

## Autumn Winds

### Chapter 1

The news photographer waited, as instructed, huddled by an old brick wall on the cold autumn day until the funeral ended. The press was not allowed into the cathedral, but the list of attendees read like a *Who's Who* of the rich and famous and his editor was eager to get some good pictures as the mourners came out. Each public face would no doubt show the politically correct degree of grief.

The photographer shivered, pulling up the wool collar of his jacket against the bitter wind. They didn't come more famous than the "Remarkable Williams Family". Philip "Philly" Williams had been a Welsh immigrant to Canada. Through hard work and brilliant financial dealings, he had carved a place for himself among a surprised Canadian establishment.

Always a nonconformist, at fifty-three he had surprised the conservative Canadian establishment again by marrying Alexandria Thasos, the prima ballerina of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company. She was twenty-two. To everyone's greater surprise, the stormy marriage had endured until Williams' mysterious, fatal boating accident at the age of seventy-six.

Alexandria gave her "Philly" three equally remarkable offspring: Roberta, Elizabeth, and William. Roberta, the oldest, had won Oscars as an actor, screenwriter, and director. She was like her father: brilliant, ruthless, and driven. As one critic wrote, "Robbie Williams can make anyone a star and all it will cost them is their soul."

Number two was Elizabeth, a reclusive physicist who had knowledge of quantum mechanics to a degree so complex that few could understand. It was said within enlightened circles that only she and God completely understood the dynamics involved in the creation of the universe.

The baby, black sheep of the family, was "Billy-the-Kid". His wild ways had won him three world championships in Formula One racing and, finally, the brushed stainless steel coffin that was at this moment being carried from the cathedral.

The photographer moved away from the protection of the brick wall and out into the biting wind to lean against the dirty yellow barricades that had been put up by the police at the request of the concerned mayor.

The crowd buzzed in anticipation of the procession of celebrities. The coffin was carried by Billy-the-Kid's racing team. They wore their team colours: black with a slash of red down the pant leg.

The grey steel of the coffin was partly hidden by the black and white checkered flag that Alexandria had dramatically unrolled on her son's coffin only moments before. His two sisters had placed his red helmet at one end. It had done its job well; Billy's handsome head had remained undamaged, although separated from his neck by the crash.

Alexandria descended the long flight of stairs behind the coffin, dramatically wrapped in black mink, though not the same one she had worn at her husband's memorial service. A brilliant red clasp at her throat emphasized her long neck and repeated the racing motif. She appeared distraught at her son's death. Closer observation through the camera lens showed the photographer that her eyes were dry.

One step behind the dramatic Alexandria walked the surviving siblings: Roberta, tall, dark, and bristling with energy, defiantly sneering at the gawkers; and mousy Elizabeth, who seemed to be bowed, not in grief, but in the heady contemplation of the universe.

Following them with quiet dignity, apparently completely forgotten by the others, was Billy's wife, Janet. In her arms she held a baby. Billy's child. The photographer took a number of close-up shots. It was the first public appearance by the third generation. The infant would have a hell of a tradition to live up to.

The party paused on the last few stairs, watching as the coffin was slipped into the black hearse. It was then that the photographer took the picture that would appear on newsstands all over the world.

There stood Alexandria, dramatically posed, with Elizabeth one step behind, lost in thought and partially hidden by the black swirl of mommy's furs. Alone to the right towered Roberta. She was not looking at the coffin; instead her head was turned to the left, looking past her sister to where Billy's wife stood with quiet dignity, her arms wrapped protectively around her child. Janet Williams' strawberry blonde hair was the only spot of light in the dark scene.

The expression on Roberta's face was one of calculating curiosity, as if she had just become aware that her brother had left a family and was evaluating her responsibilities and options regarding them.

A black, stretch limousine pulled slowly forward and the racing team, now no longer burdened with Billy's body, turned and filed down each side. Those on the left opened the doors to receive the Williams family. Alexandria and Elizabeth stepped forward and disappeared into the luxurious interior. Roberta crossed the steps and took Janet Williams' elbow, guiding the surprised woman and her child down to the vehicle. All three disappeared into the car and the racing team closed the doors, waiting for the next limo, which would carry them to the graveside.

