



Lucynda Storey

Mistletoe Wish

By Lucynda Storey

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Contemporary Romance

Mistletoe Wish

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to the men and women of the United States Air Force and, particularly CS-16, The Proud Chicken Hawks of the USAF Cadet Wing. Not to be forgotten is my family, the people who put up with my hare-brained ideas and my erratic hours. I love you.

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Chapter One

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Mitchell pushed the thumbtack through the notice and into the wood frame outside his office door. Placed at eye level on the frame, no one could make an excuse they hadn't seen the notice because the open door prevented their reading of it. The notice, printed in block style and all caps stated implicitly to his subordinates his feelings about celebrating the upcoming holidays.

THIS AREA HAS BEEN DESIGNATED AS A CHRISTMAS-FREE ZONE. THERE WILL BE NO: BULBS, WREATHS, REINDEER, CHRISTMAS CARDS, STOCKINGS, TINSEL, SAPPY MUSIC OR ANY OTHER HOLIDAY TRAPPINGS.

He didn't mind the "bah humbug" reputation he'd earned over the last seven years. In fact, the status pleased him. People in the office and throughout the squadron left him alone during the holiday season, which was exactly how he liked it. The "holidays" were for families and cherished warmth with a lover. Alex didn't have either and he sure as hell didn't need an in-your-face reminder.

Of course, the shocking block letters, bolded so they stood out on the notice, drew most readers' attention away from the tiny print along the bottom edge of the notice. Preceded by an asterisk were the words, "Mistletoe will, however, be considered on a strictly individualized, case-by-case basis."

Alex entered his office and let the door swing shut of its own accord. The tiny snick let him know he was alone for the time being with his thoughts.

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In the two weeks since he'd arrived at Buckley Air Force Base in Aurora, Colorado all he'd done was shake hands and attend meetings to ease the transition of leadership in the group. He was impatient to get his proverbial house in order. He picked up the phone and buzzed his assistant. "Master Sergeant Morgan, I want a meeting for the day after tomorrow with all my officers. No exceptions. 0700."

"Yes, Sir."

Being a leader meant maintaining authority, as well as demanding, receiving, and giving respect. His subordinates weren't about to be his buddies, but he didn't want to be known as a hard ass tool either. A brunch style breakfast meeting would help break the ice and set their professional relationship off on the correct foot. "And Sergeant Morgan, see if you can get the mess to provide breakfast pastries, juice, and coffee."

"I'll get right on it, Sir."

The latest issue of the base rag, the Mile High Guardian, had his face featured on the cover page. Everyone on base knew he was here.

Not once had *she* called.

Major Meredith Wilson Hunter.

Disappointment filled his gut like stale rations. He strode to his office window and stared across the tarmac. Did he really think she'd call after all this time? Hell yes, his mind bellowed, but his heart knew differently. He'd hurt her, badly. He'd left her without a word of explanation and by the time he'd been able to call months later, she'd married his best friend.

Once he'd gotten over the initial shock, anger set in. How could either of them have betrayed him that way? He'd pounded his fury into a body bag at the boxing ring and eventually accepted she was with Jim. After all, how was

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Merry supposed to know how he felt when he'd repeatedly told her their relationship was purely physical? At the time, he'd been too young to reveal the depth of his feelings, but also, too afraid of his dominating tendencies.

A bright shaft of eastern light stabbed through the window. Alex turned from the paned glass, sat at his desk, and methodically began learning about his subordinates by studying each individual's file.

Several hours and phone calls later, a buzz jarred him from his studies. He jerked from his perusal of the personnel files and snatched the phone. "Yes."

"Major Hunter to see you, Sir."

Alex felt his eyes go wide. Excitement wrapped around him like a strangling necktie and he resisted the urge to loosen his. After the long weeks of waiting, she was finally here. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to sound calm and responded to Sergeant Morgan. "Send her in."

He ran a hand through his short-cropped brown hair, stood from behind his desk, and adjusted his tiepin. Why would the base commander send his adjutant? Why wouldn't he call himself? He crossed the room in time to greet her at the door. "Major Hunter."

"I'm sorry for the loss of your husband." He nearly choked on the words.

"Thank you, Sir." Her voice didn't reveal a trace of emotion.

It was difficult to keep his voice calm as he looked at the woman before him. The years had given her a graceful maturity. Her hair was a luxurious mink brown twisted behind her head and kept off her collar. Would it still feel silky if he stroked it? Would the expression in her vibrant green eyes warm at his touch the way he remembered seeing them hazed

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in passion? For long seconds he couldn't tear his gaze from hers.

"Colonel, I took a chance you'd be here. I'm sorry I didn't schedule an appointment." Her voice was breathy, as if she too had been remembering one of their many trysts. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

He shook his head and gestured to a chair across from his desk. "Please, sit down, Major."

She sat in the blue vinyl chair and crossed her legs at the ankle. They were still as shapely as he recalled. An unbidden memory of those legs wrapped around his waist as he pounded his length into her and the sounds of their ragged breaths and sweaty skin slapping together filling the bedroom assaulted him. He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat and seated himself behind his metal desk. "To what do I owe this visit, Major Hunter?"

"I've come to ask a favor, Sir."

His eyebrows lifted in question. "Go on."

"Staff Sergeant Myers had a heart attack late last night."

If he'd had a heart attack, her melodic, soothing voice would speed his recovery. "I'm sorry to hear that, Major. What does this have to do with your favor?"

