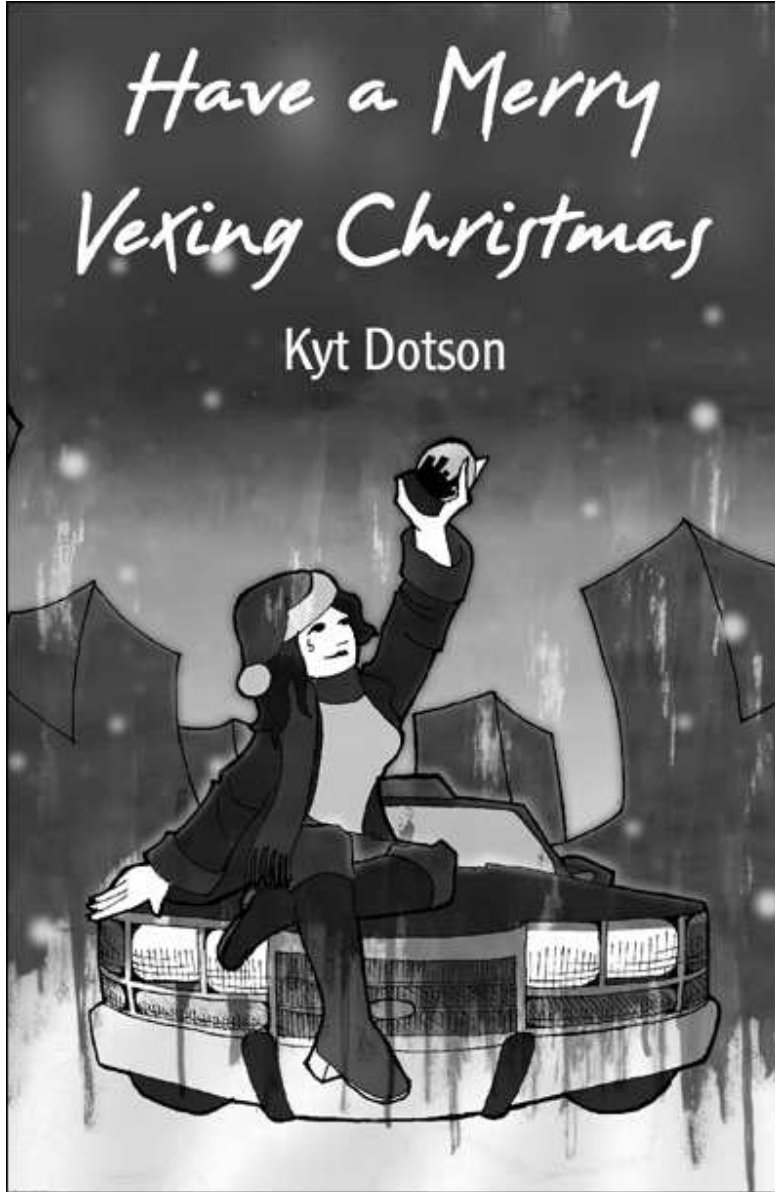


Have a Merry Vexing Christmas

Kyt Dotson



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* * *

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The phone rang. Vex let the machine get it.

“Hey, it’s your dad. Now, I know some words were said—” That was all she needed to hear before she knew she could ignore it. She brushed her teeth, combed her hair, and corrected her hastily done makeup while she listened to him ramble. The concentration it took to produce a recognizable Eye of Isis was all that kept Vex from walking into the living room, picking up the phone, and hanging up on him.

“—would you pick up the phone, Vicks, I know you’re there.” A long pause followed; Vex leaned out of the bathroom. “Okay, okay, I get it. You’re upset. Just—well, if you get over it—give your old dad a call, he misses you.”

The machine beeped softly and its green light began to blink.

She shook her head; it probably was too much to think that he’d apologize.

Vex passed into the living room to finish preparations for her Christmas Eve day.

On the couch lay a velvet sack of gifts, each one meticulously crafted by hand, gingerly placed into the same sized box no larger than a softball, and then wrapped with care. Wrapped with various Halloween wrapping paper: bats, black cats, misty moons, leafless trees, witches, and jack-o’-lanterns. Vex didn’t think herself without at least some sense of humor about subverting the season; she even tied them each with alternating black and orange ribbon bows.

