Day would count? That's next Monday.*

"Goodnight Dyl," she whispered, dropping her hand and beginning to amble toward the door.

"Goodnight Layne." She would have offered to escort Layne back to her apartment, but she wanted an encore too badly. So Dylan stayed on the arm of the couch until the muralist had given her a wink and then closed the door. "Gotta love a 12-point Layne Bishop kiss."

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March 6th 2006

Up and working since 4 o'clock, Dylan answered her phone rather cheerfully at 6:52 that morning. A nice workout in the gym belonging to her complex, creative juices flowing so beautifully within the blocks of her strip and superb coffee played a large part in her upbeat early morning disposition. The voice on the other end sent her sunny disposition a few ticks higher. Oh, a natural high was a wonderful thing!

"Someone's happy." Layne chuckled through the phone. "I was hoping that you wouldn't answer sounding groggy because you had been asleep."

"Nope, been wide awake for three hours. You two ladies alright?"

"Oh, yes we're fine. Are you busy? Drawing your strip?"

Dylan smiled, tapping a pencil against her chin. "Layne you've come to know me so well. But I'm not busy. In fact, I'm constructing a strip that is way ahead of my deadline."

Layne had her congratulations ready. "Whoo-hoo! You go Tate!"

The brunette laughed. "Thank you Bishop! So what's up with you at," she glanced at her watch,

"6:55 in the a.m.?"

"I've nabbed myself a client and was wondering if you would like to join Robin and I? The pay is pretty good."

"You want me to draw on a wall with you?"

"Basically." She chuckled again. "We don't have to worry about the rain and frigid weather because this particular job is indoors. My clients have purchased a new home and before they move in they wanted to have the recreation room painted for their children. I'd pay you by the hour if you're interested."

"My payment is getting to spend time with two gorgeous females." Before Layne could argue she added, "And you can treat me to lunch."

"I'm guesstimating that this project will take a few weeks to complete--perhaps extending into early May unless some all or partial nighters are pulled. That's if you'd like to be in my 'employ' for that long. Luckily my clients don't intend to start moving in until the end of June when their children are out of school for the summer."

Dylan softly whistled into the phone. "Large recreation room, huh?" She was informed to look around her living room and into the kitchen. That was a good estimate of the rec room's size whose four walls they would be painting. "Damn, we'll need a lot of paint! Is this one of your largest projects?" It was but Layne was quite excited about it. "Okay, you can buy me lunch for as long as it takes to finish the Cramer's mural."

"Really Dyl, this is too much work for me to only pay you with lunch."

The comic thought of other ways she could be paid, but Layne might walk up to her apartment to commit homicide if she suggested them. "Alright, dinner too. Keep pushing and I'll make you feed me breakfast and in between meal snacks. And if you get ultra pushy dessert too." She received a laugh from that response. "Honestly, just feed me and I'll devote my hands to you for as long as you want them." Seconds passed without Dylan gaining a reply. She only heard her caller's breathing. "Layne? You okay?"

"Um," she cleared her throat, "yes. Fine." Pause. "So you want to stop at that little restaurant around the corner and get a couple of breakfast burritos for fuel?"

"My stomach just saluted you with an appreciative growl. You going to pick me up?" Dylan looked toward her watch. She could be ready in twenty minutes.

"7:30 too soon?"

