

A person wearing a dark suit and a white shirt is holding a large, glossy red heart with both hands. The heart is the central focus of the image. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the person's hands and the heart.

*Her Heart's Desire*

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A blinding mix of rain and snow slashed across her windshield, faster than her wipers could swipe it away. The bright sky had grown gray, as drab as an old blanket. Rebecca struggled to stay on course, hardly able to see the road. What had she been thinking, driving out to the cabin on her own?

She and Lindsay had planned to spend Valentine's Day in Cape Cod together, inhaling several pints of ice-cream and commiserating on the sad state of their love lives. Her best friend had had a falling out with her boyfriend, Liam, and had come up with the brilliant plan of ditching men entirely this Valentine's.

"Who says we need men to have fun?" she'd said with typical Lindsay flare as she'd tossed a curtain of shimmering black hair over her shoulder.

Rebecca, who dreaded the very idea of spending another Valentine's Day pining after Lindsay's older brother, Zach, had quickly agreed. A "girls only" weekend getaway was exactly what she needed to forget Zach Ryler once and for all.

Who was she kidding? Ever since she'd met him six years ago, Zach had held the starring role in all her fantasies. The best she could have hoped for was a little distraction to keep her heart from once again shattering into a million pieces, like the brilliant explosion of snowflakes on her windshield.

No such luck. At the last second, Liam had fallen to his knees and apologized, and Lindsay had decided she needed her man to have fun after all. So Rebecca was on her own. Again. Feeling guilty, Lindsay had given her the keys to the cabin and told her she was welcome to use it.

Rebecca didn't know why she'd taken her up on her offer. Maybe she thought distance would lessen the sting of loneliness. Maybe she just needed a place where she could curl up and lick her wounds in private. It had seemed like such a great idea at the time.

Now, with the wind pounding against her Pontiac Sunfire and the sky spitting out its fury in a flurry of white, the whole thing seemed a little...well, nuts.

Damn Zach Ryler for doing this to her. Never was there a man who made her more insane, and from the looks of it, he was going to be the death of her. Literally.

It was just as well; he barely knew she existed. If only she were exotic like Lindsay, elegant and slender, willowy and graceful. Instead, she was cursed with pale freckled skin, unruly curls that were a touch too orange for her liking, and hips that flared stubbornly no matter how many hours she spent at the gym.

Zach was the exact opposite—tall, athletic, and hot enough to melt an iceberg. The mere thought of those wide shoulders, sinewy arms and strong, lean

legs made an unsettling current of energy hum along her nerve endings and coil deep in her belly. She groaned, flicked an annoying curl from her forehead, and kept forging ahead. It was too late to turn back now.

Her cell phone chimed once, then went dead. She'd forgotten to charge it again. She tossed the useless thing aside and veered onto the deserted street that led to the cabin. Barely a heartbeat later, a veil of snow blocked out the sky. Her tires struck ice, and she tightened her hold on the steering wheel, but it was pointless. The car fishtailed, and the stark white world spun into darkness.

Zach Ryler sat in his living room, going through the stack of briefing documents he'd brought home for the weekend, when the phone rang. He reached for the receiver, his eyes not straying from the papers he'd spread on the coffee table. He'd just landed a dream job at Ad Edge, one of Boston's most prestigious agencies, and he had every intention of working his butt off to prove himself, even if it meant taking his briefcase to bed. Granted it wasn't as soft or warm as a woman, but this Valentine's Day, it would have to do.

His sister's voice boomed on the other end. "Zach, I need your help."

He caught the note of panic lacing her voice and instantly released the page he was holding. "What's happened?"

"It's Becca. I gave her the keys to the cabin. We were supposed to go up together, but I cancelled and now there's a storm and she's not answering the phone—"

"Whoa, Lindsay. Take a deep breath and start over."

Air rattled in her lungs as she inhaled. "Becca went to the cabin in Cape Cod. She left over two hours ago. I've been calling repeatedly, but her cell is off. I tried the cabin, but there's no answer. Either the phone line is down or she never made it."

"Why would she drive to the cabin in this weather? I thought the woman had more sense than that."

"It's my fault. I set the whole thing up, then I bailed on her. What if something happened to her?"

Zach exhaled long and hard. "Is there any chance she changed her mind and turned back?"

"I doubt it. You know Becca. When she gets something in her head, there's no talking her out of it."

Truer words were never spoken. Rebecca James was the most stubborn woman he'd ever met. She was also the sexiest. One look at her voluptuous curves and wild, fire-kissed curls sent his pulse—and imagination—racing. That's why he stayed as far away from her as possible. The last thing he wanted was to get involved with his little sister's best friend. If things went south between them, their friendship would pay the price, and he refused to have that on his conscience.

But now it seemed avoiding her was no longer an option. "I'll drive up there," he grumbled. "Make sure she's okay."