Each one the same and each one a very special gift for a very different special person.

It was time to go to work, in more than one sense.

Vex donned her newest find: a black Santa cap with white trim and tassel.

The door opened into the brilliant noon sun, the sound of birds chirping, and the humming rush of traffic.

“The bones of children who stare,” she snickered at a pair of

kids who goggled at her. The pair bolted when she cocked her head.

Vex shrugged. If they hadn’t run she might have given them presents; though, she doubted they would follow the rules: the presents had to remain unopened until midnight, else the magic spent into them would be wasted.

The taxi’s engine purred happily at the turn of her key. She closed the door and stashed the sack behind the driver’s seat.

Nathan was deep in conversation when Vex arrived.

He wore his usual spanking-white suit with the gleaming silver crucifix tie-pin and spoke in hushed, consoling tones to a shadowy, crestfallen girl. A moment after the cab stopped, Nathan touched his friend on the shoulder and walked around to the driver’s side. He leaned over and Vex rolled the window down.

“Merry Christmas, Nathan,” she said and handed him one of the wrapped presents.

He took it graciously. “Thank you, Vex,” he said. “I didn’t think that you celebrated the birth of Our Lord, don’t you do…”

“Yule.”

“Yes, that.” He nodded.

Vex shrugged. “Why waste a perfectly good reason to give away presents? Just don’t open it until midnight, okay?”

“Okay,” Nathan said. He scrubbed his brow. “This here is my friend, Emily, the one I told you about yesterday. I need you to drive her to the strip mall between McClintock and Rural on Apache, you know the one. Just drop her off there. I already have someone else who’ll pick her up.”

“Sure thing, tell her to hop on in.”

Nathan waved Emily over and she walked out of the shadow like a woman going to a funeral. Head down, eyes cast aside.

“You have my cell phone should you need me, okay?” Nathan said.

“Yes,” Emily said, “I have it.”

The girl reached for the latch on the back door as Vex shoved the passenger side door open.

“No, no,” she said. “You’re one of Nathan’s friends. This means you ride up front.”

Emily hesitated for a moment, released the latch, and slid into the leather seat with a meek thank-you. From the look of her, Vex figured that the girl wasn’t more than eighteen, and she could have used a refresher in fashion. Her red hair clung to the sides of her skull as if damp and her eyes, sunken with sleepless dark circles, stared listlessly at the floor. She clutched herself with thin arms as if it were too cold, even though the Arizona winter day wasn’t chilly. Instead, a humid blanket of burnt mesquite and tepid air hung over everything.

Nathan watched from the curb a few moments as Vex pulled the cab into gear and drove away. Emily barely reacted.

“Apache, between Rural and McClintock, was it?” Vex asked. The address wasn’t really in need of repeating; Nathan had been extremely clear on this.

Emily only nodded.

The girl didn’t say a word for the entire ten minute drive and Vex did likewise. If Emily didn’t see the need to speak, then Vex wasn’t going to press the matter.

They finally arrived in a parking lot belonging to a strip mall sporting squat, adobe buildings with red signage. Vex parked the cab in one of the open spots and looked over to make sure that her fare was still awake.

She was. Emily took a deep breath, spoke a quiet thank-you, and reached for the handle. As she opened the door, Vex pulled a wrapped gift from her sack and held it out.

“This is for you,” she said. “Just don’t open it until Christmas Eve.”

Half-way out the door, Emily stared at the present as if it were a poisonous snake. The look she gave Vex was one between dismay and curiosity. It took her a moment before she took the gift.

“Um, thanks,” she said. “You...have a good day.”

Emily closed the door without waiting for a reply and trotted

off like a wounded gazelle. Vex only spent a moment to note the business Emily walked to before she put the taxicab in gear and drove away. The strange secrecy and silence from Nathan made sense that moment; Emily was visiting Planned Parenthood.

This was none of her business, so Vex thought on it no further.

She flicked the radio on and within minutes she had a fare to pick up. A bank-droid from Chase Manhattan needed a ride home. At least they generally tipped well; however much Vex didn’t care for the type, they were good for that.

As Vex pulled the cab into the small entrance road between the Chase buildings off of University, she notice her fare standing in the shadow of one of the Palo Verde trees. He nervously smoked the last of a cigarette and growled into a cell phone. He looked exactly like any other number of yuppie, business-rep types carrying a suitcase and wearing a black-tie suit, yet there was something familiar about him.