"It's perfect."

~~~~~

Half pound breakfast burrito demolished before they reached Jake and Duncan Cramer's soon to be residence in Pacific Heights, Dylan took a couple of swallows from her restaurant purchased coffee then leaned forward to put it in the cup holder. So comfortable and cozy in the passenger seat of Layne's truck, she stroked the soft leather while thinking back on how the silver metallic Dodge Dakota got to San Francisco back in January.

Because he was positive that his sister no longer wished to do him bodily harm, Reggie decided to move back to his hometown after spending a couple of weeks there at their mother's house for Christmas. However, he still needed to return to New York to formally tell his employer that he was quitting and to clean out his apartment, although he could probably do the former over the phone since he didn't hold the most vital position. Plus, he and his boss didn't have the greatest relationship. The man might throw an office party because Reggie was leaving.

So Reggie and Layne conversed and ended up striking a deal. They booked a flight to return to NYC where they would get their affairs in order before taking turns driving the Dodge back to San Francisco. Layne not only wanted her truck for everyday transportation, but it was her work truck for Bishop Designs and she intended to advertise her muralist skills. She figured that it would be just as simple to obtain clients in the multi dimensional city and surrounding areas as it was in New York.

Dylan didn't have a problem with Layne going to retrieve her truck, but she was disappointed in herself for opposing with the idea of her friend and brother spending so much time alone on the airplane and especially the road trip back. Against her wishes images of Reggie and Celeste in her bed kept replaying inside her head before and after they left for NYC. Despite Layne's assertions, the brunette didn't completely return to a tranquil state until she received a call from Layne that they were within the city limits. Reminding herself of Tom Cruise when he behaved like a maniac by jumping up and down on Oprah's couch last year she mimicked him while Robin seemed to observe her as if she was thinking that her aunt had lost her marbles.

Yes, she was acting irrationally, but Dylan couldn't help it. Although she had forgiven Reggie his affair with her ex-girlfriend, it remained in her mind and the thought of him spending almost three thousand miles worth of road travel with her twin was greatly unnerving.

*"Dylan I want to ask you something and when I do, don't reply with 'nothing'. I don't want you answering with the word 'nothing' or a synonym of it, okay?" The blonde asked as she paused in her packing to sit next to the woman situated on her bed. She had to learn the reason behind that frown, which Dylan was doing a poor job of concealing.*

*She nodded replying with a hushed, "Okay."*

*"What's bothering you? Tell me what's on your mind."*

*Since she had promised not to say 'nothing', Dylan chose to tell her the truth. "I don't want you and Reggie going to NYC and coming back together in your truck, which will take you several*

*days. That's a lot of alone time."*

*"You think something might happen between your brother and I?" Her moody friend shrugged. "Dylan," sighing, Layne shifted closer and put an arm around her shoulders, "there is absolutely no chance of Reggie and I becoming involved. I meant it when I said that I was gay." She added a bright smile. "Celeste and I look alike, but we're not the same. She's bi whereas I'm a 150% lesbian and even if I weren't, I wouldn't hook up with Reggie. Although he's rather handsome, I doubt that he would be my heterosexual type. Plus, he's shown no interest in me either other than offering friendship."*

*"Yeah, I didn't notice his interest in Celeste either."*

*"Dylan," she waited until the woman looked at her before continuing, "there's a greater chance that Junior Bush will turn into a Democrat than Reggie and I sleeping together." That earned a laugh. "You want to come with us?"*

*A part of her did, but she couldn't. "No, I have work. And you don't need me chaperoning you. You're grownups."*

*"Just remember that he's a straight grownup and I'm a gay one. From a sexual standpoint we're like oil and water." Layne received another laugh.*

Layne must have thought it odd that Dylan was so anxious over her trip with her brother, but she never questioned it, which relieved the comic. She wouldn't know how to explain her reservations. It wasn't like she and Layne was a couple, so if she and Reggie happened to be intimate it really wasn't any of her business. Just because he slept with Celeste didn't automatically mean that her sister was off limits.

Head shaking slightly, Dylan looked out the window toward an overcast day. *I acted like a jealous ass with no right and she was gracious enough not to call me on it.*

"What're you thinking about?" Layne inquired as she rounded a corner. "You're quiet over there."

"Ah, nothing worth mentioning. What's the deal with Jake and Duncan Cramer? I initially thought this couple with five children you were talking about was a man and woman. I just assumed."

"Jake and Duncan are the main reason that I wanted this project because they are such an extraordinary couple of men." Layne continued to give her an overview of the partnered pair of thirteen years. They met and quickly became friends several weeks after Duncan's wife of a year and a half decided that she needed to run off in order to find herself, leaving him with a five-month-old daughter to raise on his own. Duncan had a bit of self-discovery to do as well when he couldn't deny his attraction for his new friend Jake. The only difference between he and his absent wife was that he didn't find it necessary to leave during the discovery process.



Despite Duncan's effort to stay deeply lodged within that closet, his tenacious friend eventually pulled him out. By the time they were passed the sixth month anniversary mark Duncan's wife had returned, unsurprised to see that her husband had settled down with another man. Perhaps her acceptance had something to do with the fact that she had brought a woman back to San Francisco with her.

Melissa and Duncan had a civil divorce in spite of her many months of abandonment. They agreed that their daughter would live with her father and his partner and stay at Melissa's residence every other weekend.

Jake and Duncan wanted to give Cassie siblings, so they decided to adopt, although their original plan wasn't to adopt four children. It just delightfully turned out that way. In 1995 they adopted a one-year-old girl whose in and out of prison mother had been reinstated for a much longer term of seven years minimum. Four years later they adopted a five-year-old boy to find out during the process that he had a two-year-old sister living in another foster home. Immediately, the couple deemed that they should be together again, so they adopted her too. Four children was perfect until in 2002 when Jake's teenaged niece had a baby that neither she or her parents were prepared to raise, so the tiny boy's great uncle and his partner brought him into their home.

"Their story," Layne slowly shook her head, "just touched me. Not only to adopt, but to adopt four children? And I had an opportunity to meet them last week during my final consultation with Jake and Duncan. The five of them are so precious."

"So they know about the mural?"

"Yes, but they aren't privy to what the mural will be."

"And what shall the mural be my dear?"

"Jake and Duncan have given me full creative license, which means that it's my choice. They've trusted me to create a mural that the little Cramers' will love. However, I haven't exactly made my choice."

Dylan stared at the driver for a silent moment. "Wait a sec. We have paint in the cab of your truck, painting equipment but no idea what we're going to paint?"

Layne smiled a bit. "Never said I had no idea."

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Seated on a plastic chair inside the bare recreation room, Dylan studied the four mural models with Robin on her lap. The baby had immediately selected her choice by pointing with her little index finger. Her aunt on the other hand was having a difficult time making a decision about which she preferred. For five children, three girls and two boys aged 4, 9, 12, 12 and 14 any of them seemed appropriate and pleasing for all of those ages.

Using foam boards that looked like mini walls, Layne had sketched each design on four sheets labeled wall #1- #4 using colored pencils. The four sturdy 'walls' having been attached together could be propped up so that they actually resembled the walls of a rectangular room. Every time Dylan thought she had decided on a design a just discovered detail within another design caught her attention.

One theme was of wildlife including lush greenery, colorful parrots soaring through a mostly clear azure sky, monkeys hanging from tall trees and a lion relaxing near a pond with her two cubs. Obviously they had come to a peaceful understanding because on the other side of the pond were a small number of deer drinking from the water while the mother lion and her frolicking cubs paid them no attention.

Another design reminded Dylan of a fairy tale with its majestic castle surrounded by crystal clear water with a moat laid out before it. Nearby the crowned prince and princess had selected one of the many trails around the castle to ride their horses on, hers having a brilliant white coat and his horse a lustrous black. Several unbridled horses of different colors and sizes grazed upon the thick grass on either side of the trails and near stately trees. Instead of continuing the scene, the three remaining walls were to consist of short child friendly fairy tales inscribed on large scrolls. These included the super short Jack and Jill and Humpty Dumpty, a wordier Simple Simon and the longest of them all Cinderella, which not written out on the foam board might take up a wall by itself.

The next theme took place at an obviously popular beach based on the all the people there on the sand and in the blue ocean. Dylan didn't know it at the time since she wasn't aware of what they looked like, but seven of the beach inhabitants were the Cramer family. Duncan was assisting their two youngest children in making a sandcastle while Jake showed the other three how to ride on a boogie board not too far from the shoreline. Boats, jet skis, swimmers and surfers took advantage of the ocean while others preferred to stay on the land building sand creations, playing volleyball among other games, eating and some even taking a nap as the sun's rays warmed their bodies.

Robin had pointed to the beach theme but her aunt was leaning toward the last mural sample, which the ocean made another appearance in. However, this time the scene was set deep below its surface. Dylan imagined that they would need an abundance of blue paint for this design. Along with the numerous multicolored fish swimming through the water there were octopi, jellyfish and sea turtles. Various plants, rocks, shells and oysters containing the most impressive pearls were on the sandy ocean floor.

Minus Jake and Duncan, their children popped up in this mural sketch too. Cassie and her female siblings had become mermaids dressed in tankini tops with each girl's unique top matching her fishtails. The chatting trio sat upon the top of a small underwater cave, which a moray was currently swimming inside of.

On another wall of the aquatic theme was a scuba diver whose face could be viewed even through the goggles. Jamal their oldest son was headed toward a sunken treasure ship that looked as though it could have been buried within that section of the ocean for a century. However, the

jewels, gold and silver-handled swords and coins strewn about sparkled despite their age. A locked treasure chest lay on its side near the ship. The pirate flag still attached to the water vessel had a portrait of the youngest Cramer child Justin, who wore a bright smile complete with a missing tooth in the front.

Bringing the foam boards closer, Dylan studied the children within its ocean. Why did they look so familiar although she was certain that she had never met them? As though trying to help her, Robin pointed at the beach mural again causing her aunt to look at it as well. Ah ha! The children on the boogie boards and building a sandcastle were the same children in the aquatic mural. Now why had Layne drawn them twice? Dylan switched her brain to 'on'.

"Oh, these must be Jake and Duncan's children Robbie." The baby gurgled her agreement.

"Ding-ding! That's correct Dylan. Tell her what she's won," Layne said in her best imitation of a game show host as she entered the room. Grinning she pulled a plastic chair near them, choosing to sit on it backwards. "You Tate girls know which design you favor yet?"

"Robbie has taken a liking to the beach but I'm partial to the ocean although it looks the most challenging of the four. But I'm up for a challenge. You're the boss. Which is your favorite?"

"You and I both are up for a challenge. Sorry love." She looked at the baby who was reaching a hand out in her direction. Scooting closer, Layne gently grasped it and put a few tiny kisses in Robin's palm making her laugh. No hard feelings that her choice wasn't chosen by her aunts.

"How do we do this?" Dylan glanced at the four walls, which had neatly drawn grids on them. Each section formed a perfect foot-by-foot long square and there were more of them than she cared to count. Thinking of a project she once did in a high school art class, she had an idea what they were intended for. In that class each student selected a frame from a comic strip, drew a grid over it and then enlarged the picture by redrawing it on a poster board. That assignment was what ignited Dylan's interest in creating comics, in addition to the A+ her teacher gave her for the reproduction of Cathy.

"Well you see the grids Reggie, Oliver and I created yesterday--"

"How often do you, Reggie and Mom's main squeeze hang out together?" There was a smile on her face after she asked the question.

"No one told you about the club?"

The brunette chuckled. "No. Could I join?"

"I suppose you could. We'll initiate you next week."

"Great! Continue please."

"We used my nifty chalk line tool to make the foot length squares. Those boxes will assist you

and I in drawing the ocean mural. I have black and white copies of the design in my briefcase and I've already drawn inch length grid boxes on them. We'll start drawing from the left top corner of wall #1 and work our way through each square. Afterward, the chalk grid can be dusted away and then we can begin the real fun of painting. Once we start painting our little girl here won't be able to tag along because we don't want any fumes invading her vulnerable lungs. I generally use non-toxic paint, but I'd like to be on the safe side."

"Vulnerable? I know you've heard this kid holler! I'm sure her grandma won't mind babysitting." Dylan smiled. "She might have tried adopting her if you hadn't beat her to it. So we use a pencil to draw it?"

Layne nodded. "Very lightly to prevent it from showing through the acrylic paint. After the painting is finished we'll let it dry for 48 hours and then apply a thin coat of sealer to protect it." Turning her head, Layne looked at each wall while she thoughtfully bit her lower lip. "As I sit here I'm thinking this is too much work for two people--at least the drawing portion. It would go faster if we had more hands and I would take up less of your time. You have your own work to do."

A grin showing Dylan replied, "Layne it's not like I'm a doctor or a lawyer. I draw a daily comic strip, which isn't that time consuming unless I'm having a block, which is rare. I want to help you. I want to participate in this because it seems like it'll be fun once we get going. Now let's think about hands. Who do I know who can draw?"

"Whoever is willing to help doesn't necessarily have to be an artist. That's what so neat about the grid system because it dices up a picture into small squares making it so much easier to replicate. Just work your way from one square to the next drawing what you see in each box. I'd pay by the hour."

"You and your paying by the hour." Dylan shook her head, Robin subsequently mirroring her. "In about how many days do you think we could get the drawing done with say four people volunteering?"

Layne took a couple of minutes to study her sketches before she answered. "I think the six of us could have it completed in two or three days depending on how well they work with a grid."

Robin settled on her hip after she stood up, Dylan pulled out her cell phone, announced that she would return soon and exited the room. When she and her now dozing niece reentered twenty minutes later Layne had already started drawing, a stepladder making her tall enough to comfortably reach the top of the eight-foot wall. She softly called out her name to avoid startling the muralist. Pencil pausing, Layne looked to her left with a smile.

"Yes darling?"

A pleasant tingle sailed through Dylan in response to the endearment she loved to hear falling from those lips. "The search for four volunteers has concluded. They don't want payment other than food like me. Pi--"

"These volunteers want to eat you? I hate to sound like a bigot, but I'm staunchly against cannibalism."

Her friend smirked. "Only one of them has." The retort slipped out before she could put a clamp around her mouth. *Awesome Dylan. Remind her that you've had your share of bed buddies.* "What I mean is um..." Oh, just forget about it. She hadn't a clue how to clean up her faux pas.

Layne gave her an unreadable look as she idly tapped the end of her pencil against the tray attached to the stepladder. Although Robin wouldn't understand if she were awake the blonde half whispered, "My friend I *am* pro cunnilingus." Dylan was too slack-jawed to have a reply ready so Layne filled in the silence with a chuckle. "Tell me who is coming." A second later she chuckled again, the woman below still not speaking. Obviously she had forgotten how to blink too. "No pun intended."

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The six muralists (five of which were temporary) along with their supervisor Robbie enjoyed a picnic on the covered hardwood floor as they admired the penciled underwater theme that they had been working diligently on the past three days. Layne had paid them in full with a variety of pizza, buffalo wings, beer and soda for those who opted not to drink alcohol.

The only person in the group whom she was familiar with was Jimmy, although she recognized the remaining male who was Dylan's bicycle courier. She met Mason a few weeks ago when he stopped by to pick up a week's worth of Dylan's comic strips to take to the post office where he would send them off to her syndicate's address. Layne had seen him on a couple of occasions after the initial meeting, but she never had an opportunity to speak with him since he was always on the move. He had to be one of the swiftest couriers in San Francisco.

Elena and Laurel were the female volunteers and longtime friends of Dylan. Laurel who Dylan admitted was one of her few heterosexual friends had been ecstatically married for eighteen years with enough children to produce their own Brady Bunch television show. However, they had four girls and two boys and they were the O'Toole family.

That left Elena as the person who...ahem... once upon a time feasted upon Dylan. Their relationship lasted less than two weeks yet their friendship had survived. They discovered that they made much better buddies than lovers. Layne appeared a little too happy when Dylan's voluptuous Latina ex mentioned that her one-year anniversary spent with the love of her life was just around the corner.

"How long have you two been dating?" Elena inquired while she peeled a pepperoni from her slice of pizza. Her legs stretched out she tapped the bottom of Dylan's shoe with hers. "And how come you've been keeping me out of the loop?"

Laurel seconded that with a vigorous nod. "This should have made the headlines of the San Francisco Chronicle. 'The Bay Area's most renowned player has been pulled out of the game!'"

She and Elena slapped palms as they laughed and although knowing the true nature of Dylan and Layne's relationship, so did the guys in attendance. Because everyone except for her aunts was laughing Robin released her pacifier and joined in.

While Dylan smirked Layne guzzled root beer hoping to cool her reddened cheeks. "Enough ya pack of hyenas. Layne and I aren't together that way. Just friends."

"Just friends raising a baby together?" Laurel persisted, indicating the little one using her as a backrest since she hadn't mastered sitting up on her own yet.

Dylan nodded. "That's right." *At least until they pack up and return to New York with all its pollution and congestion...*

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April 8th 2006

"Don't you even think about it," she said in warning.

"Think about what?" She asked in false innocence.

Gray eyes rolled. "Don't think about turning that paintbrush on me. The paint is solely for the wall." Kneeling on the floor covered with a mountain of protective cloths, she continued to paint her starfish, which was nearly done. From the corner of her eye she noticed the paintbrush dripping with leaden blue paint used in creating their swordfish inching toward her face. "Dylan I will dropkick you into next year if you--" Stiff bristles ran across her cheek applying the cool wet deep blue paint. Brazen, Dylan moved closer so that she could get the other cheek, swiping her brush across it. And then she had enough nerve to grin.

"Now you match. What were you saying about dropkicking me? Go ahead. Make my day." She didn't sound much like Clint Eastwood when repeating his memorable line, but it would do. She screeched like a little girl when Layne lunged after her and tackled her to the floor before she could remind herself to run. A knee settled her on her lower back and an arm crooked around her neck she felt lips brush across her ear and had to bite her lower lip so that Layne wouldn't hear her moan. *Huh, she's got me pinned on the floor and I love it. I love being manhandled--or womanhandled by Layne. I'm a masochist!* And she didn't even care.

"Dylan I refuse to retaliate," the blonde started, her lips still close to her losing opponent's ear. "At least I won't in this house, because if I do we risk flinging paint on these walls, which we should finish today. If these walls get messed up I'll find a way to dropkick myself. But my darling Dylan," her voice lowered to a sultry whisper causing that moan to almost break out, "I do owe you for what you've done to me. I owe you *so* very damn much. When you least expect it I will exact my revenge. It may be today, may be tomorrow, may be next week or next month but it will be. Got that?"

Completely turned on Dylan nodded with the smaller woman's arm remaining against her throat. "It's crystal clear." *I should **not** listen to you more often!*

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## **April 14th 2006**

Eyes on the inviting bubble bath she had just drawn, Dylan was about to unbutton her shirt when she thought she heard the front door close. Turning down the volume on her radio she listened. Nothing. Chalking it up to her ears playing tricks on her, Dylan proceeded to unbutton her shirt stopping at button number three. She didn't think she heard a door closing this time but footsteps. Few people had a key to her apartment and unless there was an emergency it was doubtful that any of them would use their key this late into the night.

Informing herself to remain calm, Dylan grabbed the closest object she could find to utilize as a weapon. Toilet plunger held in a tight grip she ever so carefully opened the bathroom door ready to go piñata crazy on the possible intruder if the need arose. The baby. She had to protect Robin and then hopefully get her hands on a phone.

Stepping out into the hallway, blue eyes darted around seeing no one. Dylan heard the sound of nothing but her own breathing as she tiptoed barefoot toward the nursery, her plunger held upward and ready to strike. The ringing of the landline startled her so much that she nearly dropped the plunger. Looking in every direction as she sprinted into the living room, Dylan grabbed the phone saying a gruff 'hello'.

"Hello Dylan," the rumbling male voice answered. "You sound upset. What's the matter dear?"

The brunette ignored her thudding heart and her clammy palms as she tightly gripped the phone. "Dear? Listen asshole I'm wielding a fully loaded shotgun and hunting happens to be my favorite sport. If I go a few weeks without killing something I get depressed. You want me coming after you?" He laughed sending a chill down her spine.

"Are they making shotguns nowadays that are disguised as plungers? That's neat. Which part of it is the trigger?"

Swearing underneath her breath, Dylan felt as though she were trapped in one of those *Scream* movies. Now all the caller had to do was ask what her favorite scary movie was.

"Dylan? Are you there dear?"

"I'm calling 911. You'll need an ambulance when I'm done with you."

Again he laughed. "Before you shoot me with your dangerous hydroforce blast cup you may want to check your bathroom."

The line went dead as Dylan slowly turned around and moved toward the bathroom. She had left the door open but it was now shut. She emitted a soft gasp when she caught someone's shadow moving through the bottom of the door. The caller was in her bathroom waiting for her to

discover him. The plunger up again, Dylan took a deep breath and threw the door open before she could change her mind. With a mighty yell she was about to blindly strike at the intruder when squirts of iced cold water aimed at her body disrupted the plan.

Yelping, she took a step backward, shaking her head from side to side as fat drops cascaded down her face and dripped to the floor where her plunger lay. Small patches of her shirt and pants were damp, the skin beneath now cooled. Dylan regarded her 'intruder' with an eased expression until it suddenly metamorphosed into a semi-glare. That last look caused the person to capitulate by dropping the liquid shooting weapon at their feet. As if Dylan were about to arrest her she held up her hands, looking apprehensive one moment and sheepish the next.

"Shit," she whispered. "Uh Dylan...I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" One wet eyebrow slowly went upward. "Wasn't this intentional? The 'I'm watching you' call and attacking me with your Super Soaker?"

"Actually it's the Beast not a Super Soaker product." She swallowed with some difficulty when the penetrating eyes narrowed. "Though that really doesn't matter. Uh, yes it was intentional but now I'm realizing that perhaps I've gone too far with my retaliation?" Along with the water pump her toy gun had a paintball feature so she was relieved that she had talked herself out of using that.

"Is that a question?"

"No?"

Dylan chuckled dissolving at least a fraction of Layne's fears. "How were you able to sound like a man? I never knew you were so good with impersonations. Did you have one of those voice changer devices?"

"No, I had an accomplice." Before Dylan could inquire the blonde tattled. Every man--or woman in her case-- for himself. "Henry."

"He's still here?" Dylan glanced over her shoulder as though the skinny doorman would be standing in her apartment.

"No, he's home." Again she answered the yet to be asked question. "He knew about the plunger because I was talking with him on his cell while he talked with you on his home phone."

"Did he charge you?"

Layne nodded. "Of course. That man doesn't know what the word 'free' means." She and Dylan shared a laugh. "Am I forgiven? Sorry for scaring you. This was a dumb idea."

"Nah, actually I think it was crafty." She grinned. "Didn't know you had it in you Layne."



"So you forgive me?"

"Mhmm. Just one thing?"

"What?"

The grin widened. "I hate being wet alone." Kicking the water gun out of her way she effortlessly picked up the protesting muralist and carried her toward the bathtub. Water and bubbles sloshed onto the tiled floor as Layne sank below the surface of the traditionally designed tub. More combinations of water and bubbles joined the wet mess when she tugged Dylan inside, the woman unceremoniously falling on top of her.

Layne couldn't give an answer to how she ended up wrapping her arms around Dylan's body, hands resting on her sopped back while they silently stared at one another as though they had slipped into a hypnotic state. Remembering how to blink Layne spoke first.

"We are so even pal. Do you know how difficult it is to walk in saturated jeans? It's a pain in the butt. If I stepped on a scale right now I'd be twenty pounds heavier. I betcha I would." She was jabbering because she was afraid if she didn't speak her lips would endeavor to do something else.

Dylan wordlessly reached under the water with Layne trying to locate her hand's whereabouts but the bubbles made that impossible. Within seconds the blonde's body vibrated with a gentle massage. The look on her face assured Dylan that she was enjoying it.

"How does your butt feel now?"

"Um, fine." Layne tried to keep her eyes away from the other woman's mouth. "Nice tub you have. Great air jets. Invigorating. Truly--Dylan no." She relocated her hands to Dylan's chest, applying a slight pressure. "We shouldn't."

The comic wasn't giving up that easily. "Why shouldn't we?"

"Er, it's not a holiday." In two more days it would be Easter. Layne was aware of today being Good Friday, but she wasn't certain that it should count toward their holiday kiss. Especially not squished together in a bathtub. Although they were fully dressed she didn't feel trustworthy enough to plant a kiss on Dylan in such a confined space.

Closing her eyes Dylan searched her brain for today's date. Ah, today was April 14th. Eyes reopening, she smiled at her friend with much triumph. "It's Black Day!"

"Black Day?" Layne wore the expression of a woman who was highly suspicious. *Not making up holidays, are you Dylan?* "What is that about? Is it a day reserved for people to dress in all black clothing? Sounds gothic or ominous."

"Not either of those. Don't let the name fool you. It's a holiday that originated in South Korea for

