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An
Unexpected Gift
Renee Wildes

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An Unexpected Gift
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"She's worth saving, you know."

Annie McGowan froze. That voice. That not-quite-hated, still-familiar voice. Turning away from the sagging gate of the corral, she faced her nemesis.

Pietr Van Wyck. Heartbreaker extraordinaire.

He looked good, almost too good with his military bearing and Marine haircut. She'd seen a picture of him in his dress uniform, hanging on the wall of his mother's bakery. Now he wore a sheepskin coat, flannel shirt and well-worn jeans, just another Harmony Lake, WI Joe.

Except to her. God, she'd missed him.

He stared over top of the fencing at the black mare Annie had salvaged from the renderer's final bid. She was a sorry sight standing in the snow with the goats and Gran's old mule, Blue – visibly thin despite her current woolly mammoth coat. That Annie could fix. She was also meaner than a drop-kicked badger. That Annie *hoped* she could fix.

Pietr turned to face her, his electric blue gaze still as mesmerizing as she remembered. "That's not rage. It's fear."

Three years' gone from Harmony Lake, and he still made her quiver with a word and a look. Not good. She'd prayed she'd get over him. Now it was as if those three years had never been. She actually felt his arms around her, and ached to be held again. She shook herself back to sense by eyeing the mare. "I don't know what her story is."

"Good lines. Morgan look."

The mare snorted and pawed the ground, but kept her distance.

Annie sighed. "She doesn't trust me yet, but she will."

"You always did have a way with animals."

Just not with men. Not with you. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a neighbor come over and say hello?" He grinned, and that devastating dimple appeared in his right cheek. "Should I ask to borrow a cup of sugar to make it official?"

"I don't see a cup."

"Busted." His eyes gleamed at her. "Just came by to say I missed you last night."

"Didn't you have enough guests at your party?" The welcome-home party she'd been too cowardly to attend. She couldn't face all those eyes looking from her...to him...and recalling what might have been. The wedding that never happened.

Of course, her absence probably made tongues wag all the faster.

Some days, you just couldn't win.

Snow hissed against her jacket, pelted her cheeks, and she shivered as the wind snuck beneath her hair for an icy caress. She hugged herself, tucking her gloved hands under her arms. "Well, how about a cup of coffee before you head back to town?"

"Thought you'd never ask." He followed her into her Grandma Mae's kitchen.

The smell of coffee and cinnamon greeted her. Funny, she'd owned the old farmhouse for almost three years, but she still thought of it as "Grandma's kitchen." Annie tried to picture it through Pietr's eyes – worn linoleum, faded wallpaper, old appliances. She loved the way the oak of the antique table glowed in the sunlight, the homey look of braided rugs and place mats.

"You baked?"

The incredulity in his voice irked, but she had to be honest. "No, your mom did. I picked up a coffee cake for breakfast tomorrow. But the coffee's all mine." Cinnamon-laced dark roast.

Pietr shrugged out of his coat. The mischief in his eyes revealed the little-boy-that-was.

"How about I bring you another for tomorrow, and we eat this one now?"

Annie tossed her ski jacket over a chair and grabbed two mugs from the cupboard. With unfailing accuracy, Pietr found the silverware drawer and removed a knife. "How did you know?" she asked him.

"Where they used to be. Figured they'd still be there." He sliced the cake while she poured coffee.

His assumption stung. "I've changed. I've even changed the house...some."

He turned to her with that maddening raised eyebrow. "Yeah? Show me," he challenged.

She handed him a cup of coffee and led the way out into the living room. Pine and wood smoke. "See? I've got new carpet, new paint, new artwork."

"Same colors, same furniture." He eyed the cast-iron wood stove, the battered steamer trunk that had served as a coffee table for three generations of her family. "Same old Annie."

She crossed her arms and glared. "Not all of us are dying to run off and see the world, soldier. Someone has to stay home." She stared at the Scots pine in the corner, covered with a century of McGowen ornaments – hand-blown Bavarian glass mixed in with popsicle-sticks-and-wound-yarn.

Pietr, too, stared at the tree. "Just like I remember." He took a deep breath. "God, I missed this tree."