Vex stared at him long for a moment, trying to connect how she recognized him.

He took her intent stare as something completely different. “East Medlock Drive,” he said. “It’s near Camelback...”

“Ah, yes,” Vex said. “I can find it.”

He smelled like an ashtray dipped in cheap cologne, and though he had closed his cell phone, he still looked harassed and weary.

He and his cell phone remained silent as Vex pulled the cabby back onto University and drove off toward the freeway.

It all came to Vex as she was taking the Highland exit from the Squaw Peak Parkway—*only five minutes away from Medlock*, her mind informed—the familiarity struck her like a cold wave: she knew someone with that same cologne.

“Demon?” she said.

“What?” the young man said. He had half-fallen asleep in the back of the cab.

“Demon Strauss,” Vex said again. “I knew I’d recognized you. You used to run with the Mill kids five, six years ago.”

The man sighed. “I haven’t heard that name in years. Just Mr. Strauss now, Mr. Damon Strauss. Who...were you?”

“Vex,” she said.

“Holy shit,” Strauss said, “it is you... I—I’m sorry I didn’t say anything to you. I barely recognized you.”

“No matter.” Vex shrugged his apology away. “But, where have you been? Nobody has heard from you in six years, dude, and then I find you working at Chase Manhattan?”

A long moment passed and Strauss didn’t reply. The sounds of the road rumbling punctuated the sudden silence. Vex checked the rear-view mirror. He was still alive. Just not talking.

“Yeah,” he said after that long moment. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Say what?”

“How is everyone else?” he asked. “I really miss them, you know. Nightshade, Tepes, Erin...tell me how they’re doing.”

“Well, for the most part they’re still around,” Vex said. “Tepes is gone for the winter, but Nightshade and Erin are both on Mill. I saw them last Saturday. I’m sure they’d like to know how you’re doing too. Why don’t you come visit?”

“I mean, hot damn, you work at the Chase building. You could just walk over and see them.”

He took a deep breath. “Well, you see, that’s the problem. I’m a total sell-out now. I mean, look at me. Suit, tie, goddamn-fucking briefcase.”

“Well, at least you still sound and smell like you used to,” Vex snickered. “The cologne and cigarettes, it’s how I recognized you.”

“They’ll hate me too, won’t they.” He hung his head in dejection. “Please don’t tell them that you’ve seen me.”

Vex shook her head.

“Demon,” she said. “Tell me that you don’t remember this. It was Christmas, and nobody had any money. I mean nobody.

Spanging sucked, my cab was dead, and nobody wanted to try to hitch up to north Phoenix just to go to a shelter. So instead we all camped out under the bridge.”

“I remember,” Strauss said. “Nightshade and you made a stupid Christmas tree out of dead branches and some wood, nailed-together. We lit a little fire where the cops couldn’t see it so we’d be warm.”

Vex smiled. “Tepes bought a forty of that horrible beer and a fifth of cheap rum with the money we’d made all night. We sang Christmas carols to our ugly tree, wrapped up in the cold, warmed by fire and spirits. You wore that same stupid cologne then too.”

She glanced in the rearview mirror and Demon was smiling; he looked less like a mundane and dispirited yuppie, and a lot more like the impassioned street kid she used to know.

“That’s my house over there,” Strauss said. Vex slowed the cab and let it glide to a stop in front of the house he motioned to. Apparently he had been doing extremely well for himself over the past few years. A full-on Christmas tree glittered beyond the window, lights ringed the porch, and a cat sat waiting patiently on the sill.

Strauss put his hand on the door handle.

“Wait a sec, Demon,” Vex said. She reached into the glove box, withdrew her pen and pad, and scratched down an address. She folded it in half and shoved it beneath the ribbon of one of her wrapped gifts. “This year everyone I know is going somewhere. Home Base is holding a Christmas dinner. They could use volunteers and I’m sure that the others would love to see you too.”

“I’ll, uh—I’ll think about it,” he said as he exchanged her note and present for two fifty-dollar bills. “Keep the change and thanks for talking to me. Your whole Christmas story, it reminded me of the Ghost of Christmas Past.”