people who are not romantically involved to get together and have an ebullient time drinking and eating noodles with black bean sauce, hence the name 'black'. It's like Valentine's Day for single folks."

"Wow, that's interesting. How did you know about it?"

"A few years ago I dated a woman named Sun who was from Korea. We were involved during April and on the fourteenth she mentioned that it was Black Day and explained it to me. Although we weren't head over heels for each other, we weren't single but she did invite me to a gathering with her unattached friends at a Chinese restaurant where I ate black noodles for the first time." Dylan paused. "And the last."

The blonde chuckled. "Didn't like them?"

"The noodles were fine but my taste buds disagreed with the sauce. Luckily their buffet was open and everything else I tried was delicious. And I had a great time. I think we were there close to three hours."

"So what you're saying is us two single people should honor Black Day by kissing?"

Dylan shrugged. "Would you rather try the black noodles? I'll go pick you up a box. You prefer chopsticks or a fork?"

Layne quickly shook her head, her hands falling on a pair of shoulders. "No, I'd probably enjoy the kiss more." *I'd wager that your lips are tastier.* "And just in case we have Chinese food at some point I'd prefer a fork."

Their soaked clothing slapped together as Dylan moved closer to her willing prey. "We're in agreement that we're kissing in honor of Black Day?"

"Yes, Black Day."

They closed their eyes simultaneously as their lips met for kiss number four. Mouths parted just a little, neither woman initially pressed for more, content to let their lips caress like they had all the time in the world. Dylan's moans escalated when she felt hands slipping underneath her shirt and fingertips running across her lower back. She recognized that Layne's knee had become wedged between her legs...*far* up between her legs and in that moment her knee bucked.

"Ah Layne," the brunette whispered, reaching into the pulsating water and clutching the back of her friend's thigh so that knee couldn't move. Sharing thoughts without words, Dylan coaxed Layne into opening her mouth further so that she could explore. Sliding between the moist lips she languidly stroked Layne's tongue, alternately sucking on it. The blonde seemed to approve because her earlier involuntary knee jerk had become purposeful, her fingers dancing higher until they teased at the clasp of Dylan's bra.

And then Robin announced that she was wide-awake through the baby monitor Dylan had placed

in the bathroom when she prepared her bath. Regrettably allowing Layne to have her tongue back, the comic struggled into a sitting position, breathing shallow as she gave the other woman a soft smile.

"I'll go see what our little princess wants."

Layne nodded, watching her exit the bathtub leaving puddles in her wake as she walked out of the bathroom. When Dylan returned after changing a dirty diaper and singing a song from Journey's greatest hits album (one of Robin's favorite bands) Layne was out of the tub, seated on the rim of it, soggy socks and shoes on her lap. Walking up to her Dylan made a trade, giving her a pair of sweats, a T-shirt and slippers in exchange for the socks and shoes, which she dropped into a plastic sack.

Already changed into dry clothes, Dylan pointed toward the bathroom door. "I'll step out while you get changed. The clothes will be roomy on you, but they should do for the time being. Just leave your clothing on the floor and I'll wash and dry it all for you. If you're not too shy leave your underthings too." She smiled. "I offer free delivery service."

"Dylan you don't have to clean my clothes. I can take care of it." When she reached for the sack the brunette placed it behind her back.

"No, I dunked you in the bath therefore *I'll* take care of it. Now you get out of those wet clothes before you catch something." She almost sprinted from the bathroom to avoid a protest.

Minutes later Layne emerged, her nose twitching with the aroma of brewing coffee in the air. Heading into the kitchen she found her friend pulling a couple of mugs from the cabinet.

"Dylan I should get home," she said, her tone rueful. "I'm really tired." She caught the disappointment before the woman could hide it.

Pasting on a smile, Dylan put one mug back on its shelf. "Okay. I'll walk you to the door." As they moved through the living room she picked up Layne's water gun from the coffee table and handed it to her. "Don't forget your weapon." She started to apologize again for the stunt, but Dylan wouldn't hear it. "It really is fine sweetie. Hey, if you and Henry hadn't pulled that off we would have missed our holiday kiss."

Toy gun tucked under her arm, Layne opened the front door. "If not Black Day Easter is only two days away."

"Is that a date? A pucker up date?"

Softly smiling, Layne kissed the corner of the comic's mouth. Whispering goodnight to her she headed down the hall to the elevators. Door closed, Dylan returned to her kitchen where she poured a cup of coffee. Holding it between her palms she decided to sit on the couch for a while, mulling over tonight's events. It had taken an unexpected interesting turn. She and Layne kissed-heatedly. They practically made out!

A couple of sips from her coffee and she put it on the table before she stretched out on the couch, one arm crooked behind her head. She stared toward the ceiling and wondered about tomorrow. Would they continue on as though the kisses never happened or didn't amount to anything?

"I think I might be falling in love with her," Dylan admitted to an empty room. She snorted in reply to the declaration. "Who am I trying to kid? I'm already there." She glanced toward the phone. She needed to speak with Angela, but it would wait until morning because she knew her sister had a penchant for having an anxiety attack anytime the phone rang after 10 p.m.

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April 17th 2006

Ringling the doorbell, Dylan listened as more than one pair of feet rushed toward the door as though there was a race to see who could answer it first. She found out that her assumption was correct when she heard her nephew victoriously shout 'I beat ya' just before he unlocked and opened the door. His face brightened all the more when he saw her.

"Auntie Dyl!" He rushed toward her and she picked him up, cradling the boy in her arms. She found a smile when he deposited a damp kiss on her cheek. "What's shakin' bacon?"

"Not a thing chicken wing."

Calvin giggled like he always did those occasions when they greeted one another that way. However, his giggle faded when he studied her reddened and puffy eyes. "You been crying? Whatsamatter?"

"Nothing baby," she tried reassuring him. Even at his young age Calvin didn't seem to be buying it. "I'm fine. Just allergies."

"Since when did you have allergies?" The lawyer in the now six-year-old had returned. "You only snuffle when you're sick." And he could barely recall seeing her sick in the past!

Michael his father rescued Dylan from having to explain. "Hey Cal why don't you go help Natalie with her puzzle. She's having some trouble finding the right pieces to fit together and I'm sure she'd be appreciative."

"So you and Auntie Dyl can have an adult talk?" Calvin asked after Dylan put him on his own feet.

Michael smiled at his son who was too perceptive for six. "Yes sir. Your Mom and I will find out what's wrong and fill you in later."

"Promise?"

"I do."

Calvin looked up at his adored aunt. "I love you. Don't be sad, 'kay?" Wrapping his arms around her legs, he squeezed tightly.

Bending, she kissed the top of his head. "I won't buddy and I love you too."

Once Calvin had run up the stairs to provide his older sibling with an assistant, Michael pulled his sister-in-law into the house and shut the door. An arm around her shoulders, he walked her into the living room.

"So what's going on?" He sent a silent prayer that he would hear the garage door opening any second, which meant that Angela had returned from the grocery store with the bag of cornmeal she needed to prepare dinner. She was much better at these sensitive talks than he was. Michael considered himself better with actions than words. Perhaps he could stall by asking Dylan if she wanted some coffee or tea. That way Angela might be home by the time he filled a mug.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?" *And cookies! I could throw some of those pre-cut cookie dough slices in the oven. That's a good fifteen minutes of stalling right there. Unless she follows me into the kitchen.*

Dylan patted the hand clenched around his knee. "I can wait for Angie to get home."

"How do you know she isn't here?"

The brunette smiled. "Because if she were you would have obtained her before I could step over the threshold." Her brother-in-law chuckled. "I know this isn't your thing, but I thank you for trying."

Although relieved that he was off the hook, Michael asked her if she was certain that she wanted to wait for Angela. Dylan nodded the moment the garage door began to open. Perfect timing.

Michael decided to start dinner while the two sisters had a talk in the office. Seated on the short leather couch they faced each other. Angela had already guessed what this was about before Dylan could explain.

"What happened honey? It didn't go well?" She softly inquired, glancing toward the desk to make sure there was a box of tissues just in case.

"No," Dylan whispered. "Any hope I had has been dashed."

"What did she say specifically?"

"Her heart has been broken enough and she wouldn't dare entrust it to someone like me. I'm a ho who wouldn't understand the meaning of the word commitment if I went back to school and took

a semester long course in it."

Angela appeared completely dumbfounded. "What? That doesn't sound like Layne! She uttered those specific words to you?!" In the middle of making breakfast with Michael Saturday morning she received a phone call from her sister. The first words out of Dylan's mouth were 'I'm in love with her' and she needed help in how to deal with it. Should she tell Layne or just keep her mouth shut? Angela was in favor of the first idea because it served three purposes.

One, her intuition told her that if Layne and Dylan just broke down those walls and gave each other a chance that their love could last for the next fifty years plus. Two, unless Dylan chose to move to NYC, her niece would be within an easy driving distance. And three, along with Robin she would miss Layne, who already felt like another sister despite she and Dylan only being friends. If they ended up together and married Layne would legally be her sibling.

Inviting her sister over for breakfast they spent a near two hours talking about Dylan's just discovered feelings. By the end of the conversation the older woman had declared that she would share her feelings with Layne Monday. Why Monday her sister inquired. Not today because it was too abrupt--she wasn't prepared-- not tomorrow because it was Easter and in the event that their talk didn't go well it would disrupt that important holiday, so she mentally penciled Monday in.

Dylan shook her head. "No, she was nice when letting me down but that's essentially what she could have said if she were brusque."

"How do you nicely refer to someone as being a ho? How did Layne state that in a nice way?"

"She didn't really. I'm calling myself a ho."

"Why?"

Sighing, Dylan looked toward her lap. "I've had more girlfriends/one night stands/flings than birthdays. My 'little black book' could give the Yellow Pages competition. Face it Angie--your big sister is a salacious slut."

"Dylan!"

Her voice quiet, she replied, "It's true. I don't blame Layne for not wanting to be with me." Dylan's voice started to tremble. "I don't deserve her anyway."

"Dylan I wish that you would cease this sudden self bashing. You are far from being a salacious slut. You're a wonderful kindhearted person among many other positive attributes. Any woman would be lucky to have you."

Shoulders quickly moving up and down the comic began to cry. "That's the problem. A lot of them have!"

"Oh honey." She pulled her sister close, holding on tight as she wept. Once she settled down a bit, Angela handed her a couple of tissues. "Now could you tell me what Layne really said to you?" She gently asked.

Dabbing at her cheeks and then blowing her nose, Dylan tossed one tissue into a wastebasket. "Um, she said that although she has some feelings for me that she doesn't want to get involved with anyone. She cares for me but doesn't believe that either of us is ready for that type of commitment. She just got out of a relationship and I...she didn't really finish that thought. In conclusion she just wouldn't want to risk ruining our friendship. Things are great between us as is."

"I didn't get Dylan you're a commitment phobic ho out of that."

"She said that I wasn't ready for a commitment but added herself so it wouldn't sound so harsh. She said 'we' when I think that she really meant just 'me'. Her main reason for not being ready is because she just got out of a relationship and she neglected to say why I wasn't ready. My guess is Layne believes I'm not ready because of the way I've lived. At 35 I've never offered my heart to anyone and I go through women like it's a hobby."

"Private question but the answer is imperative. When was the last time you had sex?"

"About a week before I found Robin on my doorstep." Did she miss it? Of course! However, in the beginning she had her hands full with Robin so having sex plummeted to the bottom of her list. Shortly after Layne entered the picture she couldn't so much as dream of sleeping with anyone unless that person happened to be about 5'6" with short blonde hair and gray eyes and named Layne Bishop. The thought of picking up a woman in a nightclub or hooking up with a casual friend sickened her.

Nudging her, Angela gave her sister a proud smile. "You see? You haven't done the deed in five months! That proves you're not a ho! I haven't taken a survey but I'm willing to bet that most hoes--true hoes don't deliberately give up sex for almost half of the year." Dylan started laughing because for some reason she thought that was hilarious. It was the first time she laughed that day. Infectious, Angela joined in, sobering after a minute.

"Dyl, just because you haven't offered your heart doesn't mean you're not ready to now. There's no minimum age limit on when we are allowed to find love. Forget your age. You're in love now and that's all that counts. Don't concede defeat. Prove to Layne that you're capable of giving her all the love she needs and wants plus more. I know you can do that--you believe it too."

"But she doesn't want me. Layne doesn't want to get involved."

"She's scared honey. Show her that she doesn't have to be scared with you. They're supposed to leave in August?" Dylan nodded. "That gives you four months to convince her." Angela nudged her again, a faint smile on her lips. "Get busy big sissy."

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Collecting every videotape and DVD she could find along with a few issues of Playboy, Dylan taped up the cardboard box that she would dispose of in an alley dumpster two miles away from her apartment. Jimmy might cry if he was aware that she was throwing away every racy film he had ever given her. She hadn't realized there were so many until she stacked them inside the box.

Balancing the box in one arm, Dylan opened the front door just as Layne's social worker was about to knock. When asked if she was psychic the brunette chuckled, hoping that the social worker didn't catch on to the nervousness in it. Dylan didn't want her knowing that she Robin's aunt was holding a box full of soft porn lesbian oriented movies. It might reflect back on Layne somehow.

"Hello Evangeline," Dylan greeted, placing both arms underneath the box.

"Hello back at you Dylan. You want some help with that?"

The comic thought she said no a little too quickly. "Are you looking for Layne? I don't think she's home right now." This was quite a prompt visit considering she had checked in on Layne and Robin just two days ago.

"Actually I came to see you." Evangeline affably smiled when alarm flitted across the younger woman's face. "Nothing is wrong. I just wanted a few minutes of your time unless you're busy. I started to call first."

"Oh, don't you worry about it. Right now is fine." Dropping the box on the floor she asked the social worker to come inside. "Would you care for anything to drink?" Dylan inquired as they settled on her couch.

"No thank you Dylan. I just finished off a 24 oz. coffee so that's enough liquid for now." Smiling again she put her purse on the coffee table. "Wanted to ask you a few questions, however, you're not obligated to answer. This visit mostly pertains to my curiosity."

Speaking of curiosity, Dylan curiously raised both eyebrows. "Okay. What would you like to ask?"

"Are you and Layne platonic?"

*Unfortunately.* "Yes."

"Do you foresee your relationship with her remaining that way?"

*Unfortunately.* "Yes."

"Dylan," the social worker softened her voice, "do you want it to remain platonic?"

She sighed, choosing to be truthful. "No. I love her. I mean I *love* her."



"The first time I saw the two of you, how you interacted with each other, looked at each other, I wondered why you weren't adopting Robin together. Through the past three months I've witnessed the growing love between you two and yet you remain mere friends and Layne intends to take the baby back to New York in August. This part of the case I'm aware isn't my business and either way I know Robin will be well cared for and loved, but as far as I'm concerned you're her mother too."

Wanting to occupy her hands, Dylan grabbed a pen from her coffee table and began to twirl it between her fingers. "The moment I found Robin on my doorstep I wanted nothing to do with her. A bit later I was content being her guardian shortly followed by my liking the idea of being her aunt. And now," she lightly tapped the capped pen against her knee, "yes, thinking of myself as her mother doesn't scare the shit out of me." Dylan sheepishly glanced up at the social worker. "Sorry about the swearing."

"Not necessary. I think that most in this world have sworn at least once." She winked one big brown eye. "Have you discussed this with Layne?" Dylan replied with a quiet no. "Maybe if you did the two of you could figure out how to co-parent and I'd be glad to assist you if you want. You could move back to New York with them or maybe Layne would select to live here in good old San Francisco permanently."

The pen at rest, Dylan rested her chin in her palm, looking reflective. "San Francisco *is* good isn't it? Better than stuffy crowded New York." She cracked a smile as Evangeline released a rich chuckle.

"Born and raised in S.F. I could be biased. I've traveled to various parts of New York over the years and those were some enjoyable visits but uh yeah, San Francisco is where it's at!" Her chuckle turned into a full-fledged laugh along with Dylan's smile.

**Continued in Part 3**

**Ambrosia's Scrolls  
Main Page**

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## ~ Blessings In Disguise ~ by Ambrosia

Disclaimers: Hate to sound possessive but all characters within this story belong to me (grin). If they remind you of someone that ya know, that's just a co-in-ki-dink.

Feedback: If ya'll feel so inclined, you may send your comments to me at [SumrBrezze@aol.com](mailto:SumrBrezze@aol.com). Thank you and very Happy Holidays! (Um, yes I'm pathetically late...or early)

### Part 3

June 9th 2006

"Every one of them? Every single one?" He sounded like he was about to break down in tears.

"Jimmy stop harping on it. The movies are history." She stretched out her arm, palm up. "Hand me her lotion will you?" Given the bottle of lotion Dylan squirted some into her palm and started rubbing it into Robin's soft skin. The eight-month-old was the picture of contentment always thoroughly enjoying these massages after her baths.

"Tell me why you thought it was a good idea to throw them in the garbage?" Dylan's young cousin touched his chest. "Those were my babies, which I lovingly copied for you. And this is what you do."

Dylan turned her head away so that she could roll her eyes without him noticing. "I'm trying to be a better woman."

"For Layne?" She nodded while putting her niece's diaper on. "Has she told you that she doesn't like adult films?"

"No."

"Then dude for all you know she could have a collection of them back in NYC." His cousin looked doubtful. "You never know. Layne could be a freak!" Dylan gave him a warning look that plainly read 'you're treading on thin ice buddy'. Jimmy gulped loudly. "I mean that in a complimentary way dude! You're freaky and I'm freaky. Hey Robbie, you freaky?" He asked, gently tugging on her tiny big toe. She answered with a boisterous laugh. That had Dylan chuckling. "See being a freak can be a good thing cuz."

"Uh huh." Smiling, she ruffled a hand through the tight curls on top of his head. "You should invest in a perm sometime."

"Nah, the ladies think I'm cute this way."

Unable to hide her grin Dylan replied, "They think it's cute that you look like a dark-haired Shirley Temple?"

He smirked without comment. "Asked Layne to Pride yet?" Dylan didn't respond as she finished dressing her niece for the day. "What's taking you so long?"

"I have two weeks Jimmy. No rush."

"How do you know that she won't make plans with someone else? Don't wait until the last minute. Call her now. C'mon Robbie, let's give her some privacy while she locates her girly balls so she can call your Mama." Picking up the baby, he started to leave her nursery. When asked

where he was going, he explained that he intended to feed his cousin her breakfast. "What Gerber meal would you like this morning beautiful? Want some oatmeal mixed with bananas or apples? Multigrain cereal?"

Seated in the rocking chair once they left, Dylan held her cell phone willing herself to dial Layne's number. It wasn't a date. She was a friend asking another friend if she wanted to celebrate Pride weekend together.

Since she was a teenager Dylan had attended the S.F. Pride. She along with a few of her family members looked forward to the parade each year. The last three years she had been smart by purchasing grand stand seat tickets in advance. Although the parade and festivities were practically free, these tickets assured parade goers a great view and a place to sit in the bleachers located at U.N. Plaza. Her mother kissed her the first year Dylan presented her with a ticket. Standing for so long and often having to move to look around others had been the only negative of attending the annual parade.

Gazing toward the small screen on her phone Dylan sighed. She felt vulnerable asking Layne out, regardless if this was a friendship date. She was aware of how the comic felt now. She knew that she loved her, so what if Layne took this the wrong way and as a result turned her down? *Only one way to find out Dylan. Find your girly balls.*

She held her breath as the phone rang twice. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's me. You busy?" Acquiring another client, Layne had been working diligently the last week on a mural for a small dental office.

"Hey you. I'm never too busy for you. What's going on?"

Swaying her body back and forth the chair began to rock. "I wanted to ask you something. Is your calendar free for the last weekend in June?"

"It sure is. That's Gay Pride weekend, isn't it?"

"Yes. Would you like to celebrate it together? Some from our family like to attend the parade on Sunday and it would be nice if you would want to join us. Since she's older and her attention span has improved, I know Robin would enjoy it. As for Saturday I sometimes just meet friends and I'd be delighted if you wanted to come then too. It's really a lot of fun. There are all kinds of food, dancing, concerts, games, exhibits--so much to take pleasure in." Surely her pounding heart would pop out of her chest.

"Oh, I'm a virgin!" She sounded very excited.

Dylan looked very befuddled. Virgin? "Oh, yeah? So Kirsten never figured out how to get into your pants, huh? She's more dim-witted than I suspected." She grinned when her friend took that good-naturedly with a laugh.

"I'm a Pride virgin silly. Never been to one."

"You're from New York--I know their parade has to be slammin'! How could you miss all of them?"

"Just never made the time I guess. But now I definitely want to go with you. Count me in for the entire weekend."

"I'll have your cherry popped in no time." Dylan slapped her free hand over her mouth although the words had already exited. *I'd stick my foot in my mouth if I were flexible enough!* To her surprise Layne laughed.

"Darling?" The muralist lowered her voice to a husky whisper. "Be gentle."

Her cousin had claimed that Layne could be a freak. Jimmy could be on to something. Dylan's grin mirrored that of the Cheshire cat.

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June 24th 2006

Anyone would have thought they were just another loving couple attending the pride fair together as they strolled through the populated Civic Center, their fingers intertwined as they held hands. At least half of the duo was content to allow others to gain that impression. Actually the remaining half didn't mind either. The remaining half suddenly gave the other half's hand a squeeze as she pointed toward a particular booth, which had a few interested customers.

"T-shirts Dyl! Want one? I'll treat you to a T-shirt."

"Only if you let me treat you back."

"You bought the tickets for the parade tomorrow. Come on, let me buy you a T-shirt and lunch."

The brunette beamed. "Yes on the T-shirt and I'll give lunch some thought." She laughed as her friend stuck a pink tongue out at her. She asked if they would change into their shirts while they browsed the assortment, some hanging from racks and others neatly folded on tables.

"We could wear them today or wait until tomorrow. Hey Dylan, what do you think of this one?" Snickering, Layne showed her the back of a black T-shirt where a coyly smiling feline wearing a rainbow-designed collar was printed. Dylan was about to say that it was cute when Layne turned it around so that she could see the front. The short phrase reminded her of those Got Milk commercials, but instead of asking if you had milk, it inquired about something else.

Instead of continuing with her 'that's cute' comment, Dylan changed it to, "That is so depraved. I love it!" A broad grin split her lips. Yes, she was freaky and proud of it! "And I dare you to wear that tomorrow so Mom can see you in it."

Layne smirked. She didn't even want to imagine how Madeline would react to such an insolent shirt. "It'll be a snowy day in hell before that happens. Are you trying to get me killed Tate? Or at least a spanking followed by a timeout in the corner?"

Laughing, Dylan chose a T-shirt. "What about this?" Hers was a pink baby doll T-shirt with a declaration written in bold red on the front. Layne read it aloud.

"She may wear the pants, but I wear the strap-on." Overhearing, a man glanced at the blonde with a knowing smile. She winked in return. "Funny thing is that's true." Dylan's mouth hanging open, she reached up to close it for her.

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"What's Pink Saturday? I've caught snippets of conversation about it today." As she glanced over the menu, Layne couldn't recall ever seeing so many atypical varieties of pizza. This would be her first time eating at the California Pizza Kitchen where they were meeting a few of Dylan's friends not too far from the Civic Center Plaza. In fact, it was so close that they were able to walk there and arrive within minutes.

"It's a huge party with thousands upon thousands of guests that is held in the Castro District. It's hosted by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Have you heard of them?" Layne indicated with a headshake that she hadn't. "They are a fairly large group--around forty members I think-- of modern very non-traditional nuns, most of which if not all are men. Although their dress is quite different from your standard nun, they partake in some of the same type of activities. They hold fundraisers and organize events, raise money for charity, visit hospitals to spread their cheer, go to schools to educate on topics such as the risks of unsafe sex...they actually do quite a lot.

"Pink Saturday is held every year the night before the pride parade and the money collected during that large party will go toward charities. Every time I've gone to Pink Saturday I've had a great time. You want to check it out?"

"Layne what does this bad girl want you to check out?" Elena inquired as she and her partner arrived at the long table. She took a seat next to Layne while her girlfriend Alexis sat with Dylan across from them. Clucking her tongue, Elena opened her menu. "And you want this to occur in public Dyl? Have you no decorum?"

Dropping the sugar packet she had been playing with, Dylan placed her hands underneath the table. "Yes El, I do have *some* decorum. See I'm flipping you off without having my hand in the public eye."

As if she didn't believe her, the Latina glanced underneath the table. Sure enough a middle finger was standing alone yet proudly just for her. Looking at her ex-girlfriend she grinned. "I repeat-- bad girl." Since they had yet to meet, Elena introduced her partner to Layne. Reaching across the table, the two women shook hands while exchanging pleasantries. Dylan explained to Elena and Alexis that they had been discussing the Pink Saturday celebration.

"Are you going? We are. This will be Alex's first P.S."

"Layne's too." Twinkling blue eyes glanced toward the blonde. "She's a virgin." Layne decided to hide her reddened face behind her menu. The Pepperoni Pomodoro pizza nearest to her right eye looked tasty.

"A virgin?! Those still exist passed the teenage years?" Arriving friends continued to catch the tail end of their conversations. Lindsay pulled out a chair for Nancy on the other side of Dylan and then took her seat on Layne's right. After she said hello to everyone, she looked between Dylan and Layne curiously. "What's up with the virgin talk ladies?"

"Whose a virgin?" Everyone looked up as Adriana hooked her purse strap on the back of the chair next to Alexis. She remained standing as she looked over her shoulder.

"She didn't come with ya?" Lindsay sounded too jovial when she inquired about her longtime friend's partner.