Inside the limo there was silence for a moment, then Alexandra shifted. "Thank you, Roberta. Beautifully choreographed, as always. Although I'm not sure if we shouldn't have stood longer on the steps for the press."

The two sisters exchanged a ghost of a smile. "Nonsense, Alexandria, the light today is far too harsh. It would not have done you justice," Robbie responded practically, noting the wide-eyed shock on Janet's face. *Billy had good taste*, she thought, her eyes slowly traveling up the small woman's body.

Alexandria sniffed. "Perhaps. That is your field so I shall bow to your judgment, Robbie. Beth, do straighten your shoulders, dear." Beth did so immediately, a red tide washing up her neck and over her face.

"I read your paper on your observations of the event horizon of Cygnus X-1. Can I assume that you feel the calculated Schwarzschild's radius is not upheld by the current data?" questioned Robbie, turning her neon blue eyes in the direction of her sister.

Janet relaxed, no longer under Roberta's scrutiny. She saw Elizabeth relax too, as her big sister came to her aid by leading the conversation to waters where she felt comfortable.

"Certainly the light wave front has failed to collapse and hovers around thirty kilometers from the star. That would be the expected Schwarzschild's radius if X-1 is a massive black hole. What is interesting," the recluse continued, warming to her only interest, "is that under the principles of quantum mechanics, particles appear to escape from a black hole. This, of course, would have been impossible using classic mechanics."

Robbie nodded. "The uncertainly principle?" she muttered as she followed her sister's train of thought.

Beth smiled. "Planck's constant comes into play where—"

Alexandria waved a hand in annoyance. "Girls, Billy's wife doesn't need to have her mind strained to the limit with Williams' thought play. Be polite."

"My name is Janet," said a soft, firm voice from the corner. All eyes turned to look at the petite blonde in surprise.

At the sound of the voice the small child on her lap awoke, beamed and reached up. "Mommy, mommy."

Janet's green eyes turned away from the family and focused on her daughter. Her face broke into a radiant smile. "Hi, Rebecca," Janet Williams cooed, letting the tot play with the leather glove she had removed.

Robbie stirred uncomfortably. Elizabeth withdrew into herself. Alexandria looked in amazement at the baby as if she had just realized that she was now a grandmother. "I am not to be called Grandmother!" she proclaimed.

With startled eyes that then quickly turned cool green, Janet looked up. "If my daughter and I should ever meet you again, Mrs. Williams, how would you like us to address you?"

Robbie's laugh exploded in the limo, causing the driver to look into his rear view mirror in surprise. In response, Beth cringed in her corner, and Alexandria gathered herself up for one of her more notable tirades, but was forestalled by a large, strong hand on her arm. "Alexandria is not maternal in nature. We call her Alexandria to her face, and anything we dare behind her back," explained Robbie, those extraordinary eyes focused on Janet.

Janet nodded, realizing that Roberta had once again come to the rescue.

"Really, Roberta," exclaimed Alexandria. "What will...Janice think?"

"What do we care what she thinks? And her name is Janet," drawled Robbie with the raise of an eyebrow.

"Why did you lead me over to this limo?" Janet met and held those remarkable eyes as they turned back to her.

"Show," Robbie explained bluntly, stretching out her long legs so that her calf touched Janet's ankle.

This time Alexandria laughed. "Robbie is always directing, aren't you, dear?"

"Always," murmured Robbie, still looking into Janet's eyes.

Janet didn't look away. Backing down was out of the question. She had heard rumours that Robbie was gay and very wild. *Is Roberta coming on to me? No, unlikely. I'm Billy's widow, after all, and I'm carrying our two-year-old in my arms. That alone should discourage any interest. No, this was just another little Williams' mind game. But why, I'm not sure.*

"Billy failed to inform the family that he had married. You came as quite a surprise when we read about his wedding in the papers. And of course the birth announcement that followed. I didn't think Billy—"

"Roberta! You go too far. She is a Williams by marriage, I realize, but we hardly know her," Alexandria interrupted.