"Sergeant Myers was the only available male in our squadron."

She piqued his curiosity. "Okay, I'll bite. What does the Sergeant's availability and heart attack have to do with me ... precisely?"

"Every year, our squadron hosts the wing Christmas party we hold for the NCO's kids. Sergeant Myers had agreed to play the Santa Claus."

His mind started thinking of the possible favors she might ask of him, what he might ask of her in return. No. He had no

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intention of complicating their initial meeting by fantasizing about making love to the beautiful Major. He'd settle for being in her presence. If what she wanted was complicated, perhaps he could use the time working together with her to resolve some of their history. He steepled his fingers together. "And?"

"Colonel Gray suggested this might be a good way for you to meet more of the non-commissioned officers in our wing."

"What might be a way to meet the non-coms?"

She blinked as if his question surprised her.

"Why you being Santa, of course."

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Chapter Two

Alex snorted. "Me? Santa?"

His sarcastic voice didn't inspire confidence in her hastily scrambled plan. It hadn't been her idea to see him. When Merry contacted Colonel Gray he'd suggested Alex replace Myers. As far as Merry was concerned, gargling with broken glass would have been more enjoyable than having to face Alexander Mitchell and request a favor.

"Did you happen to read the warning on the door outside?" he continued.

Merry had read the notice stabbed into the wood frame just outside the office. Nobody could be that much of a wet blanket. No music, no cards, no expressions of good will?

Except for that itty, bitty comment about mistletoe, the words she saw posted didn't match her memories of Alex. The man whose life goal had been finding the best time that could be had.

Damn, even after seven years, she couldn't think of him as a group VC. It didn't feel right; they'd always been equals. She'd had intimate relations with the man for crying out loud, several months of hot, sweaty, orgasmic intimate relations.

All those years ago, she'd managed to memorize nearly every inch of his delectable body. From what she saw of him today, he still kept it in damn good shape. The tightening of her nipples echoed an approving, traitorous agreement.

"I really need your help with this Alex, um, excuse me, Colonel." Crap, she hadn't intended to use his first name.

He pushed away from his desk, stood, and leaned against

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the front edge right in front of her. Momentarily, his crotch was in her direct line of sight until he adjusted his stance. A crotch with a bulging erection contained in those dark blue service trousers. A shiver of appreciation ran through her, and, for a second, she was thrilled her physical presence had as much an effect on him as his did on her.

In fewer than five minutes he'd awakened her dormant sexual awareness, drawing forth the buried memories of their passion laden summer, and filling her with the unreasonable urge to take him right here in his office. She swallowed back a frown, forced her eyes to look into his face, and kept her lips in a straight line, trying to shove back the memory of how he'd hurt her and of the physical response he managed to provoke.

Seven years ago, she'd been seriously wounded by the way he left her. Two months went by without any contact. No one would give her information about his whereabouts. For a long time, the pain burned like acid eating its way into her heart. Jim Hunter had seen the pain and ridden like the proverbial white knight to her rescue. Through the long dark months of her life, Jim stayed by her side and never demanded payment for his fealty.

Much had happened over the years to mitigate the loss of Alex and later, Jim. Her life was filled with taking care of the most precious thing she'd ever done, the one person who consumed her heart with joy, the greatest gift a woman could receive—her daughter, Cassie.

"No need to use rank protocol within these walls, Merry. We knew each other far too well to be constrained by titles."

Another erotic image of making love with Alex leapt to mind like a temperature spike in the engine of an F-16. He'd demanded she be on top of him, riding him to sweaty, sated completion. That particular session had been memorable.

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Alex had run out of condoms and they continued acting on their intense attraction to one another making love in every room of his rented house. Yeah, they did know each other well, at least in the flesh.

Seven years ago, a physical relationship was all he'd needed. Merry had accepted it, despite the fact that she'd fallen head over heels for him almost from their first intimate contact. He'd been funny, energetic, and open-minded. Falling for him had been incredibly easy.

He'd also been the worst mistake of her life, one she rued for seven long years. Their ancient history flowed like a swift spring snowmelt into Clear Creek Canyon. She wouldn't be swept into the flood of emotions sitting here in his office created. She kept her voice cool and professional.

"You're right, Alex. Thank you."

He stood straighter and extended his hand to her as if they were signing an accord. It was as large and as strong as she remembered and it was easy to imagine the strong curve of his muscular arms and the way he'd once held her.

Alex had won a small victory because of her faux pas. She accepted his gesture, the shake a physical concession of the first volley between them.

The sexual heat he exuded seeped into her as he shook her hand. Her breath quickened. There was nothing untoward in his grasp, but the intensity of it nearly overwhelmed her. The memories shot into her heart with the unerring accuracy of William Tell. She withdrew her hand from his and looked up to meet his hungry gaze. She fought to keep from slipping into the fire his eyes alone ignited.

"So, will you?" Her breathy voice betrayed the sexual longing his touch created. Thank God Alex couldn't hear the pounding of her heart or feel the flutter in her stomach.

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"Will I what? Play your Santa?"

Did she detect a hint of suggestion in those words?

"Yes. Alex, will you be my Santa?" She nearly laughed. The words coming from her lips sounded bizarre—almost as if she were asking him to be her Sugar Daddy.

"I haven't made up my mind, Merry." He paused and looked thoughtful. "When do you want this charade to happen? If you read the notice, you know I'm not into the whole Christmas thing."