Catching it, Adriana smirked finally sitting. "You know her name is Beverly and yes she's here. She spotted an old friend outside and they're talking."

"Did she bring Satan's youngest disciples with her?"

Adriana looked as though she were ready to hurl the salt and peppershakers at Lindsay's head. "No, she didn't bring her children and their names are Elton and John--not Satan's disciples." Silence reigned on the table until seconds later everyone except for Adriana began laughing. Sitting back in her chair she smirked, though she couldn't blame them for their laughter. During their first date when Beverly showed her wallet photographs of her children and mentioned their names Adriana had to excuse herself. She didn't know how she managed to get inside the restroom before the giggles erupted.

"Bev is a huge Elton John fan," she weakly defended. When she was invited into Beverly's apartment the amount of pictures and posters of the musician startled her. There was a life-sized cardboard cutout of Sir Elton John next to the dresser inside Beverly's bedroom that gave her a fright the moment she first laid eyes on it. However, with time she grew to mostly overlook the obsession. Adriana sent Lindsay a look, practically begging her to be nice.

Touching her chest, the Southerner batted dark lashes. "Nice? I'm nice to everyone except succubus's and their spawn." Forget throwing the seasoning, Adriana wanted to jump across the table at her.

"That's way harsh Lin," Nancy quietly spoke. "They're children. Forgive them already. You're the grownup." She murmured something about her girlfriend at least claiming to be a grownup.

"What did...they do?" Layne inquired. She was about to say their names, but at the last moment changed her mind because she didn't trust herself not to start laughing again. "Aren't they little?"

"Seven and eight years old, but don't let those cute little faces fool ya." Common sense evaporating, she had agreed to baby-sit Beverly's two boys while she and Adriana went out to celebrate their first year anniversary as a couple. At 8:30 Lindsay put them to bed, read them a short story and by the time she reached the end Elton and John had convinced her that they were asleep. Lindsay was an hour into a movie she ordered from pay-per-view when her car alarm went off.

Running into the garage with a baseball bat just in case she had an intruder, she found the boys marking her eighteen-month-old car with nails they found in one of her hardware cabinets. More inches were covered with white lines created from their 'artwork' than not. And if that wasn't enough damage, they pried open a bucket of yellow paint and had decorated her Lincoln with palm prints that were beginning to dry. Lindsay wanted to do away with Elton and John, but then reminded herself that temporary bliss wasn't worth going to prison for.

"Oh my God! Were you able to buff the scratches out?"

Lindsay shook her head. "The scratches were too deep and their palms prints didn't help, so I just had it repainted."

"Lin, they apologized profusely and I offered to reimburse you but you refused to accept money."

"They apologize every time they do somethin' wrong and why didn't Beverly offer to repay me?" Lindsay took a second to pretend thinking and then snapped her fingers. "Oh, that's right. She quit her job soon after ya'll started datin' so you could support her."

"She's working now."

"At *your* bookstore! What kind of interview did ya give her?"

"Am I gonna have to give you two a timeout?" Dylan's glare belied the question that could have been misconstrued as a tease. "This is supposed to be a day of celebration, camaraderie and love and I for one am not feeling the love at this damn table! So let's just try getting along and Lin for the love of God will you stop ripping into Beverly and her children? We get it; you don't like them but try keeping your opinions to yourself for once. You don't care for them but Adriana does so be a thoughtful friend instead of a freaking critic. Leave it be." Spreading her hands out on the table, Dylan tapped them against its surface as she drove her point home. "Let's make this our goal--more tranquility, less hostility."

Again there was a collective silence until Elena broke it with a jubilant 'preach sister' and began clapping. The remaining pairs of hands at their table soon joined hers. Customers from other tables looked toward them curiously as did Beverly when she walked up to the group. She asked if she had missed something while Lindsay rose and stepped over to Adriana, giving her a hug and whispering that she was sorry for her behavior. Dylan was correct. Although she didn't like her friend's choice in a life partner she didn't have to be so vocal about it.

"Ah, Lin and Adriana just had a slight disagreement," Elena answered the standing woman. "Please sit down and let's check out these menus so we can order. I don't know about the rest of you ladies, but I'm starving!" Every head at the table nodded, some mouths murmuring agreement.

Once the waiter had took their orders, Lindsay slid a ten dollar bill over to her girlfriend, asking if she would walk to the convenience store around the corner to buy her a Monster energy drink. Nancy incredulously looked between her and the money lying on the table.

"Are you serious? There's a full bar here with many beverages to select from and you want me to walk a block to get you a Monster?"

Lindsay smiled despite the scowl directed at her. "Yes. Please darlin'. And I like lo-carb, okay? Only twenty calories per can."

She still refrained from touching the money. "May I ask you what's suddenly wrong with your legs? They were working just fine earlier."

"Have you forgotten our motto that quickly? More tranquility, less hostility Nancy."

Nancy started to say something more hostile and less tranquil, but she didn't want to cause a scene. Instead she snatched the money and stood up to leave. "Fine, I'll go get the drink, but I'm keeping the change because I'm considering it my service fee."

When Nancy departed the restaurant, Dylan gave the young woman's partner a light kick to the shin underneath the table. "What the hell was that about? She's your girlfriend, not your servant Lin."

Lindsay wordlessly dropped a square blue ring box in front of her inquisitive friend. Dylan first stared at the jewelry box and then picked it up without opening it. "Is this what I think it is?" Eyes around the table stared in stupefaction, mouths hanging open. Did the used to be known as Sexy Stud actually have an engagement ring?

Visibly nervous, Lindsay softly sighed. "Look inside."

Dylan opened the box confirming that an engagement ring was indeed tucked inside. Three platinum set princess-cut diamonds sparkled beautifully on a yellow gold band. Inside the band was an inscription--'Marry Me'. When Dylan read it aloud the group oohed and aahed with Adriana and Elena getting up to come get a better look at the ring. Beverly had to roll her eyes yet she admitted (only to herself--inwardly) that it was a gorgeous piece of jewelry.

The box closed, Dylan held it within her grasp as she looked toward her friend in wonder. "Thought you would never ask," she reverently began. "Yes Lindsay. The answer is a resounding yes! I *will* marry you!" The resulting giggles were almost as loud as their earlier clapping.



Lindsay feigned shock. "You will?" She turned to Layne, putting an arm around her shoulder. "And what do you think of this sugar? Your baby's other mama has just agreed to become my old ball and chain?" With some quick footwork she managed to miss Dylan's next attempted kick.

"That's terrific Lin." The blonde started to smile. "If you need some entertainment I'd be delighted to sing at the wedding or the reception."

"Mighty kind. Do you happen to know that song Can You Feel the Love Tonight?" Grinning, she made it a point to glance in Beverly's direction. "It's a song by Elton John." The third kick met its target. So did the Sweet 'N Low packet Adriana threw at her forehead, which was much less lethal than the salt and peppershakers would have been. Beverly smiled for the first time since arriving at the table. "You're being a hypocrite Tate. I'm certain that kickin' people falls underneath the category of hostility."

Dylan thoughtfully nodded. "Probably. Sorry."

"Accepted."

"When are you going to propose?" Elena inquired.

"I intended to do it at the parade, but since Nancy looked like she wanted my head on a platter when she stomped outta here, I think I'm gonna have to bump it up to tonight. I'll pop the question at Pink Saturday." An image of a less hostile Nancy appeared in her mind. "Ya know, I can't imagine ever lovin' anyone half as much as her. The thought of spendin' the next forty plus years with one person doesn't scare me so much anymore, so if Nancy lets me I might as well make an honest woman out of her." Further oohs and aahs ensued.

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Despite Layne clinging to her, Dylan successfully unlocked the apartment door. Half carrying the inebriated muralist they shuffled inside the younger woman's home. Illuminating the living room, Dylan decided to pick her up and just carry her to the bedroom, because otherwise it might take them until sunrise.

Inside the mostly quiet blonde's bedroom, she pulled back the covers and gently set her cargo on top of the fitted sheet. She stood there for a moment as Layne wavered back and forth as though she would topple to her side. Within a few moments her friend was content that she could stay upright.

While going through Layne's dresser drawers searching for nightclothes, she had to snicker to herself about how the usually sensible woman ended up in this condition. She wasn't precisely sure how it came to be, but at one point during the evening at the Pink Saturday bash Layne and Elena participated in an impromptu tequila contest with twelve other people. The host and money holder of the contest explained that it cost twenty dollars to enter and the person to drink the most tequila shots within three minutes was the winner and would receive the pot. If more than one person emptied the same amount of shot glasses then they split the money. Lucky for

her, Elena was in the lead all by herself, happily stuffing an extra \$260 in her wallet. Although she lost, Layne had come in fifth place out of the group of fourteen.

Droopy gray eyes watched while Dylan pulled her shoes and socks off, a folded nightshirt lying next to her to be shortly put on. Her mouth felt dry so the blonde licked and smacked her lips before she spoke, her speech slurred yet Dylan could understand her.

"It was lotso fun." Layne smiled, obediently raising her arms so her shirt could be pulled off. "I had a blast."

Dylan returned the smile as she reached behind the younger woman to unhook her bra. "Hearing that makes me happy. You're a proficient limbo player." She tried her best to ignore perky breasts once their bra was removed. Staring was only allowed when the blonde was sober, which fortunately was 99.9% of the time. Grabbing the nightshirt, she helped her to put it on, relieved when they had Layne's chest fully covered.

"I'm flex...flex ball." She laughed falling backward with her feet still planted on the carpet. "Y'know what I mean Dyl. Dilly Willy!" She laughed harder because in her state the comic's new nickname was so clever and humorous.

"Yes, I'm picking up what you're putting down." Reaching underneath the nightshirt she unzipped her friends pants and then tugged them off, now trying not to think. *Don't you dare fantasize about what her flexibleness could help her to do!* She had to get Layne in the bed and then get out of there before she did something stupid. She had an unspoken rule. Something could only happen between she and another woman when they were both either sober or drunk together.

A couple of minutes later Layne was tucked underneath the covers. Her eyes were closed so Dylan placed a light kiss on her forehead and moved to turn off the lamp when she heard her name. Layne was probably too intoxicated to comprehend her sigh.

"Yes sweetheart?"

Eyes reopened, she tried to stroke the woman's cheek but missed, her palm falling on the blanket. "I love you."

You would have to finally say that when you're drunk and will undoubtedly forget your profession in a few hours when the alcoholic fog is lifted from your brain. Just my luck. Dylan put a smile on her face, succeeding in stroking Layne's cheek. "And I love you. So much."

Her eyes began to droop again. "Love was in the air tonight, huh? Nancy...Lin...gonna get married."

"They're an adorable couple." Smiling, Dylan settled on the edge of the bed thinking about the moment Lindsay finally gathered her courage to pop the question. Their group gathering for dinner at a restaurant near the party, she abruptly got down on one knee in front of Nancy while

their table waited for the desserts to be delivered. The count was lost on how many times Nancy said 'yes', her body trembling with excitement as she cried, her fiancée gathering her into her arms, tears in her eyes as well.

The brunette looked down, watching as eyelids shielded those pretty gray eyes. "Goodnight Layne," she whispered, again reaching for the light switch. Her fingers were within two inches of it when Layne assured her that she wasn't sleep yet.

"Are you gonna go bye-bye?"

Dylan grinned despite her desire to leave. The muralist sounded like a five-year-old with that question. "Yes, sweetheart. So you can get some rest."

"I can't rest if you stay?" Layne retorted, vaguely smiling.

"You want me to stay?" Conflicted, she wanted her to reply with a 'yes' and a 'no'.

The blonde's head created a deeper dent in the pillow beneath it when she nodded while patting the empty side of her bed. When Dylan announced that she would sleep on the couch, Layne patted the bed again.

"Stay." Pat, pat, pat. "Here. There's room."

The comic gazed toward the vacant side with longing and trepidation. Longing won the battle within. "Okay." Standing, Dylan began to peel off her clothing while reminding herself to stay on her side of the bed. Every part of her anatomy would remain on her side. The bed was spacious enough to make that simple to accomplish. In her boxer briefs and borrowing a T-shirt from her friend's collection she settled on her side, pulling the covers up to her chest. Then she realized that the lamp was still burning.

"Layne could you turn the light off?" Obtaining no answer she leaned over, softly chuckling when she discovered that Layne had finally went to sleep.

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Showered and dressed, Dylan returned to her friend's apartment the next morning a few minutes before nine o'clock to find her in the kitchen also dressed. Seated at the breakfast table, Layne's expression was one of misery as she sipped inky black coffee. If this was a hangover headache how must a migraine feel? She figured that she wouldn't be able to take that and would quickly perish. Slowly looking up, she waved two fingers at her visitor.

"Morning sweetheart," Dylan greeted, keeping her voice soft so she wouldn't make the woman's headache any worse. Putting a Thermos on the table she poured herself a cup of coffee, almost soundlessly pulled out a chair and sat down. She smiled upon looking at Layne's T-shirt. They had decided to wear the shirts that Layne purchased for them yesterday to show off at the parade today. Both lacked the courage to wear one of the more scandalous shirts, knowing that

Madeline would see them. Neither might live to see Monday. Scratch that-- they wouldn't make it until Sunday afternoon.

Layne's choice was a fitted white T-shirt with a pair of bright blue eyes on the front. Underneath them was written 'I See Gay People', undoubtedly homage to M. Night Shyamalan's movie *The Sixth Sense*. Along with her deliciously clingy shirt she wore hip hugger blue jeans. Dylan's shirt was in a baseball jersey style, white with blue  $\frac{3}{4}$  length sleeves. It read 'My parents said that I could become anything, so I became a LESBIAN'. The words 'my' through 'a' matched the blue in her sleeves while 'lesbian' had been capitalized, the pride colors blended through it. Dylan had started to wear a pair of jeans, but at the last moment decided on khaki pants.

Grabbing her Thermos, she twisted the cap off and then slid the dark container over to her friend. "Drink this. Fast."

The word fast made Layne instantly suspicious. She forced herself to raise her head and look across the small table. For a couple of seconds there were two Dylan's, and then they thankfully merged. The blonde inwardly swore for the thousandth time that she would never drink so much again. "Why fast? What is it?" She was afraid to sniff its contents. The smell alone might send her to the porcelain goddess again. Good thing toothpaste didn't bother her, because Layne had brushed enough times with it that morning.

"I can't provide you with the information on what it is exactly, but it's a magical hangover elixir, one I learned many years ago in college. All you really need to know is that it will eradicate that 'I feel like shit' feeling you're obviously suffering with. It's paramount for you to drink it fast because the taste is nasty as sin. You can't sip the M.H.E. like coffee. Just get it down like you're on that show *Fear Factor*." Layne remained skeptical. "Trust me honey. It'll work."

Layne wrapped her hands around the Thermos, taking a deep breath as she prepared to drink something labeled nasty as sin. "I've never had a hangover. Now that I know what one feels like, at least I can be assured that I'll never become an alcoholic."

Dylan softly chuckled. "You're all kinds of virgins."

Smirking, Layne raised the M.H.E. to her mouth.

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Wearing the 'My Mommies Love Me' sweatshirt her grandma purchased for her along with the cutest little pair of blue jeans, Robin admired the freshly painted multicolored butterfly on the back of her hand. It was difficult to sit still so the nice man could create the image, but the beautiful butterfly was worth it. Although they had admired it before, Robin raised her hand for Layne and Dylan's appraisal. With her settled on Layne's lap, Dylan leaned over to lightly kiss her hand.

"You look gorgeous Robbie, but I don't think I really need to tell *you* that. You must behold your beauty in the mirror everyday." She winked and the baby giggled. "What ya reading sweetie?"

Someplace you'd like to go?" They were currently in one of the more family oriented sections of the festival. Called the Family Garden, it was the perfect atmosphere for children, and for the last hour or so the three of them--especially Robin-- had a ball. They couldn't decide which she had enjoyed more--the parade or the Family Garden. The myriad of colors and extraordinary costumes had her laughing gleefully and clapping her hands while people and floats moved down the street. Oliver had brought a video camera and taped the entire parade, promising Robin that she would get a copy.

Nodding, Layne tapped the brochure with a finger. "What's Leather Alley?"

Fortunately Dylan had finished her soda a few minutes ago. Otherwise, she might have choked if her friend asked that while she was in the midst of drinking. "You're interested in that?"

Layne looked up curiously. "Should I not be? Not much information about it here. Sounds like it would be a great place to purchase clothing. I know it's summer now--not hot yet but summer--and I'd love to get a leather jacket to wear starting in the fall. Perhaps the kind with a length..." She cocked her head to the side while staring at Dylan. "What are you laughing for?"

Dylan apologized, wiping at her dampened eyes. She responded after taking a couple of deep breaths. "Are you interested in being..." The brunette trailed off, noticing identical blue eyes watching her. Again she leaned over, this time to cover Robin's innocent ears. "Are you interested in being or learning how to be a stellar top or bottom, to spank, flog or confine someone with objects such as rope, handcuffs, leather monogloves?" When she removed her hands, Layne replaced them with her own. A tiny scowl on her face, Robin would have asked them why they were diminishing her hearing capabilities if she were able to form a perfect sentence.

"I'm variable so being a top or bottom is fine with me, but no I'm not interested in learning anymore than I already do on the subject. Spanking seems simple, like something I could already do, so no. Flogging is definitely not my cup of tea. As for restraining, don't feel I need to be educated. Done the first, would be open to the second and have no idea what the third object is and don't think I want to know. Sounds complicated. I get it--Leather Alley is all about the kinky and sexual fetishes. Nope, my interest has taken a nosedive." Layne paused while lowering her hands from the baby's ears. Robin cooed with approval. "What? What is that look?" At least she wasn't laughing any longer, but Layne couldn't decipher that expression.

Dylan blinked, shook her head and then blinked again. She would be a top or a bottom, she wasn't opposed to spanking or handcuffing and she *had* tied someone up! So many questions. How and where had Layne tied someone with rope and how many partners had she practiced with? Did she enjoy it? Was she skilled at making a variety of knots? The comic shook herself out of her reverie just in time to view the blonde's knowing smirk.

"It happened close to a decade ago, she had a lot of toys designated for adults and she asked me to restrain her. I chose the rope. Not that I didn't enjoy myself, but I never did it again due to us breaking up a week later because I discovered that she was insane and addicted to her big girl toys and really wanted me to join her in that addiction. I'm all for spicing things up but she was

one step away from asking me to hang from her chandelier." Dylan bit down hard on her lip. "It's alright. Laugh." Layne had barely cracked a smile before her friend took advantage of her permission. Although she hadn't been following their conversation, Robin joined in on her aunt's mirth.

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### **July 27th 2006**

Mason stood near the front door just in case she decided to take her aggression out on him. Close to the door, hopefully he would have enough of a head start to make a run for it. Unfortunately, his bicycle was leaning against the couch. The courier wasn't brave enough to walk over and get it right now.

Swear words flew from her mouth as Dylan created a mess in her living room searching for the week's worth of comic strips, which was Mason's responsibility to mail. Growling low in her throat, the frazzled woman ran long fingers through her hair while she stared at her unusually disorganized desk. Obviously, they weren't there. So where had she misplaced them?

"Son of a bitch," she muttered, walking over to the couch and pulling the cushions out. Unfortunately, she only found a stale cool ranch Doritos chip, a marker she lost last week and a dime. Dylan tossed the marker in the direction of her desk and pocketed the dime.

"Um, Dylan?"

"What Mason?" She kept her eyes on the couch as if she expected the strips to materialize.

"Maybe the exasperation you feel isn't because of the missing strips." His client sent him an icy glare. Reaching up to his close shaven blond head, Mason rubbed his palm over the soft fuzz, which oddly had a way of comforting him--until today. "Is something else bothering you?"

Dylan threw her hands up in the air, a rough breath escaping her lips. "Just spill it Mason. Obviously you have something to get off your chest."

Since the courier had fallen mute, she continued talking. "I guess losing seven days worth of strips that I worked my ass off to create isn't enough to be pissed about, right?" She paced the length of her couch several times. "Where are they? This isn't right...I need them! They can't...they can't go away. I don't know what I'll do if they did." Dylan's voice broke toward the end of her frantic mini speech. Clearing her throat she collapsed onto the couch where she sat lower than usual because she had neglected to return the cushions to their rightful positions and crushed the chip underneath her right buttock. She didn't bother to rectify this. It didn't matter.

Although walking as if he were in a slow motion flick, Mason moved toward the couch, parking on the arm of it. "Sure we're still talking about the strips?" The young courier would have reached out to provide her with a hopefully consoling touch, but he didn't want to risk pulling back a stump. Luckily, she didn't feel the need to glare at him again.

"Of course! What else?!" And then she had a revelation. Springing from the couch, Dylan grabbed her keys and informed Mason that she would be back in a minute as she went out the door. She returned in six minutes with the thick portfolio containing her comics. She remembered that she had let Layne take them back to her apartment to read because her friend enjoyed reading them before they were mailed off for printing. Since Layne wasn't home, she had to call and ask her where the strips were.

"Layne had them," Dylan commented, handing the portfolio to Mason.

He tapped his heart with two fingers. "What else of yours does Layne have?" The courier asked, unintentionally sounding like a younger Dr. Phil. Oh, the icy glare had just made a comeback! It was time to make like a banana and split! Mason made a production out of checking his watch. "Oh, look at the time! I should get in motion. So many packages to pick up and drop off, so little time!" He was the only person in the room smiling and his was barely a smile. "Um, later Dylan." At least she waved as he walked out.

*Damn, she might have a total meltdown if Layne and Robin leave next month. It's gonna be fun picking up those packages!*

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August 1st 2006

It was official. As of that morning a judge finalized Robin's adoption and she was now legally Layne's daughter. The hearing, which went smoothly, took half an hour with Layne, Robin, Dylan, Madeline, Angela and Layne's attorney and social worker in attendance.

That evening all of them minus the attorney met up at a restaurant for a congratulatory dinner. Angela's husband Michael, their brood, Oliver, Jimmy and Reggie joined them.

Seated at the banquet table sipping a glass of celebratory champagne, Dylan sent the band playing tonight a glare. She swore that she would be tempted to throw each and every one of them from the nearest window if they played one more love song. Didn't they know anything that wasn't romantically based? Okay, so it wasn't right to blame them for her bad mood and to fantasize about tossing them out of windows. She realized this, but she still didn't want to hear romantic ballads claiming how beautiful love was. Yes, love could be beautiful but it could also be unrequited and that type of love sucked. It sucked royally.

People clapped as the band's latest cover song ended. Dylan groaned into the cloth napkin she used to wipe away the tickling bubbles from her upper lip. Someone--she wasn't sure who this 'someone' was, but someone must have thought it was hilarious to tease her. The band started singing about unrequited love with The Temptations hit single Just My Imagination. Usually Dylan enjoyed hearing the song, but tonight not so much. Maybe she would throw herself out of a window.

Sitting on her left, Evangeline tapped her on the shoulder. "Dylan would you dance with me?"

Turning toward her, Dylan found a brief smile touching her lips. "Your husband won't mind?"

The social worker searched her surroundings as if her spouse of twenty-two years would appear. "No, he won't mind. And if he did, he's not here to protest." She grinned. "Though he might enjoy watching me dance with another woman. Especially one as pretty as you."

Dylan blushed and chuckled at the same time. "In that case, let's get on the floor." Standing up, she took hold of Evangeline's hand and began to lead her away. When they reached the crowded dance floor, Dylan noticed Layne and Jimmy already there moving in time with the music together. She frowned over her dance partner's shoulder. If her cousin's hand drifted just a bit lower she would have to toss him out of the window too. *Damn it, just rename me Dylan the Grouch. I'm annoying my own self!*

"So Dylan, I see you haven't made any progress huh?" The social worker smiled gently. "What's going on there?"

"With Layne?" Her eyes temporarily drifted to the woman in question. Catching her gaze the blonde smiled with a great dose of cheer, most likely oblivious to Dylan's inner turmoil.

"Yes."

The brunette shrugged. "Nothing." *Unfortunately.* "She and Robbie are headed back to NYC next week."

"She loves you."

Dylan twirled Evangeline and then smoothly brought her back into her arms. "Did she tell you that?"

"Didn't have to. I can tell just by looking at her. Looking at the way she looks at you."

"Hmm. Could I borrow your eyes?" She wanted to believe that, but Layne wasn't giving her much to hope for.

The social worker chuckled. "No, sorry won't loan them to you. Blue suits you much better."

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Tomorrow was D-day. Departure. Layne and Robin's departure from San Francisco and their departure from her. Turning her pillow cushioned head, Dylan checked out the time. 11:29 p.m. If only she could freeze 11:29. She shook her head. No, that wouldn't work. They would remain in San Francisco yet they would be frozen. If only SFO would shut down early tomorrow morning for a non-lethal reason, therefore grounding all planes.



Dylan rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. There was about a snowball's chance of that occurring. And even if it did, Layne would probably book a bus or train ticket. She and Robin couldn't drive to New York in her truck because she paid for it to be shipped last week. She used UPS to ship the bulk of hers and the baby's belongings. Her next door neighbor called Friday to assure Layne that the boxes had arrived safely and that they would be waiting inside her garage to be picked up whenever the muralist returned.

11:34 now. Dylan concluded that she wasn't about to drift off to sleepy land, so she pushed the covers back, exited the bed and made a beeline for the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. If she couldn't sleep than she would do something productive like work on the sequel to her first comic book. Scrapping most of what she had created months ago, she was now on page five. Last week Jimmy had been delighted to learn that his cousin was at least working on her book again, even if she did have a long way to go.