“Don’t open the gift until near midnight, okay... And, go see them,” Vex urged. “They probably miss you more than I do.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said again and walked away into the welcoming glow of Christmas decorations.

Vex visited the shelter she had spoken of to Strauss to drop off a few more presents and when she returned to her cab, the orange “Call-In” message light was on. So she picked up the receiver.

“Dispatch, this is Victor-Echo, you have something for me? Come back.”

“*Can you get to the south entrance to Metrocenter in twenty? Over.*” the radio crackled.

“Yes, I can,” Vex replied. She could be there in ten if she drove it right. Plus, she needed to visit the Atomic Comics store right near Metro anyway to drop off some wrapped presents.

“*It’s a couple, they can’t seem to decide where they’re going. Somewhere near Tempe. Consider the fare yours then, over.*”

“Got it,” she said. “I’ll be on my way shortly, over and out.”

Vex had just set down the receiver and reached for her fare pad when the radio crackled again.

“*Hey, lady?*”

Vex clicked back in, “Yes, Gary?”

“*Just between you and me. Your dad was in here and he really looks keen to talk to you.*”

“Well, we can’t all get what we want for Christmas,” Vex said.

“*You and the old man get in another fight?*”

“Something like that.”

“*Well, I’ll just tell you how it is then, lady,*” Gary said through the distant static of the radio. “*I think maybe you should talk to him, but I’m not getting involved. Over and out.*”

“Thanks, Gary. Over and out.”

Vex chewed her lip as she pulled the cab into gear and drove away towards the newest destination. Her dad was nothing if not persistent, she had to grant him that, but schoolyard tactics were just not going to cut it.

II

Vex’s fares stood exactly where Dispatch said they’d be, and

appeared exactly as they were billed: a couple.

The most striking thing about them, she noted, was how different they were. The guy opened the door for his lady and she slid into the back of the cab first.

A petite Indian woman, her face and hands were brown as bark, and her smile a white line on her face; she wore a brilliant red sari, wrapped like autumn foliage around her small frame. On her forehead, just above the bridge of her brow, a golden framed jewel glistened. Vex could make out tiny filaments arrayed like peacock feathers haloing it.

The woman slid over to permit her companion, a strapping lad with a lantern jaw and short cut red hair. In strange comparison to the woman, he wore a penguin-tuxedo with silver cufflinks with an expensive silk tie.

They sat close together and looked as if they had just been dry cleaned and laundered along with their dressy clothes.

An instant after the door closed, Vex discerned exactly the trouble here: these two were all dressed up with nowhere to go.

The man started to speak, “Red Lobster on Alma School—”

“—Jewel of the Crown in Scottsdale Mall,” the woman finished.

Vex took her hand off of the gearshift and turned to look at them. Earlier on the radio, Gary framed the situation better: all dressed up with two places to go.

“I thought we had settled this,” he said while putting his hands to his temples as if to ward off a headache.

“I’ll not be gawked at like some exotic fish by your relations, Jake,” the woman replied and put her hands up in defeat.

“Christmas dinner?” Vex asked as she pulled the taxi into gear. “Well, those are in two different cities, but I can start driving in that direction. It’s your dime.”

The woman nodded, “Yes, yes, that is good.”

Jake shrugged and rolled his eyes. “How about we let her decide,” he said. “Perhaps it’ll clear the air for both of us.”

The woman huffed and looked at Vex in the rearview mirror. “My name is Lalita. This is my fiancé, Jake, and I am so sorry to drag you into this.”

“No problem, miss,” Vex replied, “sometimes it just comes with the job. I’ll just get within the vicinity of them both and you can decide from there. Nice name, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Lalita said.

Silence descended for a while and Vex let them sit quietly as she took the freeway down to Tempe and decided on a course. The sound of the road seemed to calm Jake’s nerves and he took his fingers from his head. Soon, the couple fell into the rhythm of a quiet conversation.

Vex watched them in the mirrors. She could see a tightness to Jake’s jaw, and an intensity to Lalita’s gaze. Jake sat there trying to sell her of something, and she wasn’t buying. That eventually petered out when Lalita crossed her arms and Jake’s fingers once again rested on his temples.

Less than five minutes until her intended destination, Vex decided it was time to break the new silence: “Family troubles is it?”