Stab her in the heart, why didn't he? *Did you miss me like I missed you?* "No one threw you out. You just...left, without saying goodbye. Just up and joined the Marines, moved half a world away like your tail was on fire. You couldn't get away fast enough. Wasn't Harmony Lake good enough for you?"

Wasn't I good enough for you?

He whirled. "I wrote. You never wrote back."

She'd burned them all, unopened. She didn't want to hear his excuses, not then and not now. "What was there to say, Pietr?"

"And hasn't that always been our problem?" His eyes gleamed with the memory. "Never got around to saying what needed saying."

"You ran off."

"And you hid away." He pinned her with his gaze. "You're still hiding."

She bristled. "I like my quiet life. What am I hiding from?"

"Life. That big wide world beyond the crossroads. Me."

"Why don't you just go back to that big wide world and leave me be?"

"Seen the big bad world, baby. Now I'm home. To stay. Dad's heart made him retire early. I'm taking over the garage."

She'd never seen this Pietr – strong, fierce, determined. She'd once loved the boy. That boy was long gone. She didn't know the man in his place. "I'm sorry about your father. But what's all this got to do with me?"

"Because, darlin'," his voice dropped a half-octave, "I'm here to remind you just how good I am with my hands."

Annie choked on her coffee. Her entire body tingled with those memories, damn him. "You need to work on your pickup lines, soldier. I'll call you when my car needs a tune up."

"Be happy to fix it. But that's not what I'm talking about and you know it." He moved closer. "Tell me we weren't good together."

Her eyes narrowed. If only her cheeks would cool. "Chalk it up to youthful hormones. We grew up and moved on. It's done and over with, Pietr. Let it go."

"No." He backed her into the wall, braced a hand against the door jam to prevent her escape. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you're seeing someone else. Tell me you've never

thought of me...of us."

His scent encircled her – musk and man, bringing with it a flash of memory, the sensation of hot skin sliding on hers. The warmth of his body beckoned. She raised her gaze to his. The heat in his eyes made her shiver with yearning and dread. "I..." Annie swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "We're not the same people."

"Tell me his name," he whispered.

The movement of his lips drew her gaze. She closed her eyes to that temptation. "Stop it." Her voice shook. Damn it, she'd waited years to tell him off. What was wrong with her? "Just go away."

He nuzzled her hair aside. "I will," he whispered in her ear. Goosebumps rose. "Tell me his name, baby, and I'm gone."

Whose name? She barely remembered her *own* name. She put out her free hand to stop him. Masculine heat caressed her fingers through the flannel, and she curled her fingers in the material in response. "Pietr, I..." Words failed her.

He sucked in a breath at her touch. "Look at me. Damn it, Annie, don't you hide from me now. Look at me."

She opened her eyes to find his face an inch from her own. "No...one. There's –"

His mouth silenced hers. His lips moved on hers, a sensual caress that swept away the last three years. Annie closed her eyes, clutching his shirt with a whimper that was part need, part despair. God, she'd missed him. This kiss was new and different. Not the boy's headlong rush into passion, but the man's leisurely, relentless coaxing. Part worship, part atonement. It had been too long since he'd held her, and never like this. She felt almost...cherished.

He broke the kiss off and stepped back. "Your coffee."

She'd forgotten the cup in her hand. Amazing it was still there. Annie took a shaky step around him and retreated back into the kitchen to take a chair at the table.

Pietr was right behind her. He plunked his cup next to hers and sat down, reaching for her hand.

She laced her fingers through his. She'd forgotten their warmth. Strong and capable. She traced a new scar on the back of his hand. "Where'd you get this?"

"On some unpronounceable mountain in Afghanistan. Piece of shrapnel. It has some cousins."

She shuddered. He could have been killed. He'd have died thinking she hated him. All those letters unanswered. What had she done? "I'm sorry."

"Why? I chose the uniform. I knew the risks. I'm luckier than some."

Annie looked up at the hollowness in his voice, to see haunted echoes in his eyes. "That's not what I'm sorry for." He raised an eyebrow, and she felt her cheeks flush at how that sounded. "I mean, I sorry you got hurt. Of course I am." She bit her lip before she started babbling like an idiot. "You wrote to me. *Your* mom told me. *My* mom told me. And I never wrote back. I just couldn't."