While she waited for her coffee, she walked back through the living room and down the hall to Robin's nursery where the baby slept off her final night in San Francisco. Tomorrow she would start her new life as a New Yorker. Dylan hoped that she loved it there although she didn't want her to leave.

Easing the door open, Dylan tiptoed toward the crib. The variety of stars and moons on her mobile shed enough light for her aunt to see her face, little pink lips appearing pouty as she slept. Smiling, Dylan reached inside the crib to caress her cheek with two fingers. Now she had a difficult time understanding how she didn't fall for Robin the moment she first saw her face. November seemed like such a long time ago.

"Hey my little princess," the proud aunt whispered, eyes filled with both love and unshed tears. "I'm going to miss you terribly when you and your mama leave tomorrow, but I'll be visiting so much that you'll get sick of me. In fact, I don't think I can even wait until Thanksgiving to fly over. Maybe Halloween so I can take pictures of adorable you in your costume to tease you with when you become a teenager. Tease you in the most loving way of course." Dylan smiled through the tears falling down her cheeks.

"I love you Robbie. You arrived on my doorstep at the end of November, but I consider you to be the best Christmas present that I've ever received. You and your mama Layne are so precious to me." A soft kiss on the baby's cheek and Dylan quietly left the room. She was halfway to the kitchen when her doorbell rang. The first person she thought of who could be standing on the other side was a certain gorgeous blonde neighbor.

Hurrying toward the bathroom, Dylan ran her fingers through her hair to bring some order to it and then ran for the door, barely missing stubbing her bare foot on the couch. She suffered a slight case of déjà vu when she opened the door to find that no one was there. She slowly looked downward, breathing a sigh of relief when she found an empty doorstep. A soft chuckle brought her head up and toward the left where Layne stood. A few steps away she must have decided to leave when her ring wasn't immediately answered.

"Thought for a second there that another one of your ex's left you a bundle?"

Dylan found herself chuckling too. "The thought did cross my mind for a second, yes. What's going on? You can't sleep?" Unlike the comic, she was fully dressed in jeans and a purple NYU sweatshirt.

"No, so I took a chance that you were still up and..." She indicated Dylan's state of dress--plaid boxer shorts and a T-shirt that had noticeably seen the inside of a washer many times. A faded blue it had built in air conditioning with a couple of tiny holes. Yes, the T-shirt was an oldie but a goodie. "Obviously I got you out of bed and I'm sorry--this was silly. I'll see you in the morning." Layne turned to leave but the other woman quickly called her back.

"Actually I wasn't asleep and I wasn't in bed. I couldn't sleep either so I was already up putting on some coffee. Why don't you come inside and I'll pour you a cup?"

"No coffee, thanks."

"Okay. Anything else I can get you?" She grew curious when the blonde seemed to hesitate in answering what should have been a simple question.

"Um...probably."

One eyebrow rising, Dylan wore a quizzical smile. "Do you intend on sharing what that is? Whatever it is, if I have it I'll give it to you."

"You will?" Layne began moving toward the apartment keeping eye contact with the woman standing in such a position that she blocked access to the inside. Standing in front of Dylan she looked up. "And if I have something for you would you accept it?" This whispered question caused the butterflies within Dylan's stomach to awaken.

"In a heartbeat," the brunette responded in a whisper. She didn't understand where this conversation was going, but she was ten times as curious as she was when she first opened the door. She couldn't believe that she didn't melt or at least faint when Layne wrapped her arms around her neck right before she softly confessed.

"I want to give you me for tonight Dylan. Could I?" Since she forgot how to speak, the comic nodded instead. Her hands on the taller woman's chest, Layne gently pushed until she received the clue and began walking backward into the apartment. Securing the door, she pushed again until Dylan's back was pressed against the wall next to the door. Unconsciously, she rubbed tense shoulders as she searched blue eyes for signs of doubt. "Do you want this Dylan?"

"No offense sweetheart but that's a really obtuse question." She grinned in hopes of removing the sting from her response. *And hey deep down there's a compliment in there.*

Gray eyes narrowed. "You calling me dumb Tate?"

The grin spread. "I called your question dumb, not you...Bishop. You're smart as a whip." Her

hands resting on Layne's waist, she prayed that this wasn't a dream. It didn't feel like a dream. Layne felt too wonderful to be a dream. Dylan's nostrils flared slightly as she breathed in her scent. She smelled too intoxicating, too exotic to be a dream. A blend of mixed berries, peaches and pineapple clung to her soft skin. However, if this was a dream she sent an extra prayer that she wouldn't awaken anytime soon.

She touched her forehead to Layne's, eyes closed as she deeply inhaled. "Yes Layne, I want this," she confirmed in a hushed tone. "I want--no, I need you." Dylan kept her eyes shut when a tender mouth brushed against hers. It performed the pleasurable action three times before the brunette drew it in for a more thorough kiss. The word 'bedroom' had never sounded so beautiful as it did when the muralist whispered it into her ear.

Her thoughts focused on what they would do once they reached their destination, Dylan hardly remembered the jaunt there. While her friend lingered near the bed she checked the baby monitor, quickly ascertaining that it was properly working. Dylan felt like she had drank a bucket full of coffee already. She reminded herself that there was nothing to be nervous about. Although it had been eight and a half months since her last sexual encounter, sex was like riding a bicycle--once learned, never forgotten.

Realization threading its way to the forefront, Dylan slowly placed the baby monitor back on her nightstand. So that was the problem. Her past encounters with women had all revolved solely around the sex. She wasn't familiar with making love because until Layne she had never been in love. Made total sense--scared the crappola out of her. Eyes shut she tapped long fingers on the monitor. This continued until the blonde walked up behind her and wrapped her arms around the taller woman.

"What thoughts are inside that head?" Layne gently inquired, stroking a taut stomach. "Changed your mind?"

A 'no' was uttered with much vigor. "Just thinking." Dylan shuddered thanks to the mouth kissing the middle of her back through the thin T-shirt.

"About?"

"You."

"And?" That mouth traveled higher making the owner of the T-shirt wish that she no longer had it on.

"And..." Dylan turned to face the woman who she would be overjoyed to spend the rest of her days on this earth with. "And how much I want to make love with you."

Smiling, Layne rested her hands on the comic's shoulders. "That's something we have in common."

"You want to make love with you too?" Her nerves beginning to settle down, Dylan chuckled in

response to her friend's expected smirk. "There is something I'd like to see."

On tiptoes, Layne smacked her lips. "Why don't you see your way to that bed?"

"That's an easy enough request." However, despite the confidence in her words Dylan's feet refused to budge. Obviously, some of those nerves remained. *Dylan you've never made love before but you're far away from your days as a virgin. Snap out of it!* The internal scolding didn't help so Layne decided to nudge her toward the bed, gently pushing until the comic was seated on the side of it. Dylan looked up with an every tooth visible smile in place. "Here I am!"

"Very good!" Chuckling, Layne shook her head while she stood in front of the nervous woman. "You sure you're ready for this?" Dylan closed her eyes when she started to brush her hand back and forth across her cheek. "We don't have to. I'd be happy to just cuddle with you."

One blue eye peeked open. "Now that's something we *don't* have in common," she replied with a faint grin. "Although I'm pro cuddling there's another activity I'd like to indulge in first."

Smiling softly, Layne ceased stroking her cheek only to begin lightly tracing her lips with an index finger. Those lips parted as if they desired to draw that digit inside. "Then I suppose we should stop talking so much."

Dylan agreed with a wordless nod. Her thighs parted as Layne walked up further to the bed. Using her hands for balance, Dylan leaned backward and watched mesmerized as the muralist started to remove her sweatshirt, her heart racing more with each bit of tantalizing skin revealed. She checked her mouth for drool while admiring the push up bra, although in her opinion Layne didn't need that feature. When the blonde reached for her fly Dylan pushed her hands away.

"Allow me to do that." She wondered if Layne caught the breathlessness in her tone. Instructing her hands not to tremble, she unbuttoned and then seemingly in slow motion unzipped the jeans exposing an embroidered lilac satin thong, which perfectly matched the bra. *I love it when Victoria decides to reveal one of her numerous secrets.*

Instead of pulling the pants down and discarding them like was expected of her, Dylan began to rain kisses on the exposed flat tummy, beginning just below the velvety cups of the bra and leisurely trailing her lips down to a bellybutton, which she couldn't help but to explore with her tongue. Layne's response was a sharp intake of breath as the tongue slipped in and out of and around her navel. She was ready to tug the jeans off herself by the time Dylan moved on to her abdomen, tickling her along the waistband of the thong with that fleshy inquisitive organ.

The blonde was about to step back to remove the cumbersome jeans when the comic hooked her fingers into the sides and pulled them down her legs. Once they reached her ankles, Layne kicked them off. Before she could do anything else, Dylan had slid to her knees resuming her sweet torture with her mouth bypassing the thong and moving to an inner thigh. When her tongue swirled around a small area of skin the younger woman softly moaned, her fingers finding themselves immersed in dark hair. She had to release the long tendrils when Dylan's attentions took her further down the shapely leg. She didn't stop until she reached the inside of

Layne's ankle and then switched to the other leg, slowly beginning her trek upward. Layne's legs had begun to wobble by the time that warm mouth nibbled at the apex of her thigh, having her hoping that she wouldn't fall on the floor.

Layne had enough of being on her feet when a pair of lips started nuzzling the crotch of her panties. Her fingers returned to Dylan's head, lightly massaging. "Dyl, your bed. Please." The moment that the tall woman stood up Layne reached for the end of her T-shirt and tugged upward. The brunette obediently raised her arms to make undressing her easier. Her friend would never recall dropping the shirt as her eyes were riveted to Dylan's naked chest. She yearned to touch but her hands were suddenly frozen at her sides. Within seconds assistance was offered to her when the comic reached for her right hand and placed it over her left breast. She stroked Layne's wrist for a moment before letting go to see what she would do.

Layne was responsible for the soft moan leaving Dylan's mouth when she flicked a blunt thumbnail over the nipple, which positively responded. Because the sound was pleasing to her ears, she repeated the brief action. That time she received a moan and her name was whispered. Lifting her left hand, Layne graced the other breast with some attention, alternating between using her thumbnail and rolling the nipple between her thumb and forefinger.

"Sweetheart...you had a brilliant idea."

"I did?" The blonde distractedly replied, beginning to knead the warm heaving flesh within her palms.

Dylan nodded, jabbing a thumb at her bed. "You, me and the bed need to become acquainted." With a deep breath she placed her hands on either side of Layne's face, the hands on her chest pausing in their exploration only to inch toward her shoulders as her head lowered, moistened lips her target. "Immediately." The kiss wasn't a feather light brushing of their mouths; it wasn't a wisp of things to come. Dylan kissed her as though it were the final time that their lips would bond. It wasn't the last but the end was drawing near. This time tomorrow those sweet lips would be on the other side of the United States. Thinking of this had Dylan wrapping her arms around Layne, holding on tight while a kiss on the verge of being frantic deepened.

Discarding the remainder of their clothing, the pair at last made it into the bed. Unclothed bodies barely touching the cool sheets when their mouths reconnected, legs tangled, hands caressing every easily accessible part of one another. Gently prodded to lie on her back once Dylan's mouth abandoned hers, Layne's eyes drifted closed as she concentrated on the tender mouth moving along her jaw line and down her neck where it discovered a pulse point racing with a dollop of nervousness yet an abundance of anticipation.

Soon those lips departed from her neck and she moaned at the feel of Dylan's body brushing against hers as the brunette moved downward. Warm breath falling on the valley between her breasts gave Layne a great indication of where she planned to taste next. She opened her eyes when Dylan softly called her name.

"Don't keep those dazzling eyes closed sweetheart," Dylan pleaded while rubbing her hands

along the smaller woman's sides. "Watch me love you." She winked in response to Layne's silent nod. However, the muralist broke her silence when she felt more than puffs of air between her breasts. Attaining a grasp on the back of Dylan's head, she moaned while a tongue laved the velvety skin. Her hold on the dark head tightened as Dylan's tongue began switching back and forth between each breast either suckling a nipple or sampling the pinkish areola. Reflexively, she arched her back offering more of her breasts to Dylan's voracious mouth.

Needing to taste more, Dylan soon moved further south showering her stomach with kisses and making sure to revisit that navel before she went lower drawing her legs up and underneath her so they wouldn't hang off the bed. Layne's legs hooked over her shoulders she gazed toward a triangle of blonde dampness. Leaning in she inhaled the combination of fruity scents along with Layne's natural musky essence, which Dylan noted with satisfaction had begun to overwhelm. She nuzzled and placed light kisses on her lover's exterior until she felt an encouraging hand on the back of her head. Meeting Layne's beseeching eyes she produced a half smile.

"Could I help you Layne?" She thought she heard a growl yet it could have been her imagination.

Raising her head, the blonde bit her lower lip, watching Dylan's mouth hover just above where she needed it most. "You could." Tiny shivers ripped through her every time the comic exhaled onto her mound.

"How could I?" Her hands on Layne's stomach, the brunette started a leisurely rub, fingers moving in small circles.

"Dyl, please." She hoped to successfully hint at what she desired with a quick hip jerk.

With steady eye contact Dylan lowered her mouth, her bottom lip grazing swollen labia when she spoke. "You want me to taste you baby?" She flicked her tongue against Layne before she could answer. A gasp preceded the reply.

The muralist nodded. "I crave you Dylan. Please." When a tongue teased the length of her, she began to close her eyes when she remembered her silent promise to watch. And she would watch until that moment when she could no longer concentrate and Layne was definite that as long as she had fantasized about making love with Dylan it wouldn't be long.

When a tongue began thrusting into her she spoke yet it was a language that she had just created so neither of them could figure out its translation. However, based on the way that the unintelligible words sounded she was headed toward a blissful place. Her hips moving upward, Layne pressed herself into Dylan's mouth while losing the will to observe. Half hooded gray eyes peered toward the ceiling and a heart pounded as she neared the cusp of her blissful place. Releasing the dark head, Layne grabbed handfuls of the bedding, moaning between soft pants. She was sure that her orgasm would be imminent within the next few seconds when Dylan stopped. Layne waited a moment, certain that she would continue. The muralist was wrong.

"Dyl?" She raised her head, looking at the blue eyes gazing up at her face. She thought she noticed Dylan's mouth turning upward into a grin, but it dissipated too quickly. "Is something--"

She immediately shut up when Dylan started to shift around. '

Settling her lower body between the blonde's now outstretched legs, Dylan held her upper half above Layne, a hand braced next to her head. A fascinated young woman followed the free hand slipping between Dylan's legs, adept fingers parting her folds. Layne whimpered, zeroing in on the evidence of her lover's arousal. Envious of what the tongue peeking from the full lips above her had already done, she wanted a sample as well. No, she wanted to devour.

"Not yet baby," Dylan uttered, somehow acquiring access to her thoughts. Wearing a soft smile, the brunette slowly lowered until she was lying on top of the smaller woman, their breasts and tummies coming into perfect contact. "Am I too heavy?"

"Just right," Layne moaned, her level of pleasure soaring higher. In that moment she would have readily told Dylan that she could stay on top of her forever if she'd asked permission. A few words from her newly founded language slipped out of her mouth when Dylan began to grind her hips while she tasted an earlobe, drawing it between her teeth and bathing it with her tongue.

"Bend and part your legs wider for me," Dylan whispered against the damp ear. Layne wordlessly did as instructed, the soles of her feet resting on the bed and thighs wide open on either side of Dylan's rear. "Mm, much better sweetheart." Again, she reached between them and opened herself before pressing into the blonde, their slickness making it easy to glide against each other.

For a moment Layne thought that her eyes were about to roll back in her head at the feel of Dylan's sex thrusting into her own. Nothing had ever felt that incredible. Sliding her hands down the other woman's back, she cupped her backside, giving the cheeks a squeeze. She moaned into the mouth that covered hers, their bodies glistening with perspiration in the lamplight flooding Dylan's bed.

When the pace of their hips began to quicken, Dylan performed a pushup, keeping her upper body suspended with her palms flat against the sides of Layne's head. Arms trembling while emphatic hips rocked back and forth, Dylan watched the beautiful face before her. Lips swollen and moist from their kisses were parted, shallow breaths moving in and out of them. Eyelids tightly shut kept stunning gray eyes from view. Tiny beads of sweat dotted the hairline above a slightly furrowed brow and cheeks glowed with crimson heat. Dylan leaned down to press her lips to one.

Layne's eyes fluttered open, briefly meeting the comic's. "Dylan I...it's..."

The brunette nodded, understanding without Layne having to finish what she attempted to say. "Me too Layne." She collapsed on top of the petite woman when Layne grabbed the nape of her neck and pulled downward, crushing their lips together, greedily sucking her lover's tongue into her mouth. She wrapped her legs around Dylan as their bodies feverishly worked to deliver both to that blissful place.

It was Dylan's turn to produce the garbled language seconds before muting it when she buried

her face in Layne's neck. Lips parted, her tongue stroked the skin finding its saltiness appealing.

"Bite me darling," Layne plead in a rasping voice.

That short request proved to be her undoing, the euphoric release sneaking up on her before she wanted it to. Her disappointment was short-lived as her body tensed with a series of spasms. Dylan kept her hips active, aware that Layne was right behind her. Attaching her lips to the blonde's neck, she suctioned tender skin into her mouth, declining to actually bite her since that could result in much discomfort. By the time Dylan had the area effectively reddened she felt Layne shuddering underneath her, exultant cries reaching her ears.

Immediately following them, Dylan's ears perceived a different genre of cries. "Layne? Sweetheart, are you all right?" She witnessed the tears sliding over flushed cheeks, becoming more alarmed with each passing second. "Did I hurt you?" She placed a hand against the younger woman's cheek and was somewhat quelled when Layne turned her head to give the palm a kiss. Looking up at Dylan, she smiled through the tears.

"No, you didn't hurt me. That was wonderful."

The comic agreed. "But why the tears?" Scooting over so that she was laying beside Layne, she wiped several of the tears away with her fingers.

Mirroring Dylan, she turned on her side facing the other woman. An arm draped across Dylan's hip, she leaned in to nibble her bottom lip. "Because you've taken my heart, brought it back to life, reintroduced it to warmth and made it soar. And I can't..." Layne shook her head against the pillow as another tear escaped and traveled across the bridge of her nose. "I can't explain how fortunate I am to have met someone so special as you Dylan. Everyday I wake up feeling thankful for you and Robin. I love you both so much."

Dylan attempted to blink away tears but they refused to be banished. A lump in her throat, she swallowed. "We love you too. More than I'm able to put into words." Unclothed bodies pressed together in an embrace, their lips met. Both tried to push away thoughts of their impending separation and just focus on loving each other until the sun was ready to greet them with a new day.

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"What? Why are you looking at me like that?" She could swear that those blue eyes identical to her own were glaring at her. She threw her hands up in the air and then shrugged. "I've tried--really I have--but she's steadfast in her decision. She wants the two of you to return to New York and we should respect that. You'll grow to love it--I know you will. NYC has a lot of culture." *And pollution and a high population,* Dylan added within her mind. *Have I mentioned that?*

Her heart nearly shattered when a tiny bottom lip stuck out as if Robin understood her. "Aw Robbie, this isn't the end of the road. I promise that we'll see each other often. I'll come to New York and you and your mama will come visit me and the rest of the family." Leaning across the

armrest between their chairs with her lips puckered, she smacked the baby's cheeks until Robin started to giggle. Puckering her own lips she smacked her aunt back.

Dylan grinned. "Thank you Robbie."

"Dada." Robin pointed a finger at her to assure the brunette that she was talking directly to her.

The comic was surprised, pleased and amused. Robin specified Layne as her mama two months ago, which Layne managed to document on her cell phone the second time she said it moments after the first spoken word. Dylan hadn't expected to be called anything until the baby was capable of saying her name, which she figured would happen sometime next spring.

"Me Dada?" She tapped a finger to her chest.

Bouncing in her chair, Robin clapped her hands. "Dada!" She turned toward the right watching as Layne approached, returning from her trip to the ladies room. "Mama!"

"Hey love," the blonde cooed, taking a seat on Robin's right. Running her fingers through soft dark locks she gazed toward the other woman with amusement. "Hey Dada."

Dylan chuckled. "I'm the man now. Don't you forget it baby."

Crossing one leg over the other, Layne laughed. "Oh, I won't man. I promise. But I must say that you are the most beautiful man I've ever seen. All S.F. drag queens must be green with envy."

The comic suitably blushed, her gaze drifting from Layne's face down to her neck. Gently her finger caressed the purplish area, tracing its skewed edges. "I'm sorry," Dylan whispered, filled with remorse from having caused it. Despite the remorse, flutters started in her stomach as she thought of how the mark arrived on Layne's skin and all that occurred afterward. Four times. The muralist had sent her on an exquisite voyage to heaven and back down to earth again four miraculous times. Dylan had been somewhat surprised that she was able to walk the next morning, although she had to bathe delicately in a certain location. It had been worth it. Well worth it.

Layne raised a hand to touch the bruise. "Please don't be Dyl. I asked for it didn't I?" Although she didn't need help remembering, the hickey would remind her of their lovemaking every time she looked in a mirror until it faded within the following week.

"True."

Layne sent her a smile. "So no regrets."

The dark head shook in agreement. "None at all." Dylan bit off a sigh as she checked her watch. Boarding for Layne and Robin's nonstop flight to JFK airport would be starting soon. Her heart felt heavy as she recalled that when she left the airport she would be walking alone. Dylan felt like bursting into tears right there.

She wouldn't have made it this far to wait with them since non-passengers were not allowed passed the security checkpoint, but Dylan thought in advance to purchase a one-way ticket. Yes, some would call it a waste of money but it afforded her more time with two people she loved dearly.

Robin had crawled into her lap and fallen asleep when a pleasant voice spoke over the intercom notifying passengers that boarding at Gate 72 would now commence. The baby woke up the moment Dylan stood up with her in her arms. When the comic spotted a smile created just for her from saliva glistened lips, she wondered how she was going to release her niece so that either she or Layne could place her inside the car seat. It was truly happening. They were about to leave.

Trying to keep her expression panic free, Dylan kissed the soupy lips causing that terrific smile to widen. "Okay Robbie, it's time for you and your Mama to go. Remember you love traveling in an airplane, so this should be a fun experience." She kneeled on the floor next to the car seat. "Be a good girl and take good care of your Mama, alright? I love you." Words trembling with her will not to cry in front of them, Dylan held the small body against her, rubbing circles on Robin's back. "So much." Eyes closing, she kissed the top of her head continuing the embrace a few more seconds until she managed to convince herself that she was holding them up.

Securing Robin in her car seat, she stood up and silently pulled Layne into her arms. Nuzzling her neck, she inhaled deeply trying to memorize the balmy perfume that the blonde had spritzed on. "Have a safe trip," Dylan mumbled into the warm skin. She couldn't let go. Layne might need to push her away.

"I'll call just as soon as we land at JFK," Layne quietly replied, tears pooling within her eyes. She shuddered as a mouth tenderly kissed the bruise on her neck. She originally thought when this moment arrived that it would be difficult to say goodbye and now realized that she had been incorrect. What she and obviously Dylan were going through made difficult resemble a piece of cake. Layne barely fought against the threatening tears when the other woman was the first to break the grasp they had on one another. A whispered goodbye followed with a brief touch of lips and Dylan hurried away never looking over her shoulder.

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A wreck she didn't feel capable of making it to her car, so Dylan headed inside Terminal 3's Burger King and ordered a coffee. She didn't want it but since she was about to occupy one of the fast food restaurant's most private booths to most likely weep she felt obligated to make a purchase. Handing Dylan the cup of hot java, the BK employee took note of her impending condition but kept silent. The brunette imagined that she was used to seeing people in or near tears at her job here within the airport--those being left or doing the leaving. And then there were the people shedding joyous tears because of being reunited with loved ones. How she wished that she were one of those people.

Hands around the heated cup, Dylan's chin rested against her chest as fat melancholy drops fell,

staining the table. A neatly folded white cotton handkerchief embedded with satin stripes appeared underneath her nose. She was asked to take it and did so while looking up into a compassionate face, awestruck by eyes the color of which she couldn't pinpoint. They reminded her of a calmed ocean, stormy clouds, a thriving meadow and earth's richest soil--all concurrently.

The benevolent woman shut her mouth for her before indicating the empty booth. "Could I sit with you for a bit?"

Dylan needlessly pointed toward the booth. "Please. Thank you for the handkerchief."

"You're welcome. Keep it, I have plenty." Seated, she placed a basket filled with something unidentified on the floor. Fingertips forming a triangle on the table, her lips lifted into a comforting smile for the other woman. "Shakespeare mentioned that parting is such sweet sorrow."

Extracting the swizzle stick from her coffee, Dylan thoughtfully chewed on the tip of the skinny piece of plastic. "I'm unable to comprehend what's so sweet about it. How did you know that I've parted with someone?"

"Those reddened eyes aren't caused by allergies. I assume that either someone you love has recently boarded a plane or you're waiting to board one. Which is it?"

Although she had stopped crying for the moment another tear coursed down her cheek so Dylan used the so handkerchief to remove it, amazed at its scent. A blend of fruits the cloth reminded her so vividly of how Layne smelled last night. As though the blonde had sprayed this handkerchief with the fragrance she owned. Bringing the handkerchief underneath her nose, Dylan inhaled deeper, images from the night before filling her thoughts.