“If I may,” Jake said, Lalita gestured for him to continue. “Our families aren’t exactly happy about our relationship, well, to put it lightly my family hates it, and her family just stares at me like I’m their next meal. They put off this air of superiority...as if I’m not good enough.”

“You matter more to me than their opinion,” Lalita said. “You know that.”

Another long pause stretched out as streetlights whisked by.

Jake nodded. “So it’s like this. We have to choose. Dinner with her family or with mine.” He turned to look at his fiancé and said, “I do love you dearly, but I cannot stand your father’s eyes on me.”

“And your mother makes me want to crawl in a hole and pull it in after me,” replied Lalita.

“I don’t know if I want to put you through that,” Jake said.

He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “Alright, I’ll go to your dinner. I understand it’s important to you, and your family cannot get together often because of all the businesses they run.”

“There’s a thing that I’ve learned about parents,” Vex said. Both pairs of eyes flashed to her. “They don’t always know what’s best for their children, especially their grown up children. We run our own lives now, make our own decisions, choose our own loves.

“I can tell that you love each other quite dearly...but you’re in love for each other; not for the sake of your parents. Would you consider that there’s another option?”

Lalita tilted her head to one side; Vex could hear her earrings jangling. “What do you mean?”

The turn-signal came on and the cabby swung into a parking-lot.

“You said that I could choose,” Vex said. “I give you Haji Baba. I like it a lot. It’s a nice, cozy restaurant. Indian cuisine. And the best part about it is that there’s no family here to get in your way. Christmas dinner may have to do with being with family, but surely you two are family now. Why not spend a romantic evening together?”

“Without the loud uncles or judging eyes. Don’t choose between your families.”

The parking break ratcheted and Vex turned to look at them. After a long moment Lalita’s intent expression turned into a smile.

“Yes.” She looked at Jake. “I think that is good. Just you.”

“You’re okay with that?” Jake asked.

She answered by opening her door and stepping out into the chilly air and deepening twilight. Jake followed suit.

Vex rolled down her window. She traded Lalita’s payment for a pair of wrapped gifts.

“I like your—” Vex reached up and touched the center of her own forehead just above the eyebrows.

“My bindi,” Lalita said and she laid her dark hand gently on Vex’s for a moment. Jake waited impatiently at the door to the restaurant, Lalita looked at him for a moment, and then back to Vex.

“*Āp se milkar bahut khusi hai.* Thank you, and thank you.”

“Just consider me the Ghost of Christmas Present,” Vex said.

Lalita smiled as Vex drove away.

Vex counted her good fortunes that the last fare left her in Tempe. As twilight deepened the sky from a dark blue into a somber slate black full of igniting stars, Vex went around visiting all the usual haunts of her friends. She mostly checked the bus stops as the good routes would stop in a few hours and the street kids would already be making their way where they were headed.

Two hours passed without a fare, Vex refueled the taxi, ferried a couple of friends short distances through Tempe, and lightened her load of presents. Only two remained in her sack, but no new faces were showing themselves to receive them.

At almost time to clock out the orange radio-message light lit on the console. Next to it followed a code indicating that it was Vex’s father that wanted to talk. She spent a long moment staring at the receiver; he could have just picked up a radio and called out. He didn’t need to send a “CALL ME” notice on the console. The lateness of the day and the weariness of her spirit spent most of Vex’s ire that day already.

She set her hand on the receiver and pulled it from the hook—

Presently, something started singing. It was a soft sound, barely discernable over the idle noise of the engine.

Not singing exactly, Vex realized. Instead, it was the beepy tones of MIDI music. The doleful tune of Silent Night echoed through the taxi. She furrowed her brow and set the receiver down. The sound seemed to originate from somewhere inside the cab.

After a cursory search of the passenger seat’s cushions, Vex discovered the culprit: a cell phone.

Green glowing letters on the front screen read: NATHANIEL NICKELS. Vex only knew one Mr. Nickels.

Vex flipped the phone open and answered. “Nathan?”

“Em—” Nathan began; then paused a moment. “*Vex?* What

are you— What is— No, never mind, is Emily there with you? I need to speak with her urgently.”

“I dropped Emily off a long time ago,” Vex said. “She must have forgotten the cell phone in the cab.”

“Oh, my Lord,” he breathed. Vex could almost hear him go weak in the knees.

“Nathan, what’s wrong?”