"I know you never read them." Regret chased the shadows. "I was an ass. I hurt you. I don't expect you to understand."

"I didn't want to hear it then. I'm sorry. I was unfair." Annie rubbed that godawful scar on his hand. "So tell me now. I promise I'll listen."

He was silent for a long moment. "There was just that big wide world out there, with so much to see and do. I wanted to make a difference, do something heroic and exciting. I felt like the world was just passing me by and I'd grow old and die without ever doing *anything*."

Annie shook her head. "But you don't have to go thousands of miles to be someone special. This town is your home. You have your chance to make a difference right here."

"I was an idiot. There are people out there who'd give anything to have this, what I turned away from. I learned quick enough that what mattered to me most was right here."

She trembled at the implication. "Pietr, why are you here?"

Pietr's gaze burned into hers. "I never stopped thinking about you. I know you haven't been seeing anyone else. And I'd hoped we could make a fresh start."

There it was. "*Hoped*." Did she dare? "Just because I stay doesn't mean I'm hiding. Not all of us are cut out for the fast lane. I *like* small towns. I *like* knowing everyone, not having to worry about locking my door at night. I *like* Friday night fish fry and Saturday night movies. I *like* piano recitals and soap box derbies. This is a great place to grow up or grow old."

"I know. I grew up here, too." He raised her hand to his lips, planted a kiss in her palm. "Mr. Tucker still patrol the movie theater with a flashlight?"

Annie choked. They'd been one of many teenaged couples busted over the years for not watching the movie. "Pietr!"

He stood up, pulling her to her feet. "Put your coat on and come with me."

"Pietr, it's freezing outside."

"Just do it." He shrugged into his coat.

Mystified, she followed him out onto the front porch, into the front yard. To the big oak. Struck by lightning, split in two, but still alive. Pietr reached out to the handcarved heart and initials. "*P.V.W. LOVES A.M.G.*" Annie froze as he turned to her.

"Remember when I carved this?"

Sharp pain squeezed the breath from her lungs. "My eighteenth birthday. The week before you left." She tried to soften the bitter edge to her words, but couldn't. Anger colored every one.

"I meant it." His eyes were fierce and unwavering. "I never stopped thinking about you, Annie. Never stopped missing you. I tried to tell you in the letters. I'm not that stupid boy anymore. I know what I did. I'm asking you to forgive me and take me back. If I get only one wish for Christmas this year, that's what I want."

Tears burned her eyes as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "Yes," she whispered, tracing his lips with her fingertips. "Welcome home, Pietr."

He silenced her with a searing kiss, his tongue stroking hers in a sensual caress that made her legs tremble. She slid her arms around his neck, partly for support, partly to move closer. Lordy, the man could kiss. She whimpered into his mouth, dizzy, awash with forgotten sensations. Her heart pounded, her breasts tingled.

A car horn made them both jump. A bright yellow Volkswagon beetle rolled by. Annie groaned, half-laughing. "There goes Father Michael. We'll never hear the end of it at church."

"Then let's make confession interesting." Pietr waggled his eyebrows at her. "I can think of more private – and warmer – places to continue this...discussion."

She laughed through the mother of all blushes – the curse of fair skin and red hair. "You are so bad!" She sobered. "I missed you."

He brushed the hair from her eyes. "I'd hoped when Mom said you weren't seeing anyone else that I'd still have a chance with you."

Annie turned away before he read too much in her face, and led the way back into the house. Shucking coat and boots at the door, she padded into the living room, settling on the couch, into Christmas-tree scented warmth. Pietr dropped beside her and hauled her into his arms. It felt so right, having him just hold her, her head tucked under his chin. As if he never left. Except the haircut and the scars belied that. "If anything had happened to you, I'd never have forgiven myself," she whispered.

"I was meant to come back home," he told her. "I had to get back to you. No bullet or

bomb can undo that fate.” A shudder rippled through him. “One thing I learned over there is I believe in Fate. When it’s your time, it’s your time. If it’s not, then nothing on earth can stop you.”

Annie glanced up. His eyes were calm, steady. Very unPietrlike. So familiar, yet so different. “What if I’d said no?”