The limo came to a stop, forestalling any further discussion. Alexandria, followed by Elizabeth, got out one side while Robbie got out the other. "Roberta, would you mind?" Janet, held up the baby. Robbie blinked in confusion, then rallied, stepped forward and took the baby, though awkwardly. Anticipating that the baby would be fussy with the stiff, cold woman, Janet got out of the limo quickly.

Much to both Robbie and Janet's surprise, the little child looked into those blue eyes and gave a delighted squeal, burying her head against Robbie's neck and her chubby little arms into her aunt's dark, thick hair. When Robbie tried to give her back, the two-year-old scrunched up her face and hung on tighter.

Janet's eyes twinkled at the look of bewilderment that came over Roberta's face. Her hand rose to cover a nervous grin then touched her forehead in thought. "Listen, maybe you'd better hold on to her just for a little while," she suggested. "This is not the place for a scene."

Robbie's eyes narrowed; Janet stared back innocently. "Stay right beside me," Robbie ordered, and Janet nodded, obligingly placing her hand around the tall woman's elbow. They looked at each other at the touch. The wind blew their hair gently about their coat collars. Leaves rustled overhead. Then they walked over to join Alexandria and Elizabeth by the grave.

The photographer captured the knot of Williamses on film. Roberta, now holding the third generation, played the role of head of the family. Alexandria and Elizabeth performed their roles as grieving mother and sister, and the little wife held onto Roberta's strong arm for support as she watched the coffin of her husband being placed on the grave supports. The picture appeared on page two.

At the end of the interment service, each family member stepped forward and dropped a red rose tied with a black ribbon onto the checkered flag that covered the coffin. Robbie gave her rose to the baby first, then retrieved it and dropped it by the red helmet. The child's serious blue eyes followed it with intense interest. The last to place her rose was Janet. She leaned down over the coffin. "Thanks," she whispered and then straightened, tears welling in her eyes as she made her way back to Roberta's side.

Robbie instinctively wrapped her long arm around the grieving woman and wondered what her self-centred brother had ever done in his life for which he should be thanked. The family moved off, Robbie with one arm supporting the beautiful child and the other wrapped around the distraught wife. Alexandria and Elizabeth followed.

At the limo, Robbie turned to meet her sister's eye. Elizabeth gave the smallest of nods, following her mother into the vehicle, this time sitting beside her. Janet got in next and waited to take her child. To her surprise, Roberta held on to the little girl and gracefully slipped in beside her.

The conversation on the way to the hotel consisted of Janet telling bedtime stories to Rebecca who sat comfortably in Robbie's lap and played sleepily with her aunt's gold chain. The little girl watched her mother's face intently as the woman wove simple but beautiful fairy tales. The three Williamses sat in wonder, watching Janet who emanated love for her child as she told her stories.

When the child finally fell asleep in Robbie's arms, she whispered to Janet, "Are you staying at the hotel with us?"

"No, no, I plan to drive back home tonight," the widow demurred.

Robbie shook her head impatiently. "Where is your car?"

"Back at the funeral home," Janet replied as the limo pulled up to the hotel. "I can get a taxi from here."

Alexandria made a noise that fell somewhere between a squeal and a snort. "My dear, there is the reception. We have eight hundred guests waiting to pay their respects; do behave. Roberta?"

Robbie trained her eyes on Janet, who looked as though she was about to rebel. "You will come with me and trust me to see that things are done right. Don't worry; I won't expose you to any of Alexandria's friends."

"Roberta!" protested her mother.

Janet dropped the scowl and almost smiled.

Ignoring Alexandria, Robbie turned to her sister. "Sorry, Sis, you'll have to run shotgun while I baby sit."

Elizabeth nodded, but said nothing. As far as Beth was concerned, Roberta's word was law.

They all trooped out, Roberta keeping the heir apparent in her arms. It was important that the press see a united Williams front. They walked a gauntlet of reporters in the lobby. Robbie wrapped a protective arm around Janet and covered the baby's face by folding up her collar as they bee-lined for the waiting elevator.