“Well,” came his breathless reply. “Well, I just received a frantic phone call from a mutual friend who tells me that he was just the recipient of an equally frantic phone call from Emily. On a payphone somewhere near ASU campus. She’s distraught. Extremely upset, you understand—

“No, I suppose you don’t. I hate to break a confidence but—”

“Whoa, slow down a moment,” Vex said. “I am near ASU. I can take drive and look for her.”

“She went in for a test,” Nathan continued, “that’s why I sent her with you. I figured that it wouldn’t look strange. A taxicab. Emily has been extremely depressed lately. It’s been hard to miss the signs. I shouldn’t have left her alone. It’s been hours...”

Vex’s head swam. She turned the engine off and pondered. “Okay,” she said.

“No, it’s not okay,” Nathan said. “It can’t be. I left her alone—”

“Nathan.”

“Yes?”

“Shut up for a second,” Vex said.

“Got it.”

“I’m going to put the phone down. It’ll just take a moment.”

A long pause followed by some deep breaths answered; and then finally he said, “Okay.”

She set the phone down on the seat, leaned across the entire cab, stretching herself out like a snake, and fished through the glove compartment. Therein she roughly shoved aside a multitude of gas

receipts, several broken pencils, and no small number of empty gummy worm packages, until her fingers closed on what she sought: a small bundle of incense sticks.

The lighter she scooped up from the change holder, and she plucked a fine, red hair off the passenger side seat. She'd had only one passenger in that seat since the cab had been cleaned last so it rated to belong to Emily.

Vex turned towards the far window and better balanced herself against the steering wheel. The position felt uncomfortable, wedged between seat and wheel, but it would have to do. One hand wrapped tightly around one side of the bundle and the other on the lighter, Vex cleared her mind and focused on her memory of the meek, college-age girl she'd seen only that morning.

"Show to me what I seek," Vex said as she lit the lighter and ran it under the center of the incense sticks. They ignited with the flame. She let them burn for a moment; then blew them out with a puff. The pungent scent of Black Forest Waltz filled the air with a roiling cloud of intoxicating fragrance. "Cast aside the veil, through the keyhole I peek."

Vex held her eyes open through the stinging smoke and savagely rent the sticks in twain. Twirling orange embers flurried in a blizzard of firefly light... *A girl, Emily, sat at the edge of a peach and adobe brick. The air felt cold against her tearstained cheeks. She sobbed. In front of her seemed a precipice that fell away unto a well lit sidewalk; the stars twinkled ever watchful above.*

"Nathan!" Vex shouted, dropping the incense. "Shit." She stomped out the still-glowing embers. Her numbed fingers found the cell phone. "Call the police now."

"What?"

"Your girl, she's on top of the Life Sciences Tower and she's going to jump. Hang up the phone and call the police."

Vex didn't give him a chance to reply; she snapped the phone shut and started the engine.

The Life Science Tower loomed over the rest of ASU, its

floors alternated light and dark like a vertical piano, and it wore a glowing glass case atop its head. There were more than eight floors to the top—Vex had been to the eighth floor with Nathan before—an elevator inside, and stairs that ran up the entire face of the building, except that the stairs would be locked this time of night. Something about a girl who had committed suicide by jumping from the top floor some years before.

The police would right now be coaxing the story out of Nathan, and trying to piece together what was going on between self-flagellating phrases. Vex understood, though, that it was Emily's status that became key. The stairs would take too long, even though she could defeat the locks—they were only mechanical. The elevators were not an option; the electronics could not be lock-picked.

Vex popped the trunk and pulled out a long ash stave. The bottom had been wrapped with several layers of dried sage and expertly bound with fine twine. The trunk clicked back in place as she stood the stave upright, sage-wrapped end down, and set her boot into a notch carved just for that purpose just above the sage; her fingers glided over the intricate magical runes and sigils carved near the tip.

In case of locked stairs and elevators: fly.

III

The air around the greenhouse atop the tower moaned with a bitter howl and wintry teeth prickled at Emily's skin as she stood next to the edge. The fear of falling wasn't so strong now, just another certainty under her skin. Christmas, what a perfect time to discover someone's broken body sprawled out on the sidewalk. She wondered if anyone would think to why, or maybe even wonder what really happened.