"Does that smell nice?" The woman added a wink to the end of her question.

"Uh," blushing from embarrassment, the comic put the cloth in her pocket, "yes, it's nice." She remembered the question posed a minute ago. "My friend and her daughter just left for New York."

Her acquaintance nodded. "I think what Shakespeare meant was--at least my interpretation of what he meant was that although parting ways with someone beloved is a sorrowful experience, it could be short-lived meaning that eventually you'll be reunited with your beloved." Kaleidoscope orbs melded with blue as if trying to resolve what lay behind them or convey a message. "Sometimes after we've said goodbye to someone special to us we find ourselves astounded at how expeditiously we're able to say hello again." She followed Dylan's eyes as they traveled toward the entrance. "Not that soon sweetheart." And then the saddened eyes traveled to the table between the two women.

"This isn't forever," the soft-spoken woman assured her.

"I know." Raising her head, Dylan managed a smile for her booth mate. "Thank you for stopping by to talk with me. You're very kind." Her spirits were given a jolt upward when a gentle hand caressed her cheek.

"I do my best." After returning the smile she checked her watch, voicing that she had to be leaving. "Before I go there's something I'd like to give you. I made these..." Retrieving her basket, she placed it on the table where Dylan was able to inspect its contents. The basket was filled with an assortment of origami created flowers, each with its own stem. They were crafted with such care that from a distance a person could believe that they were authentic. Disturbing her paper creations, she reached toward the bottom removing a bright yellow flower with red painted along the tips of its petals.

She twirled the stem between long fingers as she looked at Dylan. "What do you know about a yellow rose?"

"Uh...it's the flower of Texas?"

Her acquaintance shook her head while chuckling. "The state flower for Texas is the bluebonnet. A yellow rose alone can signify elation or platonic friendship. On the contrary, especially in other countries it could also mean jealousy." She waved around a dismissive hand. "But that doesn't apply here, so let's disregard that part. Now the reddened tips take this flower to another level. On its own it's mainly friendship, but the red symbolizes falling in love--two lives merging in order to begin a sparkling brand new one together. For you my friend." She held the perfect rose out for Dylan to take and was thanked in returned.

"You should present that flower to the person you love." She smiled. "And I'm not referring to a platonic love."

Instead of inquiring how this mysterious woman perceived that she was in love, Dylan simply replied, "She's on her way to New York." Twirling the origami underneath her nose she was surprised to note that its fragrance was as genuine as its appearance. Despite consisting of paper the flower smelled as though it were freshly plucked from a blooming garden. Someone took their craft seriously!

Sliding her hand across the table, she held Dylan's a few seconds. "Again it's not forever." Hand wrapped around the basket's handle, she stood up to leave smiling when the dark haired woman asked if she could have a hug. Her arms were spread wide by the time Dylan had exited the booth. The comic's spirits were bestowed another boost as a pair of strong arms engulfed her, a heartening warmth roving through her as though she had just arrived home chilled from a wintry evening and was finally able to bask in front of a roaring fireplace. A good squeeze and her new friend released her.

"Take care of yourself sweetheart." With that said she walked away, basket of origami flowers swinging at her side. Dylan watched until the woman left Burger King making a quick right and out of her line of vision.

Dylan slowly reclaimed her seat, taking a reflexive sip from her coffee while she thought about her visitor with the basket of flowers. Who was she? Did she make it a habit to approach strangers within the airport to offer comforting words and gifts? What was her name? Dylan took another sip of the strong hot liquid, her eyes on the beautiful art piece in her hand. A gentle smile tugged at her lips. The yellow rose of happiness and friendship and possibly more with the addition of crimson kissed petals.

The brunette's brow knit. A yellow rose. Rose. She glanced toward the entrance. Layne's Rose? She tried to convince herself with an adamant headshake. Couldn't be. The odds were too minimal. Sprinting out of Burger King like she had just robbed the cash register, Dylan turned toward the right searching the crowd for the origami creator. Of course, she was unable to find her.

Laughing and not fully understanding why, the comic began the long walk to her car occasionally taking a whiff from her rose. Wait until she shared this story with Layne.

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August 21st 2006

That morning at 8:37 she had officially reached her late thirties, which caused her to feel miserable. Well that and the fact that she couldn't share her birthday with Layne and Robin were responsible for the misery. Mainly the absence of the two caused her misery. Dylan would have stayed hidden beneath the covers of her bed all day if her friends hadn't come over to lovingly harass her into going out with them. She got up and hurried toward the shower when Lindsay threatened to toss a bucket of ice water on her and Dylan hadn't any doubt that she would follow through.

It started with the unveiling of presents in her living room (some of which her mother shall never see) before the group traveled to IHOP for a hearty breakfast. Afterwards, Dylan's friends had another surprise in store for her, which wasn't revealed until they pulled into the parking lot of one of San Francisco's most prestigious spa resorts. There they spent the day obtaining rejuvenation and being pampered--especially the birthday gal Dylan.

She had muscles massaged that she didn't realize existed and by the time her ninety minutes with the two expert masseuses was up she was so relaxed and tension free that she felt like a cooked noodle. This was followed by a facial, which lasted an hour. Dylan also hadn't realized how much time could be devoted just to a face. Hers was masked, massaged, steamed, exfoliated and moisturized. She had to admit that she was glowing afterwards.

Following a leisurely lunch at one of the resort's eating establishments, the group participated in a beginners yoga class where Dylan stretched those muscles she'd just found out about a few hours prior. Although it had been fun spending time with her friends, she was certain that she wouldn't be signing up for any yoga classes in the future.

And then her favorite part of the outing with her friends was spent at Adriana's house where they

put on swimsuits and gathered into the hot tub with an assortment of fruit smoothie flavors. Beverly and Satan's di--er, her children Elton and John were nowhere to be found. Adriana threatened to drown Lindsay when she happily commented on their absence.

That evening an intimate dinner party was held at her mother's house where Dylan was given solely G-rated presents and had a blast with her closest friends and family. At the beginning of her birthday she felt miserable yet by that evening she was in a buoyant mood. Layne and Robin never strayed far from her thoughts, but she still felt like smiling and did so throughout her party. Being thirty-six wasn't so horrible and though they couldn't be here Dylan would be reunited with them before long. In the meantime she had a date with the two lovelies to look forward to via her webcam later on. Layne had text messaged her that morning to set it up to which Dylan readily agreed.

Was it her imagination or had Robin noticeably grown since the last time she saw her in person two weeks ago? Her niece had been asleep in her crib for a good while when she and Layne finally decided that they should call it a night. The comic recalled that Layne was three hours ahead of her now so it was technically the next morning there.

"So what are you gonna do now?" The blonde asked, stifling a yawn. She didn't want to leave Dylan, but her eyelids were demanding that she shut them for at least six hours.

"Hit the sheets probably."

She glanced toward the clock in the corner of her screen. *"But it's 10:37 there!"*

"And?" Dylan drew out the word with a smile.

The muralist started to grin into her webcam, a grin that showed nearly every tooth in her mouth. *"I shouldn't have corrected you 'cause baby you **are** old now!"*

"This is the part where I'd instruct you to bite me sweetheart, but I don't want to be offensive."

Not offended, Layne snickered.

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Having polished off the generous slice of birthday cake she brought home, Dylan was rummaging through her drawers for a particular pair of pajama bottoms when her doorbell rang at 11:04. Who in the world...

Hurrying toward the front door, a blue eye searched the peephole noticing a shock of wavy auburn hair framing a pretty twenty-something face. A pretty twenty-something face that the comic didn't recognize ringing her doorbell an hour before midnight. What if this was a setup? An innocent appearing young woman rings the bell of an unsuspecting person who answers and as a result armed robbers rush inside to seize their possessions.

Dylan shook her head. *You've been watching too many crime flicks at night when you can't sleep. Just answer the door.* The redhead pushed her doorbell again as Dylan unfastened the locks. Just in case she kept her foot pressed against the bottom of the door while holding it open about six inches and gave her visitor a polite smile.

"Could I help you?"

"Gosh, I sure hope so!" The woman laughed, sliding her hands into the back pockets of tight jeans. "I'm your neighbor Barbie from a few doors down. Just moved in last week."

"Nice to meet you Barbie." *Where are Ken and Skipper?* Dylan bit down on the inside of her cheek because she wanted to laugh. Beginning to trust that this wasn't a robbery, she pulled the door open some more. "Welcome. You've chosen a fine place to live. How can I help you?"

"Thanks!" The bubbly young woman bounced up and down, the full bosom inside her fitted blouse bouncing right along with her. Dylan barely noticed. "It's late I know, but I'm suffering from insomnia and thought I'd bake." She laughed again. "I wanna make chocolate chip cookies but I don't have any white sugar." Walking closer to Dylan's apartment, she leaned against the doorframe. "Think I could have some of your sugar?" Barbie inquired, her voice softening a fraction.

Dark brows skyrocketed. Was that suggestive or were her ears messing with her? *Why do I feel like I've just stepped into a porno?* "Um, sure you could Barbie. How much do you need?"

"How much can you spare?" Dylan's neighbor laughed--evidently she enjoyed laughing.

The brunette shrugged. "I have a large bag of the stuff so I can afford to be generous."

"A cup will be fine." She smiled, moving further into the apartment. Gazing upward into inquisitive blue eyes Barbie asked, "Would you be interested in sampling my cookies?"

All right, if that wasn't a question laced with flirtatiousness her name wasn't Dylan Tate! Inviting the vivacious redhead inside, Dylan hurried into the kitchen where she could measure out a cup of sugar and send Barbie back to her dream house. As she rifled through her drawers for the set of plastic measuring cups, she thought about how she would have reacted to her newest neighbor ringing her doorbell last year on her 35th birthday. Barbie would most likely have been out of those skintight jeans and in Dylan's bed unknowingly giving the comic her final birthday present.

The measuring cups located underneath a stack of dishtowels, Dylan poured a cupful into a Ziploc sandwich bag. As she sealed the zipper, music began to play from the living room. Had Barbie turned the stereo--no, wait. Dylan was quite familiar with that cheesy music because it was often played in one of her favorite adult DVD's. *Beverly Hills Vixens? I could have sworn I packed that one in the box!* And even if she had neglected to, what was Barbie doing going through her belongings and popping it into the DVD player?

Leaving the bag of sugar on the counter, Dylan headed toward the living room, immediately halting upon entering. There was Barbie doing things with her body that her plastic namesake was incapable of. Straddling a chair borrowed from Dylan's dining room set, she sensuously grinded into the padded seat with her fingers clutching the top of the backrest. Mischievous grin in place, she winked at Dylan trying to beckon her with a 'come hither' finger wiggle that was ignored because the brunette's feet remained frozen.

She unthawed when Barbie seated backward on the chair arched her back until her pierced bellybutton along with a teasing hint of bare stomach was revealed. The stereo switched off and Barbie's compact disc removed from it, Dylan wordlessly tugged the young woman out of her chair and escorted her toward the front door despite her obvious resistance. When Dylan started to open the door, the redhead had enough audacity to shut it and then press her back against it arms folded over her chest with determination.

Biting back a growl, Dylan sighed instead. "Look, I'm flattered Barbie, but I'm not interested. All I can and will offer you is my sugar. My granulated sugar." Because Barbie didn't offer a hand, she managed to slide the disc into the woman's pocket.

"I'm here to dance. However, getting a good look at you I'm open to more. You're as fine as a sharpened pencil Dylan." She grinned although understanding that her advances were unwanted. Too bad because she would have thoroughly enjoyed being unwrapped by this blue eyed hunk for her birthday. Or should that be hunkette? Either way, Barbie deemed her blazing hot.

"I never told you my name. Did you ask one of our neighbors?"

Barbie relapsed to laughing. "I'm not your neighbor--just made that up as an excuse to get into your apartment. I'm an exotic dancer who was hired for you--for your birthday." Unfolding her arms, she waved them around. "Surprise!"

The comic discovered that she wasn't that shocked. She could produce a list of people that she knew who might hire a stripper. Heck, she could have made it onto her own list. "Who hired you?"

"He asked me not to--"

"Jimmy?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "But even though I've been paid I really wanna dance for you Dylan. Come on. Let me finish."

*Jimmy, I'm hunting you down tomorrow buddy.* "That's sweet Barbie, but I'm really not in the mood for a dance. Hold on a second though." Heading in the direction of her bedroom, Dylan quickly returned with a twenty-dollar bill. However, obviously one of those unique exotic dancers Barbie refused the easiest tip considering that she didn't have to do a thing for it.

"I won't take the tip because you won't let me dance. I prefer to earn my money. And shucks, I



just like you so much that if you had let me dance I might not have accepted that anyway." Before Dylan could generate a reply, the redhead stood up on her tiptoes and kissed her cheek leaving a perfect imprint of Scarlet Velvet lips. Smiling at her 'Barbie was here' signature, she bid her could have been customer a good night and left.

Dylan locked her door as she quietly chuckled. She couldn't wait to enlighten Angie who loved the Mattel dolls as a child and teenager that Barbie wished to give her an erotic dance for her birthday.

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September 8th 2006

Dylan reflected on what color to make her heroine's blouse as she twirled a pencil between her fingers. It was a toss-up between navy blue and kelly green. Either color would compliment Tristan's leather pants. She had settled on the kelly green when a knock interrupted her reach for the correct drawing implement.

"I've come to rescue you," her brother dramatically stated as he strutted into the apartment carrying a duffel bag and a suitcase.

"Rescue me? From what?" Dylan curiously observed as Reggie dropped his luggage on the carpet, hands rising to rest on his hips.

"From yourself. I mean, just look at you..." He trailed off, noticing that his sister actually didn't look unkempt. She didn't look ready to step out in public what with the baggy sweatpants, oversized T-shirt and slipper socks, but Dylan appeared clean nonetheless. "Okay, you look okay but this apartment..." Again her brother ceased speaking as blue eyes perused the living room expecting to find much disorder and coming up empty. Nothing seemed out of place, no trash littered the floor and the air wasn't stale from tightly shut windows and blinds. The furniture appeared shiny indicative of recent polishing and the tracks on the carpet hinted that a vacuum was probably made use of that morning.

Saying nothing, Reggie marched into the kitchen, stopping just inside its entrance. Again, no trash except what could be found in the garbage can. No dirty dishes overflowed within the sink, sunlight filtering through the window glinted on a scoured countertop and the tiled floor was spotless from a fresh mopping. Reggie could smell the lemon in the air from whatever cleanser his sister used.

"What kind of depressed person are you?" The man asked as he turned around to view her, noticing the glasses perched on her nose. So she had a will to work on her strip as well. Based on her expression, Dylan was quite lost. "I expected to walk in here to find you and your home untidy. I imagined pizza boxes and Chinese cartons on the floor and you slouched on the couch having neglected to take a shower in days. You'd just be sitting there watching soap operas and talk shows through eyes red from constant crying, your clothes stained with dried up bits of cheese from the pizza and that bright red sauce from sweet 'n sour chicken."

"I prefer sweet 'n sour pork." Smirking, Dylan left the kitchen and sat on the couch. "Sorry to disappoint you bro, but I'm not quite ready for Paxil yet."

Reggie joined her. "I'm not disappointed, just surprised that you're managing so well. It's been a month now..."

Removing her glasses, the brunette set them on the table. "Hardly an hour goes by without my thinking about them but the sadness doesn't prevent me from daily showers and keeping my place clean. What's with the bags? Going somewhere?"

"Yep. Here."

"Nope."

Reggie slowly blinked. Was she saying that he couldn't stay? "Huh?"

"What happened with your apartment?"

"My roommates are getting on my damn nerves. It's a constant party and they both have women coming in and out almost every single night...early morning. I haven't gotten a good night's sleep since I returned to S.F. and lived with Mom." Trying to look haggard, the young man rubbed at his eyes for emphasis.

"Huh." A thoughtful expression in place she continued, "Twenty-four seven parties and a smorgasbord of women. That sounds right up your alley Reggie."

The youngest Tate child smirked. "I'd like to change, turn over a new leaf. If you can do it anyone can."

Dylan chuckled, nodding. "Touché bro. So why does this new leaf require that you live with me? Mom would be glad to take you back until you can find another residence of your own or to share with non or at least moderate party animals."

"I'll need roommates 'cause I can't afford my own apartment unless I get lucky enough to find a cheap place in S.F. and I doubt that'll happen. And I love Mom but I don't wanna move back home--again."

"How is moving in with your sister any better?"

"Please Dyl." Reggie pressed his palms together, pleading. "It could help you too. Having someone around. You're managing but I know you get lonely. Your little brother can brighten up your life." He gave her a large grin. "I can pay you seven-hundred a month and I promise that I won't be here any longer than two months." He patted the couch. "I'd happily bunk here or on the floor."

Chin resting in her palm, the comic thought about it. Her apartment *was* clean and she was accustomed to keeping it that way. Now Reggie wasn't the best housekeeper. His bedroom was always a disaster zone when they were children causing his sisters to steer clear of it. Perhaps the messiness was his solution to maintain privacy. On top of leading a cluttered life he tended to be noisy too. But maybe she could use some noise around there. Often Dylan caught herself leaving the television on just to hear other voices.

"All right, you can move in but I don't need seven-hundred." She slapped a hand over her brother's mouth to forestall his protest. "Two-hundred and we'll switch off weekly on who does the grocery shopping. For instance I'll take care of it this week and you the next. Cool?"

Two hundred bucks and pay for groceries every other week? Couldn't have an arrangement much sweeter than that. "Totally cool." Reggie's robust embrace had his sibling falling backward onto the couch.

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### **September 16th 2006**

She just might go through with it. She might kill him. It was wrong, she knew it was wrong to want to commit homicide against one's own family member, but he was driving her directly toward Insanity Avenue! Eight days. Eight days her brother had been living with her and she was ready to kick his butt out. But he was family, she loved him and he needed a place to stay until he could save up a good amount of money so Dylan didn't have the heart to actually kick him out. However, sending him to their mother's house was better than sending him six feet below ground.

It wasn't that he was messy. Reggie was actually doing a superb job helping her to keep the apartment clean. He offered to wash, dry and put the dishes away daily, took out the trash, vacuumed and she found him using the feather duster on Thursday. Neither was he noisy. In fact, the apartment wasn't much louder than it had been when she lived alone.

No, instead of being untidy and raucous her brother had become intrusive. Dylan wondered when that trait had developed in him. She couldn't leave the house without having to give the young man an itinerary and often Reggie wanted to tag along with her. It was like having an unpaid bodyguard or a strict parental figure. Secret service agents protecting the President couldn't be too much more competent than Reggie.

So today she planned on slipping out without his knowledge for the first time in eight days. She didn't even intend to leave a note. Just leave and Reggie would see her when he saw her damn it!

Having taken her bath last night so the running shower wouldn't alert him that she was up, Dylan washed in the sink, dressed and quietly ate the granola bar and apple she hid in her nightstand yesterday. She didn't particularly care for room temperature fruit, but the comic had been afraid that a trip to the kitchen would awaken her brother who insisted on sleeping in the living room, an air mattress his bed.

Another journey to the bathroom to brush her teeth, Dylan scurried toward the front door, keys held within a tight fist. Not daring to breathe, she glanced at her brother who peacefully slept, body near the fetal position and cover up to his nose. Now came the most difficult part--turning the locks to get the door open. Because she didn't want to make noise, Dylan inwardly growled. It was a shame that she a grown woman had to sneak out of her own home because her little brother had decided for whatever reason to start keeping tabs on her.

*Maybe I should help him with apartment hunting.* She added getting newspapers to her list of things to do today. Dylan prayed for silence as she began to undo the locks. A glance over her shoulder assured her that Reggie hadn't budged.

One final turn and the door was prepared for the next stage. A hand slippery from moisture wrapped itself around the knob and painstakingly rotated it until the door could be pulled open.

Freedom! She deeply inhaled its revitalizing scent as she eyed the hallway, empty and quiet this time of morning on a Saturday. Snickering like a madwoman, Dylan tiptoed out to the hall and took a full two minutes closing and locking the door.

She was snickering as she awaited the elevator.

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Dylan enjoyed her leisurely spent alone time at the mall where she visited most of the stores regardless if she wanted to make a purchase or not because she wasn't in a hurry to return home. She spent the most time (and most money) inside Gymboree, a children's oriented store where just about everything she looked at she wanted to buy for Robin. She settled on a week's worth of outfits, two sets of pajamas, the most adorable pair of pink and white sneakers and a couple pair of pink socks to match. One set had tiny ribbons stitched on and the other little pink embroidered roses.

Depositing her booty in the car, Dylan returned to the mall and headed toward The Disney Store because what child wanted all clothes and no toys? That was unacceptable. Was she on a fast track to spoiling her niece? It was a definite possibility.

Dylan's original intention was to pack everything in a cardboard box and UPS it to their residence in NYC, but since Robin's first birthday was coming up next month she would gift-wrap and deliver them herself, keeping her visit a surprise. The thought of seeing Robin and Layne next month put a large smile on Dylan's face as she continued with her shopping and browsing.

Her MasterCard needing a rest, Dylan treated herself to a super steak sandwich at the Great Steak & Potato Company and then went to the cinema. By that time Reggie had left four messages on her voicemail asking where she was and why she slipped out of the apartment without telling him. The comic ignored his calls until the fifth and sent one text message in reply.

Wanted time 2 myself. C U later. Will bring dinner. Luv D.

One of Dylan's final stops was to a home improvement store. Months ago she decided to redecorate her bathroom, but hadn't bought anything but a new bathtub mat. Well today she was going to purchase wallpaper and whatever supplies needed to affix it.

Now that she was there pushing her shopping cart down the wide aisles of the vast store, Dylan just had to find where they kept the wallpaper. Coming to the end of an aisle filled with every type of screw and nail known to man, Dylan made a sharp left her cart colliding with that of another shopper's.

"Oops, I'm sorry!" The brunette's apologetic expression quickly switched to astonishment upon looking at the shopper's face and froze there. "Layne?" Moving around her cart Dylan held her arms out intending to give the blonde a hug. A hand to her chest prevented her from doing so.

"Hold on there," the blonde said, gracing the surprised woman with a slight smile. "You may wanna save that Dyl. Wrong twin."

Although hearing the words, Dylan didn't immediately believe them. It had to be her. "You're Layne. You...you look like Layne."

The hand on her chest patted gently before removed. "Remember we're identical babe. I assure you, I'm not Layne. Sorry." Celeste slid her hands into the side pockets of paint-splattered blue jeans. "How are you? You look good. *Real* good." One gray eye winked.

Dylan tried to conceal her disappointment without much success. "I'm fine. How're you? What are you doing in San Francisco?" And what was Celeste doing inside a store such as this one? She wasn't the type to show interest in improving a home. And the clothes so unlike her ex. Every color of the rainbow stained an obviously old pair of jeans and a gray sweatshirt. The blue baseball cap worn backwards on her head also held splotches of paint.

"Doing great. Just visiting a friend. I still live in Vegas. Got a promotion at that restaurant I told you about last time. Work the bar now--much better tips." Her nose crinkled a bit as she grinned just like her sister's.

"Congrats. So...have you taken up the arts or is the 'paint look' something new in the fashion world?"

Celeste laughed while pointing to the half dozen cans of paint in her shopping cart. "This isn't a look I'd recommend if you're striving for chic. My friend Alice is in the midst of a rather nasty divorce with her asshole husband of eleven years and she called me earlier this week upset and crying. Concerned, I resolved to come visit her for a few days, hoping that I could do something to cheer her up. Surprised her yesterday when I showed up on her doorstep.

"This morning I found her in the basement which was Ralph's recreation room to entertain with

his buddies watching sports, playing pool, poker and whatever else. Alice mentioned that she never liked the room and now she hated it. So that's when we came up with the idea to redecorate it--make it *her* rec room. That's why I'm here buying paint."

"Why are you covered in paint already?"

"She had a few cans in the garage and we started with that although we knew we'd need more. Now I'm buying more." Smiling, Celeste wrapped her hands around the cart's handlebars. "I should finishing my shopping and get back before Alice does something foolish. When I left she was eyeing the pool table like she wanted to dismantle it with a chainsaw."

"Seems her soon to be ex would have taken that with him."

"He left a message on her answering machine last week telling her that he intended to rent a U-haul to pick it up and bring it to his girlfriend's house. The girlfriend who could pass for his daughter."

"Cold. He *does* sound like an asshole. It's great of you to travel all this way to take care of your friend."

Her cheeks blushing, Celeste shrugged her shoulders. "Alice hasn't deserved any of the crap he's put her through. She's a good woman." Abandoning her cart for a moment, the petite blonde walked up to Dylan and pulled her into a brief hug. "Layne tell you that we talk on the phone sometimes?"

"Mentioned it." The comic wanted to cry. Celeste's hug although short-lived reminded her of Layne. She felt like Layne, she smelled like...well paint actually. Dylan wished that Robin's birthday were tomorrow.

"She sent me pictures of Robin. God, she's so beautiful," the blonde stated, a tender smile on her face. "Just like you Dyl."

"Celeste?" This was too much. She had to get away.

"Yeah babe?"

"Have you noticed where they stock the wallpaper?"