"This Saturday."

He returned to his seat behind the desk and flipped through a calendar. "As in four days from now?"

There was a sort of teasing, shocked sound in his voice. Was he playing a cat and mouse game with her? She tried to think what he would say or do to win an advantage. He was a stranger in a community that he once knew well. There was no disadvantage to him discovering and building positive relationships with his subordinates. So, why didn't he just say yes?

"Yes. I want you the Saturday before Christmas." She nearly clapped a hand over her mouth. Why did she have to phrase it that way? Would he think she was making a sexual overture to him?

He considered her words and she felt as if she'd stepped into a quagmire of her own creation.

"I can see there are advantages to me in taking on this acting job, but, it is on Saturday."

The serious tone of his voice reminded her of a mountain lion's growl. His time was too precious to spend playing Santa to a bunch of kids he didn't know. He was going to turn her down and disappointment blanketed her mind like a dark cloud.

"I'd hoped to take care of some *personal* items."

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The way he emphasized personal items shot an unexpected surge of jealousy into Merry. God, was he married? She shot a glance at his left hand. There was no indication there of marriage, but then again, a lot of military men didn't wear wedding bands. Dear God, if he wasn't married, he'd moved with the speed of a hunting feline to have a woman waiting off-base already.

She tamped down her spate of irrational jealousy and focused on the task at hand; getting Alex to play Santa. "Other than the fact your participation would go a long way with impressing Colonel Gray, I would truly appreciate it, Alex."

He raised a dark eyebrow. "Just how appreciative would you be?"

The question was rife with sexual innuendo. How thankful could she be? Merry was not willing to jump into the sack with him again, not until they aired out some rank issues that still lay like putrid refuse between them.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully.

He gave her one of the charming smiles she remembered so well from their past. Anxiety dropped into her stomach like a B-52's payload. *Here it comes. The deal I won't be able to turn down.*

"I'll play Santa for you on one condition." His suave words reinforced her concern.

After seven years, she'd gotten over her anger with Alex, had moved on with her life, and developed her own brand of self-reliance. She was up for the challenge, wasn't she? "Name it."

A smile spread over his face, the one he always had right before he possessed her body with his. "I want all of Friday night alone with you. From the moment I get off duty until it's time for my Santa performance."

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Merry gazed into his eyes. Mirth danced in the brown depths, but there was an underlying seriousness there too. She hadn't expected him to make time alone with her one of his stipulations.

The room seemed to close in on her and the air grew unbearably hot. The nape of her neck dampened with unexpected perspiration. She fought the urge to nibble on her nail as she considered his counter proposal.

"What do you say, Meredith? How bad do you really want me?"

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Chapter Three

Alex couldn't resist smiling. The last two days had been exceptional. He'd spoken with Merry on Wednesday to arrange his Santa suit fitting. Thursday, she'd been at the fitting, even cinching the wide black belt around his pillow-stuffed, Santa girth as she nodded her approval of his garb.

After closing and locking his office door, Alex headed toward his vintage Porsche. The strong wind blew bitter cold across the runway and he quickly donned his Air Force issued parka. His coat having kept him warm in the frigid Afghan nights had as many miles on it as he'd added to the Porsche.

The car started easily and Alex let the engine hum a few minutes to warm up. He pushed aside the melancholy memories that threatened to ruin his good mood. Right now, he was on his way to make amends with the only woman he'd never been able to forget, the only woman he'd ever loved.

He exited the manned Mississippi security gate and followed the directions Merry had given him to her condo. Five minutes later, he pulled into the community and scanned the homes for the building number she'd given him.

Anticipation mingled with nerves as he parked the car near the condo she'd indicated. He felt as nervous as he had on his first date when he was fifteen. Merry would either accept what he had to say or reject him. And he had his apology ready. God knew he'd rehearsed it enough times shaving this morning. No matter what happened he would know he'd done his best to set things right between them.

He declined pushing the doorbell opting instead for a

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firmer knock on the door. A gust of wind slapped at him bringing with it the sting of icy snowflakes. The storm had moved in faster than the forecasters predicted.

A light flashed on above his head and Alex caught a reflection of mistletoe suspended from the overhang of the small porch.

Merry opened the door, a tentative smile on her face. "Hello, Alex. Please, come in."

Soft as silk, her voice washed over him, relieving him of his anxiety. Any concern about her acceptance of him at this moment vanished. He mentally congratulated himself at the breaching of yet another line of her defense.

Standing to the side of the door, Merry allowed him entrance into her home.

Alex took several steps into her foyer. Muted white lights glowed from the hidden recesses of a real evergreen Christmas tree tucked into a corner near a hearth that burned with a steady flame. The mantle, covered with fake snow, held Christmas knick-knacks. Pseudo presents adorned the walls the way he'd seen in some department stores. The harmonious strains of *White Christmas* wafted through the air.

Alex shrugged out of the parka. Maybe he'd claimed victory a little too soon. Any military man worth his weight knew that was a dangerous assumption. Score one for Merry; her living room was decked to the crown molding in holiday glitz. His stomach twisted. Maybe this evening wasn't going to be as easy as he'd initially thought.

"Let me take your coat." Merry stepped around him and took his parka.

Her gentle voice turned his attention from the room to the woman herself. Her silky dark hair was loose, grazing her shoulders and reflected the lights of the Christmas tree. She

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wore black slacks and a soft looking black sweater that caressed the sweet curves of her ample breasts. His heart pounded erratically. Merry was nothing short of stunning. "Wow."