On the top floor, the manager ushered them into a private suite where they took off their coats and freshened their make-up. Janet used the time to wash and change the baby and settle her to continue her nap. Then they went to greet their guests in an adjoining hall.

The evening was a blur for Janet, who was emotionally drained. Robbie steered her around, and when she saw that her eyes were no longer focused, she ushered her back into the bedroom and left her to sleep with Rebecca.

Several hours later, Robbie returned to find mother and daughter still asleep; Rebecca safely under the covers with her mom's protective arm over her, and Janet on top of the covers wearing only her slip. Her strawberry blonde hair washed across the pillow.

For a minute, Robbie leaned against the doorjamb and enjoyed the view. *She is a beautiful woman — photogenic features; wonder if she can act.* Robbie looked at her watch. She needed Janet out of there and home safely before the press re-formed in greater numbers in the morning. They would not be expecting Billy's widow to disappear from the hotel in the middle of the night. It was important to keep Janet as isolated as possible until the Williams family knew more about her. She pushed herself away from the doorframe and walked to the bed. "Janet. Janet. Hey," Robbie called, giving the petite woman's bare shoulder a shake. The skin was warm and silky soft under Robbie's hand. She quickly pulled her hand away.

"Huh? Oh. What time is it?" the blonde asked, clearly not fully awake.

"Time to go before the press regroup. I'll get you a coffee while you get dressed." Robbie turned and left.

Janet got up and busied herself getting washed and dressed, and then seeing to Rebecca.

Robbie returned some time later with a coffee, a glass of milk, and some cookies on a tray. "Here, the limo is downstairs. It will take us over to where your car is parked, then I'll drive home with you."

"Really, I'm okay. I can manage from here."

"Feed the kid," was Robbie's response as she left the room.

When she returned, Robbie had changed to jeans and a suede jacket over a brushed cotton shirt, and was carrying an overnight bag and a laptop case. Janet was just getting Rebecca into her coat. "This isn't necessary," she protested.

"Yes, it is. You are tired and emotional, and you plan to drive some five hundred miles through the night with the only Williams heir," Robbie stated bluntly.

Her temper rising at this woman's clear intention to meddle in her life, Janet snapped, "Damn the Williamses!"

"Too late, we already are. I will drive and you can take care of..."

"Rebecca," Janet supplied sharply.

"Rebecca," Robbie looked at the child as she registered her name. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out her cellular phone. "Rowe, we are leaving the hotel now. I'll be gone two days, maybe more." She clicked the phone off.

"I don't need your help," Janet said with determination, the edge in her voice obvious.

"Good, because you are not getting it; Rebecca is." Robbie picked up Rebecca and led Janet out and down to the elevator. They left by a side door and entered the limo that pulled up as they stepped outside. As soon as they were safely in the car, the driver accelerated away. The trip back to the funeral home was made in silence.

The limo pulled up beside the only vehicle remaining in the parking lot. It was an old, slightly battered Chevy truck with an extended cab. There was a moment's silence. Then Robbie snorted, "What...is...that?"

"My truck," Janet answered, getting out with some difficulty with Rebecca, her purse, and the diaper bag in her arms. She walked over to the dusty, red vehicle, shifted Rebecca to one arm, and fumbled in her coat pocket for her keys. Her gloves fell out and Rebecca stirred restlessly.

Strong arms lifted the child from her. "Here, open the damn door before you drop the kid on its head," Robbie grumbled.

Janet stooped and picked up her gloves. Then, finding the right key, she walked around and unlocked the passenger door. Robbie followed, her face devoid of expression. Janet placed the diaper bag inside and turned to scoop the sleeping child from Robbie's arms, bringing the three of them together for an instant. Robbie's body felt very warm. That was probably why Rebecca liked being close to her. The faintest fragrance of spice drifted over to Janet as she looked up and met Robbie's eyes.

The taller woman spoke. "I'm driving. You can be pissed off as much as you want. It is still going to happen."

