

# Robyn

The world was a shitty place; no one knew that better than Robyn Peltier. Every day for the past six months, she'd scoured the news for a story that proved it. She sometimes had to check two newspapers, but never more than that.

No common murder or assault would do. What Robyn looked for were the stories that made people call over their shoulders, "Hey, hon, can you believe this?" The ones you really didn't *want* to believe because they supported a sneaking suspicion that this world was an ugly, fucked-up place where no one gave a damn about anyone else.

The experts blamed everything from video game violence to hormones in the milk to the wrath of God. People wrung their hands and moaned about what the world was coming to, as if callous disregard for human life was some new phenomenon. Bullshit. It started back when the first caveman clubbed a buddy for his wicked new spear.

But it's easier to tell yourself the world is a good, civilized place, filled with good, civilized people, because that's what you need to believe to keep going. And it works just fine until the day the ugliness seeps to the surface and sucks your life into the cesspool.

Today, Robyn found her story on page two of the L.A. Times. A man had shot a kid for walking across his lawn and thought he was perfectly justified—because, after all, it was his lawn. She clipped the article, laid it on a fresh page of her bulging scrapbook, then smoothed the plastic over it. Number one hundred and seventy.

Before she put the scrapbook back on the shelf, she flipped back to page one and read the headline, as she had one hundred and seventy times before: “Good Samaritan Gunned Down on Highway.” She touched the face in the photo, tracing his cheek, where the plastic covering was almost worn through, and she thought, for the one hundred and seventieth time, what a crappy picture it was.

There was no excuse for picking a bad photo. As a public relations consultant, Robyn knew better than anyone the importance of providing the right picture to convey your message. She thought of all the ones she could have given the press. Damon playing hoops with his nephews. Damon treating his tenth-grade class to post-exam pizza. Damon goofing around with his garage band. Damon grinning at their wedding.

Damn it, any picture of him *smiling* would have done. How hard was *that*? The man was a born performer—stick a camera in his face and he lit up. After five years together, she had hundreds of photos of him, any one of which would have shown the world what it had lost that night.

But when asked for a photo, she’d been dealing with the press, the police, the funeral arrangements, everyone clamoring for her attention when all she’d wanted to do was slam the door, fall to the floor and sob until exhaustion blessed her with sleep. She’d grabbed the first picture she could find—his somber college graduation shot—and shoved it into their hands.

Robyn's cell phone rang. "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." Portia had set up the ring tone. Not that Portia needed her own special one. These days, if Robyn's phone rang, it was almost always Portia, who kept her busier than her dozen clients back in Philadelphia. In this business, the only job crazier than doing PR for Paris Hilton was doing PR for the girl who wanted to be the next Paris Hilton.

She put the scrapbook back on the shelf, then answered.

"Finally," Portia breathed. "It rang, like, ten times, Rob."

Three, but Robyn knew better than to correct her. "Sorry, I was in the other room."

Silence, as Portia contemplated the concept of being, even momentarily, cell phone free.

"So how was lunch with Jasmine?" Robyn asked.

She braced for the answer and prayed, if cleanup was required, it wouldn't involve posting bail this time. The tabloids called Jasmine Wills a "frenemy" of Portia's, but if there was any "friend" in the equation, Robyn had yet to see it.

The two young women hadn't spoken since Jasmine stole Brock DeBeers, the former boy-band heartthrob who really had made Portia's heart throb. Robyn had warned Portia not to accept the invitation to a makeup lunch, but Portia had only laughed, saying Robyn didn't understand the game yet, and besides, she hadn't really liked Brock *that* much. She only kept his photo in her room because she hadn't found time to redecorate.

Apparently, Jasmine had spent the entire meal regaling Portia with tales of her wild sex life with Brock. Man's inhumanity to man. Sometimes it was shooting a helpful stranger, sometimes it was beating your BFF's dignity into the ground with a crowbar.

"But I'm going to get her back. I have a plan."

Portia's singsong cracked at the edges, and Robyn bled a little for her. She wished she could write Portia off as a vacuous twit who was sucking her dry with her neediness, but she supposed it would take another hundred-and-seventy articles in her scrapbook to drain her last ounce of sympathy.

Or maybe Robyn just liked to bleed. Maybe that was why she'd taken the job. Representing Portia Kane was the lowest, most meaningless form of PR work she could imagine. But after Damon's death, she'd had enough of representing not-for-profit organizations for a pittance. No one else cared. Why should she?

"Oh, and then, just before the bill came, Penny called and guess what? They can't make it to Bane tonight because—get this—they're going to the opening of Silhouette with Jasmine. How much you want to bet Jasmine told Penny to call at lunch so she could watch my reaction?"

*Every dollar I have*, thought Robyn. Portia wasn't stupid. That was the problem. It'd be so much easier if Robyn *could* write her off as a vacuous twit. But then she'd show some spark of intelligence, some proof that she could do more with her life than grace club openings.

"So what about that benefit concert tonight?" Robyn asked. "If you're skipping Bane, I can call and get you back on the list—"

"Benefit concert? Oh God, Rob, kill me now. No, I'm still going to Bane, and you're coming with me."

How lonely did you need to be to invite your PR rep clubbing? "I'd love to, but I have plans. Remember that friend I was with yesterday, when you came by?"

"The Indian girl?"

"Hope is *Indo-American*."

Portia's put-upon sigh made Robyn press her fingertips into her temples. Portia never ceased to complain about Robyn correcting her gaffes, ignoring the fact Portia had asked for that "sensitivity training" herself, after she'd been quoted making a racist comment about the city's Hispanic population. Hiring Robyn had been her idea of damage control. She'd needed a new PR rep and someone mentioned Robyn, saying she was looking to relocate after her husband's death. *A real tragedy. He was trying to help a stranded motorist, but the woman saw a black guy coming at her on an empty highway and shot him.*

With that, Portia had seen the perfect way to prove she wasn't racist. Then Robyn showed up—blond haired and green eyed—and from the look on Portia's face, you'd think she'd never heard the term "interracial marriage."

Portia was still nattering on about Hope. "So bring her and make sure she looks hot—but not hotter than me."

"We already had plans, Portia."

"It's *Bane*. Now, I know she works for True News, but under absolutely no circumstances is she allowed to report on our evening. Got it?"

In other words, Portia expected full coverage on the front page.

"Hope isn't a celebrity reporter. She's their weird tales girl, so unless you're going to sprout a tail or breathe fire, she's not—"

"Okay, tell her she can report on it. An exclusive. Oh, and make sure she brings that hot boyfriend, and tell him to bring some friends. Hot friends."

"He doesn't have friends here, Portia. They aren't from L.A.—"

Portia let out an eardrum-splitting squeal. "Finally. Jasmine's coming out of the restaurant. Tim, start the car. Move forward, slowly. Rob, hold on."

“What—?”

The line went dead. Robyn was putting the phone down when it rang again.

It was Portia. “Remember how you gave me shit for wearing that micro skirt last week?

Wait until you see this.” A split second pause. “Well? What do you think?”

“Of what?”

“The photo I just sent you.”

Robyn checked her mail. There, with the caption “Wait til tabs see this!!!” was a picture of Jasmine Wills wearing what looked like a baby-doll nightgown. A *see-through* nightgown.

Gauzy pink, with a red bra-and-panty set underneath.

“Well?”

“I’m . . . speechless.”

“You’re going to send it, right? To the tabs? Oh! Send it to your girlfriend at True News.”

“She doesn’t cover—”

“Then tell her to make an exception. Oh, my God! There’s Brock! Tim, pull forward.”

*Click.* Portia was gone.