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She couldn't stop herself. She wasn't certain why she was doing it, but the urge was too great to resist. It was as though she needed confirmation. Parked within her designated spot at the apartment complex, she scrolled through the alphabetized list of names and punched the 'send' button when she found one of the two people dominating her thoughts. Three rings later her call was answered.

"Hey babe," Celeste cheerily stated. "We spoke like three hours ago. Miss me already?" She spoke louder than usual so that her caller could hear her over the blend of voices and beat heavy music in the background.

"Like crazy. I want to jump through the phone and throw my arms around you never to let go," Dylan deadpanned. She heard Celeste laugh and someone in a baritone asking for a Corona beer with a twist of lime. "Is the painting done? You and your friend at a nightclub?"

"No. We're about halfway done. I'm at a sports bar near Alice's house getting us some buffalo wings. She had a taste for them, so whatever my buddy wants, my buddy gets."

Dylan stared through her windshield with a perplexed expression. "When did you start being so solicitous?"

"I *guess* a compliment resides in there."

"Sorry. That was rude. What I meant to say is I like the new you that you're becoming."

"Thank you Dylan." The comic could feel the smile through her phone. "I'm trying to rise above my evil woman status." She laughed when her ex failed to comment, most likely thinking about her accidental song dedication eight months ago. To fill the silence and because she was curious to know, Celeste asked why she called.

"Um, I wanted to say that it was good seeing you today and to wish you a safe trip home whenever you leave."

"Thanks again babe. It was good seeing you too." A pause. "Oh, my order is ready."

"Okay, I'll let you go then. Bye Celeste. Take care."

"You too Dyl."

Call ended, the brunette continued her scrolling until she found the other person four names later. She glanced between Layne Bishop and the 'send' button several times before she snapped her cell shut. *Snap out of this funk*, she scolded herself. *You'll see her soon*.

Getting out of the car, Dylan grabbed some of her purchases from the trunk and headed toward the lobby, knowing that she would need to make a few trips to get everything inside. Unless her brother was home and willing, maybe she could slip Henry a twenty to help out.

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October 2nd 2006

Cozy in a sweatshirt and flannel pajama bottoms with her slipper sock covered feet perched on the desk, long fingers lightly tapped the keyboard as Dylan patiently waited for her friend's typed

reply. She had her webcam switched off because Layne's had taken a fatal fall last week and the muralist had yet to replace it. Dylan terribly missed seeing Layne and Robin's faces but then smiled as she looked at the roundtrip plane ticket lying near the computer screen. Next Sunday she would be on her way to NYC to celebrate a special baby girl's birthday.

[PaintByNumbers] Yes, I was selected for that job I told you about. The couple interviewed I think it was seven or eight muralists to paint a wall of their daughter's bedroom. It's to be a gift for her 10th birthday next week. This should be fun. She has a carnival fascination so there's going to be circus tents, clowns, acrobats, animals, amusement rides...

[StripTease] Congrats! (clapping) I knew you could get it! How long do you think it'll take to finish?

[PaintByNumbers] Her room isn't that large and I only have one wall to paint, so I'm estimating around seven to ten days. How is your work going? Are Tristan's adventures almost done for her latest book?

[StripTease] LOL, her *latest* book? I don't think the 2nd should count as latest ;-). However, yes I'm darn near finished. Thank goodness! And...(big sigh) After much deliberation I've decided to out our detective.

[PaintByNumbers] *dramatic gasp* Tristan's coming out of the closet?!

[StripTease] Uh huh. She's 33. About time, eh? (grin)

[PaintByNumbers] Is she going to have a love interest? I've noticed a hint of sexual tension here and there between Tristan and her partner in crime.

[StripTease] Maybe she will and maybe she won't. You'll just have to read the published work to find out.

[PaintByNumbers] *sticking my tongue out at you*

[StripTease] Ooh, is that an invitation? You wanna cyber with me baby? (wiggling my eyebrows).

[PaintByNumbers] Tempting, but I'm already cybering with someone else so I'd feel like a floozy. Although I don't think I'm going to find release with this one. She's too bad of a speller.

[StripTease] LMAO. You see? That's why you should hook up with me. I average 52 WPM and baby I...spell very *very* well (saucy grin).

[PaintByNumbers] *purring* I know firsthand how *very* well you 'spell' Dylan. I think about it.

[StripTease] How often?

[PaintByNumbers] This often.

[StripTease] You'll have to tell me 'cause I can't see you.

[PaintByNumbers] In that case you'll just have to wait until I purchase a new webcam to see how often my thoughts are consumed by your...spelling capabilities :-D

[StripTease] Tease.

[PaintByNumbers] I'm a tease? That's half your name!

[StripTease] If you'd gotten your cute little butt to a Radio Shack by now I'd happily do the other half of my name for you right--this--moment.

[PaintByNumbers] *gulp* Really?

[StripTease] Maybe. Because of your negligence in going webcam shopping you'll never know for sure.

[PaintByNumbers] Tease.

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### **October 8th 2006**

Dylan was checking her suitcase to make sure that she had packed everything she needed when she heard a light knock on her door. Beaming (something that she had been doing since the day before) she turned toward her brother asking him what was up.

"Your flight is 10:30 right?"

Nodding, she zipped up her suitcase and the duffel bag containing Robin's gifts. "You still driving me?" They had a deal. Reggie could have possession of her car while she was gone as long as he kept the gas tank full and it's body dent free. Her brother did have his own car but it was a hunk of junk and Dylan had breathed a sigh of relief that they safely reached their destination during the less than handful of times she rode in it.

Spotting his sister's keys on the dresser, he picked them twirling the key ring around his index finger. "Of course. Would you like breakfast first? I'm thinking McDonald's and I'm willing to buy *and* fly." Dylan readily agreed and after giving him her order, Reggie walked over to retrieve her luggage to put it in the trunk. "Be back in about fifteen."

In about fifteen minutes he wasn't back, but he did call via his dependable cell phone. Dylan quickly discovered that her younger sibling had never left the premises because he was at the bottom of the stairwell, having chosen to use the stairs instead of the elevator for some peculiar reason.

In short, Reggie had fallen and now couldn't get up.

There was good news and the unfortunate intermittently close by bad news. The good news was that Reggie was expected to make a full recovery and could go home the same day of the accident. Part of the bad news was that he suffered a concussion and fractured his right leg. The other bad news was that Dylan had missed her flight to NYC and after speaking with her brother's doctor decided that she wasn't about to reschedule. Because the post office would be closed tomorrow due to it being Columbus Day, she would have to mail Robin's gifts to her on Tuesday. In the meantime, she would call tomorrow.

"Honey, I know you were looking forward to this trip," Madeline Tate said, sandwiching her daughter's hand between her warm palms while they sat in the waiting room with her companion Oliver. He insisted on driving her to the hospital after Dylan called to tell her mother what happened. "You go ahead and try to get another flight. I'm certain you can find one leaving this evening. I'll take care of Reggie."

"And I'll drive you to the airport," Oliver helpfully stated, a smile on his still handsome face.

Dylan split a smile between them. "Thank you both but I'll go to New York another time. Perhaps within the next couple of weeks. He was carrying my belongings when it happened. I'll look after him. Plus you know how much of a pain in the a-- rear end Reggie can be when he's under the weather." She grinned at Madeline. "You were responsible for tending to him during the first eighteen years of his life so I can take care of my little brother this one time."

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October 14th 2006

Lying on the couch with his injured leg propped up with pillows, Reggie looked over to his sister who was diligently working on her comic book and then checked his watch. 3:49 p.m. The court television show he had been watching on a commercial break, he hit the mute button.

"Dyl?"

"Hmm?" She looked up, the light from the desk lamp casting a glare on her glasses.

"You hungry?" The young man patted his stomach. "I could eat a horse or better yet a hard shell beef taco. No, two hard shell beef tacos. And a shredded beef taquito plate."

Chuckling, Dylan dropped her pencil into the pickle jar. "Let me guess. You're in the mood for Mexican food? I'll go make a run to Del Taco."

"Del Taco?" Reggie didn't bother hiding his disapproval. "Dyl, my palate is in the mood for *authentic* Mexican food. Besides, last I knew Del Taco doesn't make taquitos. There's a menu in

the kitchen drawer closest to the fridge. Get it and tell me what you want and I'll call Tacky Taco for a takeout order." He reached for his wallet on the coffee table and pulled out some money waving it through the air. "My treat."

"Tacky Taco on a Saturday? You know how busy that restaurant gets on the weekends."

Reggie produced a smile that could easily melt butter. "And that my lovely sister is why I'm calling it in so by the time you reach the restaurant our food should be ready. And don't forget to check the bags for chips and salsa. Just because we're not eating there doesn't mean we're not entitled to the pre-dinner freebies."

Dylan saluted her brother as she stood up to go find the takeout menu. She actually could go for a Tacky Taco carnitas plate. "Aye captain!"

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Dylan noticed the sea of cars parked in Tacky Taco's lot from the street. Once the arrow switched to green she made a left turn, within seconds driving onto the restaurant's property. While searching for a parking space she almost collided with someone's brand new shiny Chrysler when her eyes caught sight of one of the restaurants walls, which Dylan was certain had been unembellished the last time she dined at Tacky Taco.

Taking her foot off the brake, her car crept closer to the building. Was that...? Pushing on the gas, Dylan bounced over a couple of speed bumps on her way to the back of Tacky Taco where more parking could be found. Parked a bit crookedly yet within the white lines, the brunette hurried out of the car and raced toward the side of the building.

With shallow breathing she observed the wall, taking in every detail. Yes, it was. Somehow the sketched taco from last year had become a reality.

*"A fully loaded taco. Doing a dance."*

*Layne stared in disbelief. "You want me to draw a dancing taco?" She watched as Dylan shrugged and thought she heard Jimmy faintly chuckle, but since she only had eyes for his accusatory cousin she couldn't be sure.*

*Dylan pointed toward the luminescent Tacky Taco sign. "In honor of one of the best Mexican restaurants in San Francisco."*

However, this mural was different from the sketch Layne drew to hopefully get Dylan to understand that she wasn't Celeste. The basic concept of the dancing taco had been painted, but within the mural the hard shell ground beef taco was grooving on a checkered dance floor with his mate--a shredded beef taquito with gorgeous long eyelashes and full smiling lips. They were the only two...um...food items on the dance floor, but in the background couples, friends and

families of enchiladas, tamales, burritos and other tacos and taquitos etc. dined at tables and booths.

A tortilla chip wearing a bowtie balanced a platter on top of slim fingers in front of a candlelit table where a couple holding hands sat. On it was a tres leches cake decorated with sliced strawberries. It wasn't the strawberries that fascinated Dylan so and caused a five second lapse of her breathing. It was the succinct question written in icing script on top of the cake.

*Will U B Mine Dylan?*

"Corny joke here, but I'm going to ask you anyway. What is a taco's favorite style of dance?"

Dylan froze. She was apprehensive about turning around in case this was a hallucination. However, she did reply. "I dunno. What is it?"

"The salsa," the familiar voice said with amusement.

A deep breath and Dylan turned to greet the person always within her dreams. She studied her from head to toe and then from toe to head. And then she focused on her face. That beautiful face wearing the gentlest smile, gray eyes shining as though she were near tears.

The comic beat her to it. Her knees buckled with the force of her tears, eyes becoming bleary yet able to see the blonde rushing toward her. Also kneeling on the concrete, she wrapped her arms around the taller woman, holding her tight as they both shed tears. Minutes passed before a word was spoken.

"You're here," Dylan hoarsely whispered. Placing her hands on either side of Layne's face, she looked as if she expected the younger woman to disappear. Leaning forward, she kissed her forehead, her lips warming on contact. "You're really here."

"Yes, I'm here darling." Eyes closed, Layne relished the lips kissing their way from her temple to cheek.

"Robin?"

"She's one years old now so we decided that it's about that she were on her own so I left her in New York City. Set her up in her own apartment and everything. And can you believe she already gained employment? Starts Monday." She joined in when Dylan began to tremble against her with laughter.

"So are you going to answer the question?"

"Question?" Dylan was sure that she looked like a big dolt. So surprised to be reunited with the woman she loved, had she forgotten a question that Layne posed?

"Mhmm." Smiling, the muralist reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a gold colored

heart-shaped ring box with a tiny pale blue ribbon on top. The lid removed, a gold band set with radiant diamonds arranged in a flower design was revealed. Layne kissed the bottom lip of a mouth opened in awe. "The moment that plane left the tarmac I knew that I had made a huge mistake. What was I thinking taking Robin back to New York when her home and what has become my home during the year is here with you and the Tate family?"

"I was afraid. I was afraid of falling in love with you. Not because of anything you've done-- you've been incredible-- but my past experiences have made me gun-shy and therefore I allowed that fear to override what my heart was trying to tell me. My heart says that you are one in a million and I'd be insane to pass up the chance of sharing my life with someone who has such an amazing and beautiful soul. You give me courage so I'm throwing that fear in the trash. I love you Dylan Tate. I love you, I love you, God how I love you." Again, both women were crying. "I've loved you for so long that I've forgotten when it happened, but I'm so happy that it did because the opportunity to love you has to be the best feeling in the world." Lifting the ring in a shaky hand Layne continued, "This is a promise ring and I'm asking much like the chicken enchilada in the mural, will you be mine Dylan?"

"I've been yours for the longest time. Absolutely yes." Swiping at the tears sliding down her face, Dylan beamed. This wasn't another dream nor was she hallucinating. Layne was here and she truly wanted to be with her. What a terrific day. October 14th should be noted as a holiday! Her beam surprisingly brightened more once Layne slid the promise ring onto her finger. She shook her head in wonderment, glancing between the ring and Layne.

"When did you and Robbie return? Must have been weeks ago with your painting this mural. I love it by the way."

"Thank you. I had a lot of assistance with it." Standing, she took the comic's hand and helped her to her feet. "We got back on September 12th. I didn't want you to know until I finished the mural. You should have seen me freaking out when Reggie told me that you were planning a surprise vacation to see us for Robin's birthday. I knew I couldn't finish before your departure date so I asked him to stall. Your brother has been a tremendous help."

Reggie? Stall? Help? Dylan's eyes widened as the curtains were raised and everything started falling into place. He was in on it! He was in on it from the beginning! This was why Reggie wanted to move in with her so badly--not so coincidentally four days prior to Layne and Robin's return. His peculiar intrusiveness was linked to his ascertaining that she didn't pop up in the wrong place at the wrong time. And Reggie's 'accident' Sunday had been another ploy to keep his sister from leaving the state. If Dylan went to NYC, she would learn that they weren't there any longer. How had he convinced the medical staff to put on a cast? And whose X-ray's were those that the doctor pointed out to them? *Was* he a doctor?

"I didn't want you going all the way to NYC to find the 'Sold' sign on what is now my ex-property, but I feel horrible that Reggie broke his leg."

"Isn't he faking?"

Layne shook her head, a sigh escaping her lips. "The plan was for him to fake a broken leg and Dr. Meadows--Henry your doorman's uncle agreed to go along with it. But Reggie called me later that day and explained that things didn't quite go according to plan. He was able to stall you but he truly fell and hurt himself in the process." The blonde waved a finger in the air as she thought of something. "The fracture is real but Dr. Meadows did give him a bogus concussion. You know, on the off chance a broken appendage wasn't enough to stop you from leaving."

"Wow, this is one convoluted plan." Dylan grinned, pulling Layne in for a brief hug just because she wanted one. "So, Reggie and Henry were in on it. Anyone else?" The muralist expelling her breath with enough force to ruffle the short bangs on her head was a 'yes'. Dylan thought about her trip to the home improvement store last month. "Was that you? And I called Celeste later--so she's in on it too?"

Layne nodded, a proud smile fixed on her lips. "Yes, that was me you ran into. Man, did I not expect to see you there. I called Celeste the moment I left the store and told her what was up just in case you decided to get in contact although I thought my story sounded plausible enough."

Dylan smirked. "Ralph and Alice the feuding soon to be divorcees a.k.a the Honeymooners." She chuckled and so did the other woman.

"I wanted to smack myself after I named Alice's husband Ralph."

"Wait. My presents. I bought presents for Robbie and since I wouldn't make it in time for her birthday I mailed them Tuesday. I hope they're returned."

"She rarely lets Pooh Bear out of her sight. They're the best of friends. They sleep together, play together, 'eat' together and they'd bathe together if I let Robbie put him in the water."

"She got the package? If it went to your previous address how--"

*Setting Reggie up with his breakfast in the kitchen, Dylan hurried into the living room when the doorbell rang. Throwing the door open she greeted her bicycle courier. What was he doing here? She wasn't scheduled for a pickup until Friday. Mason pulled his Palm Pilot from the ever-present red backpack slung on his shoulders to check.*

*"Oops, don't know how I messed that up. Since I'm here you don't have anything you wanna give me?" The courier asked, pushing his shades up to rest on top of his head.*

*"No, I won't have my strips ready until Friday."*

*Mason looked over his client's shoulder to the rectangular box placed on the coffee table. He pointed to it. "What about that? Is that an outgoing box or did you receive it?"*

*Dylan followed his finger and promptly shook her head. "Too big for you."*

*"Not today." Smiling, the courier showed her his bicycle, which had an empty cart perfect for her package attached to the back of it. "I could get that shipped off for you. No problem."*

*"I've never seen a cart on your bike."*

*"Yeah, the last few days I've had some larger deliveries. The cart won't be an everyday thing. Can't move like the silver bullet I usually am with it." Mason flashed her a grin as he readjusted his shades.*

"Mason delivered her package to you directly," Dylan said, sounding confident that she was right. Layne confirmed this. "And you've been staying where in S.F. since September?"

Again, she appeared mighty proud. "Mom's house."

"Ah, Mom knew too. So I assume that Oliver did?" Layne nodded. "And heck, what about Angie, Mike and their kids?" Another nod along with a growing smile. "Let's cut this short. Did everyone in San Francisco know you were back?"

"Most people in San Francisco don't know me, so I'd have to answer that with a no." Her smile was in full bloom now. So was Dylan's. The wool had been pulled over her eyes for two months and she couldn't be happier. "Dylan, please do me a favor."

Moving closer, the comic's arms enveloped a petite waist. "Anything you want, consider it yours sweetheart."

Head tilted upward, a mouth far too close not to be inspected distracted Layne from immediately voicing her favor. "First I need a proper kiss." The word kiss barely passed her lips before Dylan's covered them. Mouths parted and tongues leisurely reunited, moans combining as two bodies pressed so tightly against each other that the cool bay air couldn't seep between them. A small group of replete co-workers headed toward one car because they were carpooling sent the couple cheers and whistles, yet neither woman looked up, ears deaf to everything but one another. They didn't part until the car had exited Tacky Taco's parking lot.

A dreamy smile graced Dylan's lips. "Your kisses remain 12-pointers."

"I do what I can love. Now my favor," Layne breathed, her fingers stroking the back of Dylan's neck. "Turn around for me."

"Shouldn't we wait until we get home for that? You know I love *that*, but I don't want to be banned from my favorite Mexican restaurant." She snickered after she was slapped on the arm and then dutifully she turned. Instead of the wool being pulled over her eyes again, a black mask was placed there. Dylan heard footsteps as Layne walked around to stand in front of her asking if she could see. "Not a thing. What's going on?" *Like she's going to tell you that.*

The muralist smirked without a witness. "Like I'm going to tell you that. You'll just have to

wait." She linked her arm through Dylan's. "I'll lead and you follow. Promise that I won't let you bump into anything or trip."

Dylan softly smiled. "I trust you implicitly."

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Although her eyes were out of commission for the time being, Dylan could still rely on her ears and nose to give her an idea of where they were headed. Based on the array of sounds, conversations and salivate worthy odors she figured that they were now inside Tacky Taco. Had her brother really called in an order for their lunch? She doubted it. Perhaps Layne had secured the both of them a little private romantic table to dine.

Dylan's heart could have given out the second she and Layne stopped walking and a multitude of voices screamed at the top of their lungs, "YOU'VE BEEN PUNKED DYLAN!"

"I didn't know Mr. Ashton Kutcher-Moore knew me!" The comic laughed as Layne removed the mask. Blinking, she looked around noting that this was Tacky Taco's banquet room, large enough for a party of one hundred, however theirs was closer to a party of thirty-five. A sea of teasing smiles was aimed at Dylan and she cheerily smiled back, the smile increasing when she read the strung up festive banner.

Happy Belated Birthday Robin & Dylan. We Love You.

The banner held the signature of just about every adult and child in attendance except for the smallest Robin, because she was after all the main birthday girl. Every one of Layne's already named conspirators had shown up along with Jimmy, a newly single Adriana, Lindsay, Nancy, Elena and Alexis. Laurel, Dylan's longtime friend and Evangeline, Layne's social worker was also there along with their spouses. Laurel brought her brood of six who were looking forward to having a lot of fun with Angela's four youngsters. Henry and Mason were among the conspirators who brought a guest of their own.

"Dada!" Held by her grandma, Robin left one arm around Madeline's neck and stretched the other out toward Dylan, wearing a soupy grin. The guests chuckled at her enthusiasm, yet most were tickled by what she called Dylan. Carefully placed on feet tucked within the new shoes from her birthday package that Mason delivered Tuesday, she toddled toward her aunt and since she was proceeding surely yet slowly, Dylan met her a little more than halfway. Scooping the small child into her arms, she littered her cheeks with kisses earning a good share of belly laughs.

"How's my big girl?" Dylan cooed, so thrilled to have Robin back in her arms. Her niece didn't vocalize how she was, but she did plant a kiss on the tip of the brunette's nose. Grinning, Dylan turned toward Layne half-whispering, "I love what you've done, but it isn't my birthday sweetheart. This little lady right here though," she indicated Robin by pecking her cheek again, "should definitely be honored as she just turned the big one!" Robin giggled when long fingers tickled her tummy.

"We're honoring you both. So what if your birthday was in August? We weren't here to celebrate it with you and I never gave you an appropriate gift so this is your party with Robin." The muralist grinned, pecking them both on the cheek. "So just deal and prepare to have fun."

"You and Robbie are a gif..." She didn't finish her reply, as the dimming lights were a distraction. And then the grandest smile touched she and Robin's lips when they saw the substantial candle-laden sheet cake being wheeled toward them on a cart by Jimmy. Large enough that surely everyone could go back for seconds, the cake had been professionally iced to resemble a birthday presents, complete with ribbons and a bow all made out of frosting. The only part of the cake inedible was the small cluster of multicolored plastic balloons in each corner, which would be removed before Robin could get it into her curious mind to swipe one.

"Happy birthday big cuz and lil' cuz." Beaming, he turned toward the other guests and counted to three. On cue everyone began to sing the traditional Happy Birthday song while Robin clapped her hands with glee. Once they were reminded to make a wish, aunt and niece simultaneously blew out what had looked to be around a hundred candles from a far, but was actually thirty-seven, their combined ages. However, once a candle's flame was quenched a second later it ignited once again. It took them a few moments to catch on.

"Hey Robbie?" The baby sent Dylan a quizzical look, confused as to why the hot stuff wouldn't go away so that she could sample the sweet stuff it was holding hostage. "I think we're being punked again."

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With all of the scrumptious food served buffet style that Layne ordered for the birthday party, Dylan wondered how there could possibly be enough food left to feed customers in the main dining area. Seemingly, everything on Tacky Taco's menu was within the banquet room and every guest could take some leftovers home. She knew that she would be grabbing a couple of those carnitas.

Unwrapping the Jolly Rancher candy, which fell from the piñata that Laurel's eight-year-old son successfully broke once it was his turn, Dylan dropped it into her mouth. A hand appeared before her eyes and she silently placed a red Jolly Rancher in its palm. She nodded at the thank you she received, hearing the chair across from her screech against the floor a second before it was occupied.

"Dylan, we need to have a chat." Fingers quickly untwisted the ends of the wrapper and removed the small piece of hard candy, slipping it between glossy lips.

One eyebrow lifted, the comic regarded her. "We do?"

"Mhmm." The blonde nodded. "Concerning you and my sister. About your intentions toward her."

She was officially amused yet didn't reveal it. "All right. I'm listening Celeste."

"I realize that I'm lousy when it comes to relationships, but even I can see how perfect you are for each other. I haven't known Layne for long, but it didn't take me too long to figure out after we started really communicating that you make her world ten times brighter. She's been through too," pausing, Celeste glanced around them to confirm that no one under the age of eighteen was listening, "through too much shit and I've learned that it's difficult for her to open her heart. She's strong...much stronger than I could ever imagine being, but she's also delicate, so please treat her right. Be good--no fantastic to her. Always show her how much you love her and how much she means to you. Layne gave you a tremendous gift when she offered her heart, so take that and cherish it."

Dylan's amusement was replaced with a new respect for her ex-girlfriend that she previously wouldn't have believed was possible. Respect and Celeste hadn't belonged in the same sentence until now. Dylan wasn't the only person fortunate enough to have Layne in her life. Perhaps unbeknownst to the muralist, she was cultivating all kinds of wonders.

"I promise that I will Celeste," Dylan soberly responded. Raising a finger to her chest, she drew an imaginary cross there. "I'm crossing my own heart that I'll take the best care of hers. I love your sister and the only way that'll change is by growing."

Celeste smiled. "That's what I wanted to hear. Now let me see that ring up close." Dylan's left hand held in her right, her thumb grazed the diamonds as gray eyes revealed delight. "Don't fall asleep. I might be tempted to grease your finger and steal this gorgeous rock." The brunette laughed. "I've never seen diamonds formed into a flower pattern. That's sweet Dyl."

The mention of flowers had Dylan scooting to the edge of her seat, preparing to depart it. "Celeste if anyone asks my whereabouts, could you tell them that I'll be right back?"

"You leaving the restaurant?"

"Yes, but I won't be gone long. Need to go get something."

Celeste didn't ask what, although that nosy part of her wanted to. Instead she nodded. "Okay. See you in a bit."

