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Robyn

She hadn't dared hope that this might happen.

Someone less cynical might have thought of it as a Christmas miracle, but Robyn no longer believed in miracles. She was terrified, but layered under the terror was a seam of something else. *Hope.* The kaleidoscope of emotions inside her matched the swirl and shimmer of color in the sky. Here in Swedish Lapland, north of the Arctic Circle, the unpolluted skies and clear winter nights made for frequent sightings of the northern lights.

She heard the door open behind her, heard the soft crunch of footsteps on deep snow and then felt Erik's arms slide around her.

"Come inside. It's cold."

"One more minute. I need to think…" She'd always done her best thinking here, in this wild land where nature domi-

nated, where a human felt insignificant beneath the expanse of pink-tinted sky. Everything she'd ever done that was foolish, selfish, risky or embarrassing shrank in importance because this place didn't care.

Trees bowed under the weight of new snow, the surface glistening with delicate threads of silver and blue. The cold numbed her cheeks and froze her eyelashes, but she noticed only the beauty. Her instinct was to reach for her camera, even though she already had multiple images of the same scene.

She'd come here to escape from everything she was and everything she'd done and had fallen in love with the place and the man. It turned out that you could reinvent yourself if you moved far enough away from everyone who knew you.

Erik pulled the hood of her down jacket farther over her head. "If you're thinking of the past, then don't."

How could she not?

Robyn the rebel.

Her old self felt unfamiliar now. It was like looking at an old photo and not recognizing yourself. Who was that woman?

"I can't believe she's coming here. She was three years old when I last saw her."

Her niece. Her sister's child.

She remembered a small, smiling cherub with rosy cheeks and curly blond hair. She remembered innocence and acceptance and the fleeting hope of a fresh start, before Robyn had ruined it, the way she'd ruined everything back then.

Her sister had forbidden her to ever make contact again. There had been no room for Robyn in her sister's perfect little family unit. Even now, many years later, remembering that last encounter still made her feel shaky and sick.

She tried to imagine the child as a woman. Was she like her mother? Whenever Robyn thought about her sister, her feelings became confused. Love. Hate. Envy. Irritation. She hadn't known it was possible to feel every possible emotion within a single relationship. Elizabeth had been the golden girl. The perfect princess and, for a little while at least, her best friend in the world.

Time had eased the pain from agony to ache.

All links had been broken, until that email had arrived.

"Why did she get in touch now, after so long? She's thirty. Grown."

Part of her wanted to celebrate, but life had taught her to be cautious, and she knew this wasn't a simple reunion. What if her niece was looking for answers? And what if she didn't like what she heard?

Was this a second chance, or another emotional car crash?

"You can ask her. Face-to-face," Erik said, "but I know you're nervous."

"Yes." She had no secrets from him, although it had taken her a while to reach the point where she'd trusted their relationship not to snap. "She's a stranger. The only living member of my family."

Her sister was gone, killed instantly two years earlier while crossing the road. There was no fixing the past now. That door was closed.

Erik tightened his hold on her. "Your niece has a daughter, remember? That's two family members. Three if you count her husband."

Family. She'd had to learn to live without it.

She'd stayed away, as ordered. Made no contact. Rebuilt her life. Redesigned herself. Buried the past and traveled as far from her old life as she could. In the city she'd often felt

trapped. Suffocated by the past. Here, in this snowy wilderness with nature on her doorstep, she felt free.

And then the past had landed in her in-box.

I'm Christy, your niece.