"Wow what?"

He looked around trying to get his bearings, suddenly feeling lost. He glanced upward and spotted a large sprig of mistletoe. All five foot four inches of Merry stood directly beneath it. Hastily, he made a wish, beseeching all the gods of Christmas to be with him as he worked to set right the mess he'd made of his relationship with Merry.

"This." He gestured toward the warm room and then paused. The opportunity was too good to pass. "You."

A blush crept up her neck and lodged in her cheeks.

Alex smiled. "Do you know much about the mistletoe you're under?"

Her eyes widened and she started to move away.

Alex laid a hand on her arm and stepped closer to her. "Not very sporting to get caught under the kissing bough and then try to escape."

She clutched his dark blue parka against her chest as if it were a shield. "I wasn't trying to escape."

Her words were breathless and her discomfiture inexplicably intoxicated him. He lifted an eyebrow, but then decided to postpone his challenge of her statement. "You didn't answer my question, Merry."

She took a deep breath and exhaled with a shudder that drew his attention back to her chest.

"I know that when a couple stands under it they're supposed to kiss. But, I don't think that's a good idea...for us, I mean." She cleared her throat and swallowed. "Did you know that mistletoe is poisonous to ingest?" Her voice grew

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stronger. "And Norse mythology suggests Balder was killed with an arrow made of mistletoe. Anything else?"

"If you know the Balder legend, then surely you know that a kiss is required to pay homage to the love the mistletoe represents."

He didn't give her an opportunity to refuse him. The lure of her called to his guilt-ridden soul. He had to touch her, taste her, or crash and burn like a downed F-16. As gently as he could, he pulled Merry close to him and let her scent surround him. Her eyes warmed with wary anticipation.

Entwining his fingers in her hair, he lowered his head and lightly caressed her lips. Her breath mingled with his, the feel of her mouth on his, the heat of her flushed skin filled him with a joy and expectancy he hadn't felt in years. Her full lips melted beneath his causing a million memories to rush back like a soothing spring breeze. The feelings threatened to overpower his tightly held self-control. No, he couldn't give in to the raging desire coursing through his veins. Keeping a tight rein on his emotions, he pulled back before he embraced the need racing through his blood.

He fought to keep the sound of yearning from his voice. "Did you know too, that according to Druidic legend, the mistletoe was sacred and considered to have miraculous properties?"

"You've accumulated quite the repertoire of trivia in regards to mistletoe Alex."

Her breathless voice told him she'd felt his craving, too.

He let the strands of her dark, silky hair slide through his fingers. He slipped an arm to her waist. The plush pile of her sweater caressed the palm of his hand as he relished in the feel of her so close to him. Her musky perfume merged with the fresh scent of the tree. He was on sensory overload, his rigid

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systems of self-control failing with each passing second.

A gust of wind slammed against the window of her living room, shaking the glass in its frame. Who would have thought the wind would offer him a reprieve from the barrel roll dive of his emotions. "Weather is nasty. We should probably head out before it gets much worse."

Merry nodded and handed him back his parka. "I'll just turn off the fireplace and grab my coat."

She slipped from the curve of his arm, crossed the room to turn off the gas jets, then returned and opened the front hall closet, pulling out an old but respectable looking black cloth coat.

He slipped into his parka and helped her with her coat. "Thank you, Merry."

She turned to him, the light of confusion in her green eyes. "For what?"

"For not slapping me when I kissed you. For agreeing to see me."

"Oh."

The single word lacked enthusiasm. Maybe she should have slapped him. It would have felt better than that single word uttered in a neutral tone he couldn't decipher. His heart pounded out in Morse code the distress call he understood all too well. May Day!

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Chapter Four

The evening progressed from alternately well to awkward to nerve-wracking and back to well. Merry didn't want to talk about their past, or about the way they'd spent their time alone. She wanted to talk about why Alex had left her and the role Jim played in both their lives, but Alex hadn't supplied her with the opening she needed.

With the possibility of a forty-eight month tour at Buckley, Merry wanted to be able to run into Alex on the base without regrets, remorse, or recriminations. Dinner, although pleasant, hadn't resolved any of their issues.

Maybe if she invited him in they could share a glass of wine and sit in front of the fireplace where they could relax and open up to one another. It was worth the try at any rate.

Alex brought her home and walked her to the front door, firmly grasping her elbow and keeping her steady on the icy sidewalk. He glanced up at the mistletoe she'd hung from the porch ceiling and gave her a quick, hungry kiss.

Even that little touch of their lips had her aching for the intimacy they'd once shared. A hint of gray touched his temple and made him sexier than he needed to be. Over six feet tall, he was an imposing, tall drink of a man. He'd been an addiction she'd never kicked, she realized as she pulled away, her breathing erratic. "Alex, would you like to come in?"

There was more wishful thinking evident in her words than she wanted to hear. Alex didn't need to know how she struggled with her craving to be in his arms again, how her spirit longed to forget how he'd hurt her and just revel in

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feeling him skin to skin; how she needed an explanation to make accepting him reasonable.

"I'd like that." The words rumbled from his chest, the desire in his voice evident.

His reply sounded simple and humble. That boded well, didn't it? It had to. He knew there were things between them that needed answering. You didn't just up and leave a woman and expect to pick up where you left off without some sort of discussion as to what went wrong in the past. That's what Merry told herself anyway.