The sound of footsteps crunching against gravel brought Emily's attention back towards the cold glow of the greenhouse. The last thing she wanted to see was another person. Emily hugged her

bare arms to herself and lowered her eyes as not to see, but she had already recognized the darkly clad figure striding smoothly towards her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to ask you?” Vex said as she held her empty hands apart in a gesture of harmlessness. She had left the sage-wrapped stave leaning against one of the glass greenhouse windows.

Emily shifted closer to the edge and wrapped her arms tighter. It was a conscious motion, rebelling against Vex’s presence. “Don’t try to stop me,” she said. “I’ve already decided.”

In response, Vex sat down. “Oh, I wouldn’t try to stop you if you jumped. I believe that everyone has a right to choose when and how they’re going to die. I’m just here to talk.”

“What?” Emily said. She turned toward Vex and lifted her head. “If you’re not here to talk me down, then why are you here?”

“Well,” Vex said. “Someone that I care about dearly also cares about you.”

“Nate.” She said the name with an air of casual dismissal. “He’s nice and helpful and all, but he doesn’t get it. He doesn’t understand.”

“Tell me about it,” Vex said. “I’ve been friends with him since high school.”

Emily wiped a tear from her cheek and stared at Vex’s dark silhouette. With a precarious uncertainty she lowered herself into a crouch and wrapped her arms around her legs. Her eyes looked off into nothing.

“Aren’t you going to ask?”

“Ask what?”

“Why I’m standing on a ledge, ready to jump,” the girl said. “I figure it’s the thing on everyone’s mind. I mean, someone had to know. You found me, after all. I guess I’m too predictable.”

Vex picked up a bit of gravel and turned it in the light. “It is a little melodramatic, I have to agree. Does it have to do with where I

dropped you off this morning?”

“Yes,” Emily said. “Nate said you wouldn’t tease me about it, and you didn’t. Still, I had you stop across the parking lot. It hurts so much inside, you know. Like someone is clenching a fist on my heart and I can’t stop them. I know that people like Nate care, but... It’s not enough, it’s never enough.”

Emily wiped another tear from her cheek and continued, “My boyfriend—I mean, my ex-boyfriend is a lying bastard. He still won’t tell the truth.” She nearly choked on the next words. “I had to hear from his little girl-toy that he’d cheated on me. Called me a few days ago, I wish I hadn’t picked up the damn phone. Said she felt obligated to tell me.

“What a way to find out.”

“That your boyfriend cheated on you?”

“Yeah,” Emily said. She clenched her eyes closed and huddled tighter against the cold. “And...and, well that she’s—that I... I mean.”

“Take your time. I’m patient,” Vex said. She stood up slowly, slid one arm out of her trench coat, then the other, set it on the ground a few paces in front of her, and walked back a few paces. “You look cold. Have my coat.”

The girl stared at the black trench for a long moment, but eventually something won out in her head and she walked over.

“Thank you, you’re very kind,” she said as she pulled it on. Instead of walking back to the ledge, she sat down in front of Vex. “I’m such a little shit, you know. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no problem,” Vex said. “We all go through hard breakups. I know that I’ve had my share of boyfriends cheat on me. Just know that I like that coat, hey, don’t go jumping wearing it.”

Emily snickered. “Sure, I can do that,” she said. “But, I guess Nate didn’t tell you why I was at the clinic today.” Vex shook her head. “I have HIV, you know: AIDS. Well, no, I mean I might have it. I went in for a test today. My boyfriend’s little friend—the one he was cheating on me with—that’s why she called me. Apparently they

found out a week ago that he has it...didn't have the guts to tell me himself.

"So now I might have it myself. What a world, huh? What a jerk."

"Man, that's harsh," Vex said. "How long till you know?"

"Two weeks... I figured I don't want to know, you know. I mean, I've seen what it does to people, turns them into wasted husks, and no sex, and who would ever love me? My boyfriend cheated on me and now it's a death sentence. Better to end it quick."

Vex nodded.

"Let me just pose you something though," she said. "HIV or no, you have people who care about you. It's Christmas Eve, you should be out with friends and family, making jolly, not sitting out in the cold with little old me on top of a building. And even if you go back in two weeks and discover you're infected, you'll have more Christmases.