Frustrated, Janet sighed and pulled Rebecca away and into her arms. The sleepy little child reached a hand over Janet's shoulder. "Obbie, Obbie come," she whined. Janet placed the child into her car seat in the back, carefully fastening her in. She looked at her little girl, wondering why she had bonded so quickly to this strange woman. Roberta Williams did look remarkably like her brother, Billy, but Rebecca had never met her father so it was unlikely that was the reason.

Janet wiggled back out of the back seat and flipped the passenger seat back into place, turning to face Roberta. "Thank you, Ms. Williams, for your concern. Rebecca and I will be fine," she said, taking out her keys again.

Robbie stepped forward, trapping Janet between her body and the doorframe. Her hand folded around Janet's and she squeezed.

"That hurts," Janet snapped, and the hand around her own relaxed a little.

"Let go of the car keys," Robbie ordered. "You can't care for a tired baby and drive." For a minute their eyes held in a battle of wills. "Please," growled the director and Janet acquiesced, opening her hand and letting the keys drop. Robbie scooped them up, went around to the driver's side and hopped in, turning to look at the annoyed woman.

"On the rare occasions when I feel compelled to be responsible for others, it is for a damn good reason. Don't question my authority," Robbie stated calmly, her blue eyes the colour of ice. Janet looked at her daughter. "Don't even think it," came the response to the plan that had barely taken root in Janet's mind to take her daughter and walk off. The petite woman looked back at the driver, then got in and slammed the door.

"This is kidnapping," she growled, staring out the front window in anger as she did up her seat belt.

Robbie leaned forward and turned the key. The engine started with protest. "Add it to my list of crimes," responded the director bitterly. "Shit! Is this the best vehicle that my brother owns?"

Anger spurred Janet to say more than she normally would have. "Billy and I never lived together."

"Yeah, well how did you end up with the kid then?" Robbie asked sarcastically.

"That's not your concern," muttered Janet, her hands folded in her lap to keep them from shaking.

The strong jaw of the driver tightened as she pulled out on the street. "Is she Billy's?"

Janet gave her a sneer and didn't answer. They drove on, Robbie expertly moving through the city traffic and then out on the highway taking them north.

Some hours later, Robbie pulled into a self-serve gas station and got out. Janet watched the famous director pumping gas and cleaning the windows. She looked as dynamic in blue jeans as she had in the black tailored coat of brushed silk she had worn at the funeral. The coat was classic over a grey, wool suit, beautifully tailored and set off with a red silk blouse. Elizabeth had worn grey, too, with a red silk scarf as an accent. Show, Janet now realized. The whole funeral, right down to the costumes, had all been arranged by Roberta to perpetuate the Williams' mystique.

Billy had talked bitterly about the myth the first night they had met. How the famous Williams family consciously perpetuated their legend as talented, united, and caring. According to Billy, they consciously enhanced their image by carefully staging any public gathering, all the while protesting that they didn't enjoy the limelight. Billy had said that it was all a sham, a myth, and that the truth was very different. Looking back on the day, the funeral had been more a play than a time of grieving.

Robbie climbed back into the truck. "You hungry?" she asked. "It's eight o'clock, and the sandwiches they served at the reception were for show not substance."

Janet considered. She was actually starving but it meant disturbing Rebecca and having to spend more time with the objectionable Roberta. Hunger won out. "Yes, something to eat would be good. Rebecca might be a bit cranky, though. She doesn't like to be waked up."

"Well, if she starts to bawl, we'll stuff a hamburger or something in her mouth," Robbie suggested, looking back at the little bundle asleep in her car seat. She had a small fist balled up in her eye. *She's kinda cute for a baby.*

Janet gave Roberta a weary look. *This woman clearly has no idea about children.* She opened her heavy door and jumped down, then flipped back the seat, undid the straps, and pulled Rebecca out. Right on cue, Rebecca started to cry. Janet bounced her and talked softly to her as Roberta locked up the truck and came around.

The tall figure looked down at the fretting baby. "Make her stop," she commanded.

"I'm trying, Ms. Williams, but she is a baby and her schedule has been really upset today."