~~~~~

"Hello darling. Where are you?" Layne asked through the speaker of her phone while moving further away from a lively game of Musical Chairs so she could hear well and wouldn't have to shout. Since he was in a cast, Reggie elected to be the music controller, having a ball playing different types of songs while children and a few of the adults scrambled to occupy chairs to stay in the game. It was now down to Mason and Evangeline versus five of the kids. At the beginning of the game, the children formed an alliance to defeat the over eighteen players. With an original seven against seven it was an obvious success.

"The parking lot."

"They won't let you back in? What did you do this time?" The blonde teased, relishing the voice on the other end and reveling in the fact that she would now get to hear it on a daily basis.

Dylan chuckled. "Will you come to my car? I'm parked in the back lot under a shade tree."

"Be there in a minute." The cell dropped into her purse, Layne grabbed her sweater pulling it on as she headed toward the back door exit, which would lead her to the parking lot quicker than going through the entire restaurant, out the front and around the large building. Dylan's car was easily recognizable what with the battery powered lantern seated on its roof, used to illuminate since the sun was about to leave. Although if the lantern wasn't there, Layne wouldn't have had any trouble spotting the tall drink of water perched on the trunk.

Dylan parted her legs as Layne stepped between them to greet her with a kiss. "I don't want you to freeze, so I'll hurry. Just wanted to do this privately." Pulling her arm from behind her back, the comic revealed what she held.

"Is that the flower?" Layne gingerly ran her fingers across the synthetic red tipped yellow petals. "This *does* look real."

"And it's for you. My friend from the airport advised that I should give this yellow rose to the person that I am in love with." She trailed the flower across Layne's cheek while gazing into her eyes. "And I could never love any woman as much as you. You Layne Bishop are a godsend. Dance with me?"

"No music," the muralist answered, her voice drifting into a whisper, as there was a lump in her throat warning of the joyous tears threatening to break through.

"Taken care of." Once Layne moved, she jumped off the trunk and walked around to the driver's side. Leaning in, Dylan turned the key in the ignition and then hit the play button on her built-in CD player. A song familiar to them both began to play. "Remember this?" The brunette asked, gently pulling Layne against her.

The smaller woman nodded, a smile on her face as she remembered that night. "Ribbon in the Sky. We danced to it on that wonderful cruise Valentine's Day." She pressed her cheek to Dylan's chest listening to her heartbeat. Hands around Dylan's neck, she twirled the flower's stem between her fingers. "You really think that woman who comforted you at the airport that day Robin and I left was Rose?"

"Should be impossible but possibly it was her."

"You think we'll ever see her again?"

Chin resting on a blonde head, Dylan looked thoughtful. "Somehow I doubt it. I think her work is done."

Layne gazed up into warm blue eyes. "Because we're together." She puckered her lips when the comic lowered her head for a kiss.

"Always."

*This is not a coincidence
And far more than a lucky chance
But what is that was always meant
Is our ribbon in the sky for our love*

~~~~~

### **Epilogue**

"You see this cookie?" Dylan enticingly waved the soft oatmeal cookie through the air, watching the fascinated blue eyes follow it on its invisible course. "It can be yours. That's right. All yours. And all you have to say to get it is Mommy. Who am I?"

Robin didn't hesitate. "Dada." She smacked her lips together waiting for the cookie to be dropped into her hand.

Dylan shook her head. "No Robbie. No Dada. Mommy." She pointed toward herself. "I am Mommy." And she was officially the baby's mother through a second-parent adoption completed last month. Doing things a tad backwards, she and Layne's wedding was coming up next month. Oliver, who was ordained, had been honored when the couple asked him to perform the ceremony.

Robin disagreed despite wanting that cookie. "No, Dada." She looked up when she heard her other parent laughing as she entered the living room. "Mama!"

Smiling, Layne pinched her cheek, sitting next to her on the carpet. "Dyl, honey, face it. She's not about to call you Mommy. Give her a few more months. She'll learn."

The comic glanced at their grinning daughter. "I think she secretly knows what she's doing." Dylan took a deep breath, preparing herself to try again. "Robbie, listen to me all right?" The toddler nodded. "Are you a girl?" She nodded again so the brunette indicated Layne, a crumb falling to the floor as the cookie continued to be waved. "Is Mama a girl?" Another nod, little fingers itching to grab that crumb. "Is Uncle Mike a girl?"

"No."

"Is Uncle Mike a boy?"

"Yes." Robin stuck her finger in her mouth wishing that it were a cookie as she nodded.

"Is your big cousin Calvin a boy?"

The toddler smiled at the mention of his name. Calvin had the neatest big kid toys and he was sweet about sharing and showing her how to play with them, just as long as she didn't try to put anything in her mouth. "Yah."

"Am I a girl?"

Robin nodded with enthusiasm. When was she gonna relinquish that dang cookie already?  
"Yes."

"So that makes me Mommy right?"

"You Dada!" Hah! She hadn't just fallen off the turnip truck. Robin giggled along with her Mama. Dylan playfully rolled her eyes at the pair.

"Aw, Dyl. Take a walk on the bright side. At least she's aware that you have girly parts." Layne paused, observing the uneaten cookie in her fiancée's hand. "Are you attempting to bribe an eighteen month old?"

Dylan quickly explained herself. "I was going to give it to her whether she called me Mommy or not. I swear. I'll prove it." She held the treat out for the baby to take, which she happily did. Before Robin bit off a piece of her cookie, she thanked Dylan although it sounded more like 'tank you'. Smiling, the comic kissed her cheek. "You're very welcome Robbie." Shoot, one more time and then she would drop it for the remainder of the day. "You Robbie and I am...?"

The little girl shook her head. Would she never learn? "You...Dada."

Dylan threw her hands up in defeat. Perhaps she should just wait until Robin was ready to replace Dada with Mommy. It wouldn't be much longer, right? "Okay little princess. You win." She touched her forehead to Robin's. "For now." The baby giggled around the cookie in her mouth. Once she finished her treat, it was time for her daily nap, which she usually didn't protest and today was one of those days. Getting a tender hug from her Mommy, she took Pooh Bear by his paw, both following Mama to their nursery.

Layne had barely finished reading the second page of one of Robin's favorite fairy tales before the toddler drifted to sleep, Pooh Bear tucked at her side. Returning to the living room she found her partner seated on the couch with another cookie in her hand.

"Who are you intending to bribe with that one?"

"My fiancée."

"Oh, you're getting married?" She straddled Dylan's lap and tried to take a bite out of the cookie. The brunette's reflexes allowed her to move it away from the choppers just in time.

"Yes, I am." She bent her arm so the cookie was hidden behind her neck. "Next month."

"Is it fancy?"

"No, we wanted a casual intimate ceremony."

Layne nodded her agreement. "That's nice. Cuts down on the stress of planning. What about a honeymoon? Will you have one?"

Dylan grinned as she replied, "Eventually if she ever makes up her mind. Every other day she's showing me a new brochure. You know some women and their inability to come to a decision within a reasonable amount of time."

The muralist smirked. "Uh huh. And you wouldn't know anything about that being a Dada. You men are capable of making a decision like," she snapped her fingers, "that."

And then Dylan smirked. "Cute."

"Yes you are Dada."

"It's Mommy."

An eyebrow rose. "You want me to call you Mommy? Is that the bribe? If I call you Mommy will you give me the cookie?"

She slapped the cookie into Layne's hand and promptly pulled her closer. "Call me whatever you want. Just kiss me."

The oatmeal cookie was dropped on the couch and forgotten. "Of course darling. You want a 12-pointer?"

"As usual."

**THE END**