“You don’t think I’d give up that easy, do you?” His gaze dropped to her lips. “I’d just have to convince you.”

She could already feel his kiss. “So? What are you waiting for, soldier? Convince me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Pietr dipped his head and pulled her fully onto his lap. His mouth took hers in a kiss of melting tenderness, one hand sliding under her hair to cradle to back of her neck, the other caressing the sensitive skin between her sweater and her jeans. Long, leisurely kisses, drugging...warming.

Annie turned to straddle him, so she could move closer. She felt herself melting, going boneless by exquisite degrees. Her entire body tingled, slowly heating. So slowly, with every stroke of his hands, his tongue. Her breasts swelled, her nipples puckered against the chafe of her bra. She whimpered into his mouth, her fingers tightening on his shoulders as he gripped her backside to pull her closer still. But it wasn’t close enough. She fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, tugging it free from his jeans so she could run her hands over him. Hot skin over hard muscle. He’d always been fit, but there was no softness to him at all now.

He groaned, shuddered at her touch. His kiss deepened to ravenous demand. She was powerless to resist. His need was hers. When his hand slid up to unhook the clasp of her bra, she drew back just long enough to pull her sweater up over her head – and off. The bra immediately followed. His gaze was a caress all by itself.

“So beautiful.” His voice was a low rasp.

Her nipples tightened in response. When he reached around to cup her breasts in his hands, she drew his head to her. “Please,” she whispered. “Pietr, I need...Ah!” She cried out as he took one in his mouth, drawing gently, teasing the tip with his tongue. God, how she’d missed him...needed him. Her body cried out to his, softening against the growing bulge of his jeans. She shifted against him, trying to ease the ache. It had been so long...

He released her breast to stare up into her eyes. “God, baby, I missed you. Let me stay. Make us whole.”

“I don’t have...”

“I do. Wallet.”

She tried for indignation, but could only feel elation. “That sure of me, were you?”

He shook his head. “Not sure. Hopeful.”

She pushed the shirt from his shoulders, and he shrugged it impatiently to the floor.

“Now, where were we?”

“About to make confession more interesting.” He eased her back onto the cushions and settled between her thighs. His mouth took hers, his fingers teasing her breasts, her nipples into tight points of need.

She arched into the hard press of his body, thrilling at the feel of hot skin sliding over her own. He broke the kiss off to nibble along her jaw, suckling at the sensitive spot beneath her ear, nipping gently at her shoulder. Her entire body burned, ached, craved...needed. She shifted restlessly, tangling her legs with his to pull him more firmly to her. She felt him fumble with the clasp of her jeans. “Take them off,” she whispered.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “There’s no going back.”

She nodded. “There never was. You’re mine. I’m yours.”

He had them both naked in a heartbeat, yanking the foil package from his pocket. He

shuddered as she helped him roll it on...slowly. "You're killing me, baby," he groaned.

Annie slid her hands over his hips, gripping the muscles of his butt and drawing him into her. He eased into her, flexing his hips, testing her readiness. But she'd been empty for so long, without him for so long, that she didn't want to wait. She pulled him all the way home. Into her body. Into her heart. He filled her to overflowing, every movement a pleasure that made her entire body pulse around him. It had always been like this. She never wanted to let him go. Yearning and pleasure and need spiraling out of control until she shattered around him. He joined her a moment later, shuddering in her arms.

She melted into the cushions, and smiled shyly up at him. She laid her palm against his cheek. "I think I was waiting for you to come home to me. Why I never let anyone close. They weren't you." She bit her lip. "So what do we do now?"

Pietr kissed her gently. "How about we finish that coffee cake we started?"

"Seems to be a great day for finishing things we started," she teased. "Welcome home, Pietr. Merry Christmas."

Author Biography

Renee Wildes lives & writes in central WI. Married w/2 kids, 2 horses & a cat. I love horseback riding, reading fantasy books, watching the PBR (esp. Wiley Peterson!), & scrapbooking. I am a serious writing-book junkie, and a major Joseph Campbell & Tolkien groupie.

Website: <http://www.reneewildes.com>

Blog: <http://www.reneewildes1.wordpress.com>

Samhain Author Page: <http://www.samhainpublishing.com/authors/renee-wildes>