Robbie reached out her arms, saying, "Gimme." Janet handed over her heavy daughter. The director looked down at the startled baby face. "Shut up, okay," she said and, much to Janet's surprise, Rebecca laughed and grabbed for Robbie's chain. Robbie looked down at Janet and raised an eyebrow, a smug look on her face.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Janet laughed. "Just for that bit of showing off, Ms. Williams, you can feed her the strained peas."

"The name is Robbie, and no kid should have to start life on strained peas," she growled, heading for the diner with Rebecca over her shoulder.

Not sure just how to take the unusual woman, Janet followed. "All children start out on strained peas. Rebecca is starting to eat solids, but I thought it best to have her on the bottled foods while we were on the road."

"If we all started out eating that crap, no wonder the world is such a fucking mess," Robbie muttered, holding the door for Janet to go ahead.

"Robbie?"

"Hmm," the tall woman responded, liking the way Janet said her name.

Janet slid into a booth and Robbie, still holding Rebecca, slid in the other side. "If you are going to be part of Rebecca's life, you have to remember not to swear in front of her," Janet chided softly.

Surprised, Robbie glanced first at Janet, then Rebecca, and then back to Janet again. "Who said anything about being in the kid's life?" she exclaimed.

Janet smiled and looked down at her daughter, who once again had wrapped her little arms around Robbie's neck and was happily chewing on Robbie's collar. She looked back up at Robbie. A slow blush was creeping up her neck. "You're here, aren't you? And you have taken Rebecca every chance you had."

"Hey, wait." The red was now glowing on high, defined cheekbones.

"Excuse me, would you like a highchair for your little one?" asked the waitress, looking down at Robbie.

"Agh!" Robbie looked down at the floor.

"Yes, she would," translated Janet. "Don't they look alike?" she added as a tease.

The waitress smiled, reaching out to smooth Rebecca's dark, sleep ruffled hair, "She's got mom's hair. Are you going to look just like your mommy?" she cooed.

Janet hid a grin behind the hand that was propped up on the table. Robbie buried her face in Rebecca's neck. "Can we have menus too, please?" asked Janet.

"Sure thing." The waitress moved off.

In annoyance, Robbie looked up at Janet. "What'd you do that for?"

Grinning broadly, Janet put her head to one side to observe the hot and bothered director. "This was your idea," she reminded sweetly. Robbie scowled and was just about to respond when the highchair showed up.

"Here you are." The waitress placed the wooden highchair at the end of the table, and the menus on the blue tablecloth before she left.

Janet smiled at Robbie and waited. Robbie's scowl got deeper as she eased off the bench and lifted Rebecca up to put her in the highchair. Rebecca laughed gleefully and swung her legs up, making it impossible to slide her into the chair. Robbie tried again, another gleefully aborted attempt.

"This kid has your sick sense of humour," Robbie muttered, grabbing Rebecca's legs with one hand and stuffing them gently under the highchair's tray as she successfully lowered Rebecca into place on her the third attempt. Rebecca promptly grabbed hold of Robbie's gold chain, making it impossible for her to straighten up.

Prudently, Janet decided that this was the time to come to the rescue before there was one of the famous Williams' scenes. "Rebecca," she called softly and her daughter immediately forgot Robbie and let go of the chain, reaching her little arms out to her mom. Janet took the hands and kissed them. "That's a good girl."

Robbie sighed and slid back into the booth, looking at the mother and daughter with confused eyes. *Why the hell am I here anyway? Why should I be making Billy's family my responsibility?*

"So, are you going to try feeding her now that you've mastered highchair?" Janet asked, leading Robbie on as she read her menu.

"I can feed her," Robbie muttered with irritation, looking at her own menu.

"Ready to order?" asked the waitress, who had returned to their table.

"I'll have a cheese omelette," Robbie ordered from behind the menu, "and...my daughter will have scrambled eggs."

"I'll have bacon and eggs with extra toast, please," requested Janet with a smile. The waitress smiled back and went to put in the order. Janet looked over at Robbie. "Your daughter?"