They entered the condo. "Would you mind turning on the fireplace? I'll get us something to drink."

She went into the kitchen and opened a bottle of Chardonnay. In a matter of minutes, she'd returned to Alex and with slightly shaking hands gave him a glass of wine. Merry set hers down on the edge of the coffee table in front of the sofa. On one end of the couch sat a pile of brightly colored Christmas themed cushions. She grabbed a set, tossed them onto the floor in front of the fireplace, and sat, folding her legs beneath her, willing her heart to stop racing.

Alex followed suit. His nearness should have upset her, but it didn't. They both needed to expunge the secrets weighing on their souls. The blocks between them could be knocked down and bring them closer, or they could continue to add to the wall and make it damn near impenetrable.

She leaned forward and stared into the fire. "Alex," she ventured. "About Jim."

"You don't have to tell me anything about your marriage if you don't want to," he quickly responded. "I had no idea the two of you were so close."

She frowned at the subtle tone of jealousy she heard in his voice. She'd never explained to anyone her relationship with

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Jim. It was time to lance the truth from her blistered soul. "We were and we weren't."

He took a sip of wine, leaned back against the sofa, and frowned. "Sounds like a riddle, Merry."

Her throat closed up and she swallowed hard several times before she could speak. "You introduced me to him, remember? You'd been out riding dirt bikes and had me meet you at the Officer's Club after you got cleaned up. You brought Jim with you."

In her peripheral vision, she saw Alex nod. The movement encouraged her to go on. "I only mentioned it because that first meeting was significant. Jim told me he fell in love at first sight with me that day."

Alex reached out, took her hand, and held it. He stroked the back, his touch sending ripples of awareness over her skin. "I had no idea."

His regretful words mitigated the jealous ones she heard before and gave her comfort.

"I didn't either. He was like that, keeping his emotions bottled up. I didn't see him again until after you'd been gone a month. In retrospect, I think he was trying to protect all of us from our misguided emotions, but most importantly you, Alex."

"Me?"

"He loved you like a brother. He didn't want to hurt you or see you hurt. Some days I think his marrying me was the worst day of his life."

Alex pulled on her arm. "Don't say things like that." His words were fierce and commanding. "Marrying you could never be a mistake."

"You can say that, but I lived with him." Merry fixed him with a sympathetic stare. "He fretted about his perceived

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betrayal of you."

"Jim didn't betray me. I deceived myself by not facing the truth." Alex scooted nearer, his serious gaze intense on her. "I never admitted to you how much I loved you."

"You loved me?" Merry gasped. "All those years ago, you loved me? And you didn't say a word?" Shock and happiness coursed through her like a strong cocktail. She shook her head, suddenly irritated that he'd never told her. "Son of a bitch," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, Merry. At the time I didn't understand my feelings, couldn't find a way to set aside my fear of a permanent relationship and what it might do to you."

She furrowed her brows, her anger climbing like a fever. "Do to *me*?"

"That's another discussion." He paused and stared into her eyes as if he were digging into her soul. "Why did you marry him?"

She broke away from his gaze and stared into the fireplace before she uttered a bitter half-hearted laugh. "He asked me." She shook her head as the memories of her emotional state at the time returned. "I was a basket case, that's what your leaving did to me." She puffed at an errant strand of hair and made it fly off her forehead. "You were gone; hadn't communicated with me for over eight weeks. I was barely able to function not knowing where you were, where you'd been whisked off to, or how long you'd be gone. Jim kept me from succumbing to an inescapable depression."

The twinkling of the Christmas tree lights and the light of the fireplace gave the living room a romantic glow mocking her turmoil. Alex opened his arms to her. "I'm so sorry, Merry."

Willingly, she settled into his arms and laid her head on

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his chest. His heart beat steadily beneath her ear as if offering her a lifeline to grasp. But could she risk having him hurt her once more? There was so much more yet to say and his embrace offered her the security in which to say it. "Before he deployed he talked about you, Alex. He made me promise that if I ever saw you again, I was to let you know he never meant to hurt you."

She felt his voice rumble up from his chest and pulsate into her body. "I know."

Merry glanced up at Alex and watched his lips. His simple words were rife with sad emotion.

"Merry, did you love him?"

This was the crux. The wall that stood between her and Alex had been built of love - her love for Alex, Jim's love for her, and into the mix was Alex's secretly held emotions. Was love enough to bring the brick wall down? She shook her head. "Yes, but not romantically. We never had that sort of relationship. He was simply there for me when I needed someone"

Alex tipped her head toward him. He pulled her close and kissed her.

She shivered beneath the tender onslaught of his lips against hers. Heated passion was in his kiss and it felt damn good. But, she couldn't encourage him, not until she'd shared everything she must with him. She pulled away and placed her hands on his temples, meeting his gaze head-on without flinching. "Alex," she took a deep breath and steadied herself to go on. "There's more."

"Shh, darling. It's enough to know you didn't love him in that way." Gentle acceptance imbued his words. "Your heart was with me, despite what I did to you. Nothing else matters."

Merry opened her mouth to protest, but Alex took the

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opportunity to sweep into her mouth with his hot tongue. He pushed her back against the pillows, his lips rapacious on hers. Her heart pounded in her chest and shivers of delight danced within her. The moisture of her desire pooled between her legs.