"This is not a path you have to walk alone. Heck, Nathan went out of his way to make your visit to the clinic as inconspicuous as possible, he's looking out for you in a way I've never seen him do for anyone before, girl." Vex tossed the bit of gravel overhead; it sailed through the air and vanished over the lip of the ledge. "But if you decided to jump off, here and now, well...you make that journey alone and there won't be any more Christmas dinners on the other end."

"I guess," Emily said, she wiped her eyes with the sleeve of the trench. "I don't want to have AIDS, you know..." She let her voice trail off and she stared at her nails. "You know..."

"How about you make a plan," Vex said. "Why don't you call your ex every morning and bitch him out until you get those results. Hey, I'd do it."

"Hah, no. I don't think it'd do anything to him."

"Yeah, well, I was thinking about you."

"Yeah."

Vex shifted and discovered that she'd unconsciously crossed

her arms against the winter air.

"I'm getting a little cold, how about you?" Vex said.

Emily's eyes twinkled when she looked up. "I don't feel much like jumping anymore. I guess you can have your coat back."

Vex rose and helped Emily stand.

"Do you think that you can walk? Nathan is worried about you... His cell is in my cab. Lets go talk to him. You and me."

"Sure."

The trip down was slower than the trip up; during, Vex supported Emily with one arm and carried her stave in the other. The elevators were set that they wouldn't go up above certain floors after ten at night, but they would gladly take passengers from the top all the way down to the first floor.

"Nice hat, by the way," Emily said on the way down. "Thank you for that present, I have it in my pocket."

"Just call me the Ghost of Christmas Future."

When the doors opened at the bottom, the police were there, as was a camera crew. Vex delivered Emily into their waiting arms; she went meekly, hunched over, but willingly. For the most part everyone ignored Vex but for a few waved off questions—they probably had a description of Emily from Nathan.

The reporter, an overzealous ASU student with a police radio, spoke briefly with Emily as the police walked her out to a car, but when he turned the attention of the cameras to Vex, she was gone. Later on, a weary and curious film student would examine the footage: watch Vex smile, turn and walk behind a pillar, but not emerge from the other side.

It was near eleven and Damon Strauss, a.k.a. Demon Strauss, sat alone in his small house watching FOX News. It told a tiny story about a girl who almost killed herself and he caught a glimpse of Vex in the background. He unwrapped his present and revealed a snow globe with a black cityscape as its background.

Without another thought, he grabbed his keys and drove out to the shelter. Upon his arrival he was greeted by all his friends with

hugs, smiles, and tears. Nightshade hugged him long and hard. “Yeah, it sucked donkey’s balls back then; but at least we had good friends to spend the time with.”

Another snow globe sat on a mantle, next to a guttering candle in a dimly lit house in Tempe. Jake and Lalita held each other close and slow-waltzed to instrumental Christmas music in their own living room. There, together, in the night with no loud uncles or judging eyes.

Vex stopped her cab by the side of the road under a burnt out streetlight along Camelback Road. The engine’s grumble gave way to the quiet of the night when she turned the key and pushed open the door. She had forgotten to get her coat back from Emily, but she still had Nathan’s cell phone.

The hood of the cab was warm as Vex climbed onto it and sat with a snow globe in her lap.

She looked out across the city, the lights of the roads and parks gave the buildings a distinct relief against the half-light of the city sky. Vex held up the snow globe, the cityscape within closely matched the cityscape. She turned the globe; flakes fluttered and swirled around the buildings.

The temperature began to drop as the magic took hold. To her eyes the clouds shimmered momentarily. If most of the people opened their presents at the right time, it would be enough to trigger the magic.

Silent Night sang out from her pocket. Vex pulled Nathan’s cell phone out and looked at the screen. Text Message, it informed her.

Vex flipped the phone open. A message displayed there, sent by Nathan: Thank you for what you did. Have a Merry Vexing Christmas.

She smiled and cleared the message. After a long pause, she punched in a phone number, hit SEND, and put the phone to her ear.

“Yo, this is Vince Harrow.”

Have a Merry Vexing Christmas

Vex smiled. “Hey, da, someone said you wanted to talk.”

Flakes of snow began to fall from the clouds above. Gently at first, then in a quiet torrent. Barely enough fell to cover the ground, cactus, and buildings with more than a sheen of white; but those who woke up early enough witnessed a white Christmas in Phoenix.



Kyt Dotson