"Hey, you started it. What am I going to say now — that I've never seen the kid before today?" Robbie leaned forward and propped her chin on her hand. "Do immature humans eat scrambled eggs?" she asked as an afterthought.

"Now's not the time to be asking," Janet pointed out, her eyes dancing with merriment at the thought of Robbie trying to feed her stubborn daughter.

Robbie looked down at the tablecloth, tracing patterns with a long, slender finger. "Listen, I'm kind of head of the family now. I feel I've got some responsibility to see that Rebecca here is okay."

Janet looked up from watching Robbie's hand. She had beautiful hands, with long artist's fingers. In fact, Roberta Williams was a knock out. One of those rare people who were very comfortable with and unaffected by their incredible good looks. "Were you and Billy close?"

"No." Robbie frowned.

"Robbie, Billy never saw his daughter. The Williams Family does not have any responsibility to Rebecca. I'm quite capable of raising her on my own."

"What the hell sort of relationship did my brother have with you?" Robbie asked in irritation.

Janet was saved from answering by the arrival of their food. She noticed that Robbie deliberately did not look up at the waitress. Nor had she the previous time. *She doesn't want to be recognized. I hadn't even thought about her being famous.*

"Thanks." Janet smiled, drawing the attention to herself.

"You're welcome." The waitress left them to their meals.

Janet reached over to touch Robbie's arm. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"For bringing attention to you last time the waitress was here. It never occurred to me she might recognize you. I'm truly sorry," she repeated sincerely.

Robbie shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "So, you tell me about your relationship with Billy, and I'll stuff these eggs into the kid, okay?"

Looking into remarkable blue eyes that seemed to glow with an inner light, Janet considered. "Okay," she said, wondering whether Robbie would understand.

Robbie determinedly picked up a fork. Janet took it away and handed her a teaspoon. "Just put a little on and blow on it first so it's cool," she cautioned. Robbie nodded and scooped up some egg and blew on it, then offered it to Rebecca. Rebecca grabbed the spoon with a laugh and tipped it over into Robbie's lap.

"Shit!" Robbie snapped. Janet raised an eyebrow. "The kid got egg all over me," Robbie protested. Janet said nothing. Robbie scooped up, blew on, and offered egg again. This time Rebecca refused to open her mouth but one egg filled hand came up and grabbed Robbie's hair.

Janet saw the look and reacted immediately. "Here," she said, hurriedly offering Robbie her napkin. "Like this." Janet took the spoon and readied a mouthful. "Here you are, sweet one, open up for mommy. That's a good girl. Do you like the eggs Aunt Robbie got you? Come on, have another spoonful," Janet coaxed, putting the spoon in her daughter's mouth then lifting it up so the egg was scraped off as the spoon was withdrawn.

Finding the exchange between mother and daughter fascinating, Robbie watched intently.

"Okay, now you try." Janet smiled, handing the spoon back to Robbie. Robbie repeated the action. Right down to Janet's expressions and voice tone. Rebecca ate her egg happily and Janet sat with her mouth open in shock. "That was me!" she gasped.

Robbie smiled and wiggled her eyebrows. Rebecca burped and spit up on Robbie's hand.

Robbie lifted her hand and watched the partly chewed egg drip off. "And just what expression do I use to describe what I am feeling now?" she asked quietly, pulling a face.

"I usually say, 'Oh dear'," Janet offered, trying not to laugh.

"Nope. 'Oh dear' just doesn't cut it dramatically."

"Here," said Janet softly, taking Robbie's hand and wiping it clean with her napkin. "Tell you what, you eat your dinner and I'll finish feeding Rebecca. I'm used to eating with one hand."

Robbie didn't protest. She had successfully stifled, for now, any nesting instinct that might have been lying dormant within her. She looked down at her cool and partly congealed omelette. Janet's eyes followed.

"You get used to eating your food cold," she sighed. Robbie nodded and ate her dinner moodily, watching silently while Janet ate and fed Rebecca at the same time.