Alex's hand slid beneath her sweater and burned her skin. When his fingers reached her breast, he caressed her through the satin material of her bra until her nipple was a hardened peak, aching for his kiss. Her heart agreed to surrender to the traitorous need and she slipped her arms from the black angora sleeves and exposed herself to his view.

She heard his sharp intake of breath. Pride and happiness suffused her at the thought she could still make him breathless. The front clasp of her bra unsnapped and the next thing she knew, Alex was suckling her.

Sharp bolts of pleasure ran straight to her core. This was the Alex she knew, the man who'd given her countless hours of pleasure with his touch. Arching her back, Merry unfastened her slacks and slid them over her hips, waiting, needing him to test her readiness.

He slipped his palm over her mons and entered her with first one finger and then another. Oh God, his touch felt so right after such a prolonged absence. She lifted her hips again and he slid the slacks off her legs, and then he started to piston his fingers in and out of her.

She had to get next to him, next to his skin. She unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off his arms forcing him to stop his ministrations to her. His tee followed. She paused to appreciate the firm muscle of his chest, and then she was next to his heated skin, letting his warmth cover her body. Inhaling deeply, she let his scent infuse her lungs. How had she managed to survive without his aroma all these years? She

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trailed her fingertip over his shoulder and down to his tiny, hardened nipple.

"Damn, Merry. I have to be in you." An intense feral look seized his features.

She wanted him in her too, wanted to surrender to his latent power. Quickly, she unbuckled his belt and unzipped his trousers. Their hands met as they pulled his briefs down his thighs, releasing his erection. A couple of shakes of first one leg, then the other and the restricting garments no longer imprisoned his legs.

He straddled her hips, and then fastened his mouth on her other nipple, drawing the tender tip deeply into his mouth. He laved it into a tight peak, and then moved his attention to the other. For a moment he stopped and admired his handiwork. "I don't remember your breasts being so responsive," he murmured with appreciation.

"It's been a while since anyone has touched them like this," she gasped.

He reached back and grabbed his trousers. He fumbled through the pockets and finally yanked out his wallet. He grasped the foil packet as if he'd won a valuable prize, tore it open, and slid the condom over his penis.

She held her breath in anticipation of the pleasure she knew he could wrest from her body.

"Are you sure, Merry?"

Doubt matched the hesitation she saw in his chocolate brown eyes. With a sigh, she nodded her head. Her body ached to feel him buried deep within her. They'd been apart too long. This joining would go a long way toward knocking down the barriers they'd erected. She spread her legs and reached out to touch him. "Yes. Please, Alex, make love to me."

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He slid into her ready entrance with slow, controlled thrusts. He stretched her and continued to fill her. Each push of his penis inside her, every inch of his length claiming her welcoming heat healed another portion of the damaged heart that had always belonged to Alex.

"You're so tight, Merry," he groaned, sheer euphoria etched on his face.

No one had touched her in the seven years since Alex left her. At the time, the thought of another man's touch felt like an infidelity to the love she had for him. Not even her beloved Jim had seen her legs splayed wide to accept him.

Dancing light played over his skin as Alex moved faster within her core. Bolts of pleasure fired her nerves. Each incursion he made into her snug channel intensified the onslaught until all she could think about was Alex driving harder and faster into her.

He grabbed her wrists and pinned them over her head.

She bucked up against him and drove him deeper into her body. "Oh God," she murmured. She kept time with his faster, shorter thrusts moving her hips in a steady rhythm answering the insistent demands of his body. "Please Alex, please."

He released her hands. "Hold on baby."

When he rubbed her clit with his free hand, Merry flew over the edge, freefalling through the sensations he'd created, her internal muscles clamping around his length. "Alex!" she screamed as she drowned in wave after wave of intense pleasure.

He pushed harder and faster until he too, called out her name and took his satisfaction from her body, collapsing next to her and rolling her into the crook of his arm.

Satisfied, she drifted to sleep content to be in his arms.

Later, when she woke, sunlight streamed in through the

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eastern windows. She sighed, her body wonderfully sated from making love to Alex. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she glanced at the watch on his wrist. "Oh shit!"

Next to her, Alex jerked. "What, what is it," he asked in a sleepy, sexy voice.

She'd already pushed to her feet and was darting through the kitchen to the guest room and into the bathroom. "I'm late," she called.

"Relax," he said soothingly. "It's only eight. We don't have to be there until eleven."

"I've still got things to do. I'm supposed to be there early." She turned on the tub faucet and then pulled the shower nozzle. "Are you going to shower with me or not?" she yelled from the bathroom.

Beneath the steaming water, Merry let the destructive past slide away as if it were dirt going down the drain. Despite the hurt and anger she'd felt, the fears she'd nearly succumbed to, her love for Alex hadn't died. They still had to wade through a lot of garbage, but if last night was any indication of his feelings for her, Merry felt confident they'd muddle through.

A moment later, the shower door thundered to the side and Alex stepped in. She turned and gave him a kiss. In the light, his honed physique was impressive. A scar ran from just beneath his ribs to his hip. "Where'd this come from?" she asked, tracing the pale length with a finger.

"I got it in Afghanistan."

"Afghanistan?" A chill stole over her, thinking of her beloved Alex in harm's way. Even though she knew the risk of being in the military, the thought he could have been on the same helicopter with Jim doubling her loss stabbed her with fear. "When were you there?"

"Four years ago."