They left some time later, Janet carrying a now tired and grumpy child to the truck. Robbie gingerly held the crying child while Janet got in the rear seat and then, with relief, she passed Rebecca over. Janet strapped her miserable daughter into her car seat while Robbie walked around and slipped into the driver's seat once again. For a while the sound of wailing pierced the air above Janet's soothing voice. Then both child and mom went quiet as Robbie started

to sing. Her songs were old Welsh lullabies and her voice was low and melodic. Soon Rebecca was fast asleep and Robbie pulled to the shoulder to let Janet get back into the front seat.

"You have a beautiful voice," Janet said as they started off again.

"Hmm," Robbie responded disinterestedly.

"Have you sung professionally? I don't remember you singing in any of your movies except in *Dark Night*, but that was just a few words and you were drunk then," pattered Janet.

An eyebrow went up. "No, I don't sing professionally. And I wasn't drunk, I was *acting* drunk; there's a big difference," the actor clarified.

"You don't drink alcohol at all?" Janet asked in surprise. She had understood that the famous director had lived a rather wild life, but the vehemence of Robbie's response made her think otherwise.

"Rarely, and never to excess," Robbie responded. "Where do I turn off the highway?"

"Just north of Bartlett," Janet replied as she studied the actor's profile.

"Nothing is north of Bartlett," Robbie observed sarcastically. "Is there something wrong with my face?"

Janet smiled. "No, you are really very beautiful, but I guess you hear that a lot. No, I was trying to understand you. You are a very complex person."

Robbie had heard she was beautiful a lot but somehow Janet thinking so made her tired spirits rise. She wasn't sure, however, if she wanted Janet to understand her. *She probably wouldn't like what she found.*

Shifting so that she leaned against her door, Janet continued to look at Robbie. She was a strange and beautiful enigma, filled with a pulsating energy that could focus in an instant in violence or in care. Janet couldn't explain why, but she really didn't dislike this woman as she had first thought she would. In fact, she found herself very much impressed with Roberta Williams.

She had found Billy's family to be a trying experience. What would they do if anything happened to her? Legally, her daughter would be handed over to Alexandria. That scared the hell out of Janet. Elizabeth seemed nice, but she lived in her own world. She wouldn't have time for an active child like Rebecca. Then there was Robbie...

"Can I ask you a question?"

"I guess," Robbie sighed, waiting for one of the standard fan questions.

"Who would you want as Rebecca's guardian?"

The truck swerved onto the gravel shoulder and then bounced back onto the tarmac. "What?"

"I thought it only fair that I allow the Williams family some input. If anything were to happen to me, I want to make sure Rebecca has someone that will take good care of her. Billy's dead and I don't have any family. I don't want Rebecca running any chance of having the childhood I did."

Robbie stole a look at the face of the serious woman beside her. "You were an orphan?"

"Yes."

"Who raised you?"

"My grandfather," Janet answered tersely.

Robbie was confused by the subject. "Are you ill?"

"No, I'm not ill. I'm responsible. I need to know that Rebecca's future is as secure as I can make it."

There was silence for a minute. "I'll be Rebecca's guardian."

That was not the response that Janet had expected. She hesitated for a minute and then spoke frankly. "Most of what I've read about you was pretty negative. You are supposed to be a creative genius, but a tyrant. Did you really cause Sally Gershman's nervous breakdown?"

"Most likely, but that is beside the point."

"It is the point. I've seen a bit of that tyrannical nature tonight, but I don't think Rebecca would be intimidated by it. I've also seen another side of you today. Elizabeth adores you, Alexandria respects you, and I've learned that you have a really soft heart."

"Crap."

"I will consider your offer," Janet said, proving herself to be just as strong willed as Robbie.

There was a long silence as various emotions washed across Robbie's face. "You do that," she finally grated out.

"I will," Janet said noncommittally, and then leaned back against the headrest.

An hour later, they turned off the Bartlett road and bounced down a rutted dirt lane pressed in by thick trees on either side. "Do you live with the bears?" Robbie asked sarcastically.

"Only in the winter," Janet yawned, as they came to a stop outside a log cabin. "This is where we live."

Robbie looked at the log cabin in disbelief. "Who with...Daniel Boone?"