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A gasp left her lips. Jim had been there four years ago. Maybe they'd had a chance to talk before Jim died and had righted things between one another. Hope sprang in her heart for the two men she'd loved, each in differing ways. "Did you see Jim?"

Sadness settled into Alex's brown eyes. Oh no, he had seen Jim and their meeting hadn't gone well.

"Hold me, Merry."

The forlorn sound of his voice had her wrapping her arms around his waist without question. She leaned her head against his solid, massive chest. Beneath her ear his heart pounded in quick time. Hot water sprayed about them, creating the feeling of a surreal fantasy world. There was an unseen monster in the midst waiting to attack them. "What's wrong, Alex?"

"I was there."

"I know," she sighed. "I can't imagine what its like to be worried about every breath or step you take."

"No, Merry. You don't. You don't know." He gently pushed her back into the spray. "I went after Jim when his helicopter went down. I was trained for combat rescue." His choked words were accompanied by tears flowing freely down his face. Misery pierced his features. "I begged him Merry, begged him to hold on until we got to the medics." A violent shudder wracked his body. "All he wanted was my forgiveness."

The water continued to hammer against her skin like Alex's terrible revelation beat against her heart.

"What could I do? He told me how much he loved you. In his last moments, I knew he was a much better man for you than I. I spoke the words he wanted to hear, cradled him against my chest, and begged him to forgive me. I'd grievously wounded you both. I'm not sure he heard me. I'd like to

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believe he did."

His tears hadn't stopped. The depth of emotion pouring from him nearly buckled him against her. "Jim died in my arms," he whispered in anguish.

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Chapter Five

Too much time had passed. He should have sought her out, made a clean breast of everything to her years ago. That was all Alex could think of as he donned the brilliant red Santa suit and went out to meet his diminutive audience. Merry wasn't the same woman he'd left. That Merry was dead and gone, most probably buried the day she discovered her husband was deceased.

He'd been foolish to confess the worst thing he'd ever experienced. She carried too much of her own pain to be burdened with his. And she'd been burdened by his rejection and Jim's death.

They'd taken two cars to the Christmas party, her excuse being she had some final errands to run before Santa's big day. Since her arrival she hadn't looked him in the eye, hadn't exchanged with him more than the barest bit of civil pleasantries she could get away with.

Her chilly reception was all his damn fault. Despite the hours of lovemaking they'd shared, Alex had effectively erected another barrier between them. Once again, he'd delivered a blow difficult for her heart to recover from.

Each, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" he uttered through the obscenely white beard seemed more false than the last. His heart grieved over its latest loss.

"Hi, Santa!"

Through the lens-less spectacles, Alex peered at the little boy standing at his knee. Innocent trust glowed from his cherubic face. "What's your name young man?"

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"Chandler."

The child's bright eyes revealed his excitement. For his sake, Alex would try to put a little more conviction into his performance. He held out his velvet-clad arms to pick the boy up. "How old are you, Chandler?"

The child held up five chubby fingers. "Five."

Alex settled him on his knee and recited the spiel he'd been encouraged to share with the little ones. "Have you been a good boy this year, Chandler?"

"Oh, yes, Santa!"

"Look at the camera, Chandler and smile. Then tell Santa what you want for Christmas."

The boy did as Alex told him and a flash shot bright light at them.

"Santa, I'd like a 'copter."

Typical, Alex thought. Why wouldn't an Air Force kid want a helicopter for Christmas? "We'll see what we can do about that, Chandler."

The boy's bright blue eyes begged Alex to make his wish come true and then he scrambled down from his lap. "Santa, how do you remember? There are a lot of kids here."

Good question. Time for some creative thinking. "I tell my head elf and he writes it down."

"Oh." The little boy looked around. "I don't see any elf writing, Santa."

Kids were a tough crowd. Alex put his hand to his head, the white faux fur cuff slipping down his arm. Tapping the side of his temple, he explained. "It's telepathy."

"T-pathy?"

"It means we talk to each other only using our brains. No lips or words."

A big smile erupted on the little boy's face. "Oh, I get it

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Santa. He's at the North Pole writing everything down and then getting the toys made."

Alex nodded and shook his sleeve back into place. "Something like that, kid."

For the next three hours, Alex heard the wishes of over a hundred kids. Some squirmed on his lap and a few pulled on the curly white beard, but most were exceedingly well behaved. The line had seemed never ending, but now only one child remained, standing alone with Merry kneeling in front of her clasping her hands.

"It's okay, Cassie," he heard Merry say. "You can tell Santa about anything you want for Christmas."

As the child approached, he saw it was a little girl with long, dark hair about six or seven years old. "Hi there," he said in a friendly voice, holding open his arms for her. "I bet your name is Cassie, right?"

The child's brown eyes widened. "Santa, how'd you know my name?" she asked in awe.

Alex sincerely smiled. "It's my job. Your name is on my good list this year."

"Really, Santa?"

The little girl's eyes continued to widen and the amazement in her voice had Alex putting his best thespian skills forward. Somewhere he'd learned that the best night to go to the theater was closing night. The actors knew the run was over and they put their all into the final performance, just like Alex was doing now.

"Really, Cassie. Now, tell old Santa what you would like for Christmas."

"My mommy had a date last night and I spent the night with my grandma. I wished under granny's missile toad. My granny says grown-ups kiss there. Ick." Her nose wrinkled

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and emphasized her disgust. "But she said little kids could make a wish. I wished my mommy not to be alone anymore."

Alex glanced around looking for the little girl's mother. Someone needed to tell the woman what a treasure her daughter was. "That's a pretty hard present to give someone, Cassie. Moms and dads have to be the right sort of mix. You just can't give them anyone." He leaned closer to Cassie as their picture was snapped. "Moms need someone that has a lot of love for them and their kids, someone that is generous and treats them real nice."

"Like giving them presents and hugs?" she whispered.

"Yes, Cassie. That's part of what a daddy needs to give to a mommy."

The little girl frowned for a moment. "I don't know anyone like that, Santa."

The sadness in her voice tore at Alex's heart. "That kind of daddy is hard to find."

The frown turned into a grimace of deep concentration. "Santa, I know who I can wish for."

He smiled and looked directly into her dark eyes. "You look like you are taking this very seriously young lady."

"Oh, I am, Santa." A smile lit her diminutive features. "I want my mommy to marry you."

Alex jerked back in surprise. "Me?"

She smiled broader and looked extremely satisfied. "You."

Cassie scrambled off his lap. "Thanks Santa!" she yelled jubilantly. She careened down the steps. "Mommy, Mommy! Santa is bringing you the bestest present."

With his gaze, Alex followed the little girl. Cassie had flown straight into Merry's arms.

The truth slammed into his gut as if he'd been kicked by a

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reindeer's hoof.

Merry and Jim had a daughter? Why hadn't she told him?

He shook his head, the fake curls bouncing around his lips. He really had hurt Merry badly if she thought she couldn't tell him about Cassie. That little girl was a selfless thinker as well as a bundle of energy. He'd remind Merry of just how lucky she was.

Alex got off his Santa throne and cautiously approached Merry. His stomach beneath the pillows did nervous flips knowing he had to handle her just right. "Cute girl."

"Thank you."

At least she hadn't denied Cassie was hers.

"Santa," Cassie said grasping both their hands. "This is my mommy."

Alex smiled at Cassie and continued the charade of not knowing who Merry was. "I was wondering who this pretty lady was."

"I'm sorry, Santa. Cassie can be a little exuberant."

He looked from Cassie's brown eyes to Merry's green ones. A surge of happiness jolted him. Jim's eyes had been blue. Alex's eyes were brown. "How old are you, Cassie?"

"Six," came her quick reply.

The mental math wasn't difficult and only confirmed his suspicions.

Grief and guilt tore through him. With clarity, he understood Merry's depression and decision to marry Jim. When Alex had left her, he'd left her pregnant. Jim had taken on the responsibility of another man's child. The enormity of his sacrifice hit Alex hard.

He exhaled in acceptance and elation. He'd not squander this wondrous gift. It was a gift from above to set things right, an opportunity for his second chance with Merry. Even if he

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and Merry weren't to be, he'd cherish Cassie and remember the friend who'd given her so much.

A father! God, he could hardly believe it was true.

He watched Cassie skip off to pick up her Christmas stocking. It was his chance to discover the truth. He leaned over and whispered in Merry's ear. "Cassie's mine, isn't she?"

Merry nodded. Tears streamed down her face and an apology spilled from her lips. "I tried to tell you last night."

"*Shh, shh,*" he said pulling her into his arms, his voice choking with emotion. "It's alright baby. I'm the one who should say I'm sorry. I had no idea, Merry."

"You're not angry?" Genuine surprise colored her question.

"I'm disappointed in myself," he said with regret, tears welling in his own eyes. "I wasted so much; Jim's life, Cassie's, yours, mine. I don't know that it's something you can forgive me for."

"Nothing happened right seven years ago." He forged on anxious to fly heavenward with Merry into blue skies. "I went to work one morning and an hour later I was on a hush-hush mission. By the time I was cleared to contact you, you had married Jim." The wonder of what Jim had done for him amazed Alex. "To give our little girl a home and a name, you and Jim sacrificed your lives to give Cassie what she deserved."

He kissed Merry on the cheek. "It's too soon to ask you to marry me. I know that. We still have a lot to talk about and work out, but I'm asking for something equally as important Merry. Will you give Cassie and me the "bestest" Christmas present ever?"

She looked up at him. "What present, Alex?"

"Give me a second chance to do things right this time," he

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begged.

She looked around the room as if she searched for something. "Damn. It's never around when you want it."

He followed the direction of her gaze, noting the litter of Christmas trappings that had managed to make a lot of kids smile. "What's not here?"

"Mistletoe." She bit her lower lip. "Even though there's no mistletoe..."

He held her away from him and stared into her beautiful face. For Alex, his future was there in Merry's radiant gaze, lasting nothing less than an eternity.

"Merry Christmas, Alex." She stood on tiptoe and gave him a kiss that left him with hope. Maybe the holidays were worth celebrating if all his Christmas's could be so bright.

The End

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Meet the Author:

Lucynda Storey has been actively writing for over seven years. Currently, she and her family, call Colorado home, but has lived in such diverse places as Maine, Michigan, and Turkey. She has several full-length novels out which you can read about on her web site www.lucynastorey.com.

Her favorite authors are Terry Brooks, David Brin, and Orson Scott Card. She enjoys reading, writing, music, and movies.

Recently, Lucynda graduated from the Aurora CO Citizens Police Academy. When she's not writing, she's driving, a lot, most notably to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs where her oldest son attends school.