Lindsay's relieved sigh echoed through the receiver. "Thanks, bro. I owe you one. I would have gone myself, but Liam is picking me up any minute and I'm not much of a driver—"

"Like there's a snowball's chance in hell I'd let my baby sister drive out there in this weather."

"You're the greatest, Zach."

Amusement scratched his throat. "And don't you forget it."

"You wouldn't let me if I tried."

Blades of pain cleaved the blackness as awareness slowly trickled in. Rebecca reluctantly parted her lids and winced at the exploding ache in her skull. The hiss of wipers scraping ice pummeled her brain with the force of a jackhammer. Swallowing a moan, she brought her fingers to her forehead to find it damp.

*Blood.*

Her airbag had failed to do its job, and she'd knocked her head on the steering wheel when she'd lost control of the car. Her stomach folded onto itself, but she tamped down the nausea and attempted to start the motor, which appeared to have stalled. The engine made a strange clucking sound that only accentuated the plummeting sensation in her abdomen. She was stranded. In the middle of a snowstorm. With a dead cell phone.

And she'd thought not having a date on Valentine's Day sucked.

Now what? She couldn't exactly stay in her car; she'd freeze to death. How far away from the cabin was she? A mile, two at most. She could walk the rest of the way and call a tow-truck from there. That was probably her best bet.

Grudgingly, she left the warm cocoon of her Sunfire and sank knee-deep in snow. Icy fingers slapped her cheeks. Snowflakes spiraled down to perch on her nose and embed themselves in her hair. A shiver crept along her spine, fierce and chilling.

Of all the days to forget her gloves...

With a miserable sigh, she strapped her purse over her shoulder, buried her hands in her pockets, and began carving a thin trail toward the beach house.

On days such as these, Zach thanked his lucky stars he'd had the good sense to purchase a Jeep instead of the Mustang convertible he'd always dreamed of owning. This baby may not have had the cool factor of a convertible, but it handled beautifully in the snow. It usually took him a little over an hour to make it to the cabin. Today, because of the lousy conditions, it was taking him longer. He cursed the whole way, wondering how insane a woman had to be to venture out in this blizzard.

The sun was just beginning to set, a dull glimmer that brushed the frozen trees with hues of gold and silver. Soon, darkness would fall, obscuring the streets, further decreasing visibility. Zach pressed on the accelerator, ignoring the muffled protest of his tires as they skidded and gripped what was left of the pavement.

As the smothering cloak of dusk fell, he came upon the road that led to the beach. He took the turn nice and slow, carefully lifting his foot from the brake to let the Jeep glide. The moment he rounded the curb, panic reached in with leaden fingers, squeezed the air from his lungs. Becca's car hunkered on the side of the road, the lights off, the interior blacker than death.

He brought his Jeep to a halt and slid out, trudging through the snow to inspect the Pontiac. The door was unlocked, the driver's seat empty. But that wasn't what made fear ram metal fists into his gut. A dark blotch stained the steering wheel, and he knew instinctively that it was blood. Dry blood. The accident must have happened a while ago.

Leading away from the vehicle, set aglow by the pale light of the rising moon, was the barely noticeable indentation of footsteps. Zach closed his eyes and bit back another oath. The woman was stark, raving mad. She'd left the safety of her car in favor of biting wind and bitter snow. She could be buried up to her pretty little neck by now, for all he knew.

Struggling to quiet the dread that pealed through him, he got back into his Jeep and followed the white ribbon of road. He couldn't see the footsteps from behind the wheel, but he kept scanning the surrounding areas for a copper-capped head and the delicate curves he'd secretly admired countless times before. He prayed to God she had enough sense to stay out in the open where he could see her. If she ventured into the trees, there was no way in hell he'd find her, especially at night.

The thought that she could be hurt or worse hollowed out a place in his soul he'd spent years ignoring. A place that was bright and warm and belonged only to her, whether he admitted it or not.

About three-quarters of the way to the cabin, a flash of movement caught his eye. Nestled between two large pines, huddling to ward off the wind, a woman sat on her haunches in a cradle of snow. Something inside him died a small death, then was instantly reborn.

*Becca.*

Rebecca hadn't realized how darn cold the coast could be in February. Not as cold as Boston, the weathermen always said. Yeah, right. After walking a mile or so, she became convinced the wind had a personal vendetta against her and wouldn't quit until it had turned her into an ice sculpture. Icicles encrusted her hair, blowing snow took tiny nips out of her skin, and her hands and toes had lost all feeling. If they hadn't altogether fallen off.

She couldn't take another step. She needed to rest, to get the blood circulating through her limbs again. She found a small alcove of pines and sought refuge within them, hoping their spiny branches would do an effective job blocking out the vicious wind. She crouched low where the trees were wider, rubbing her arms, her legs, her fingers, struggling to infuse some heat within them. Her eyelids drooped. Fatigue blurred the edges of her vision. She had to stay awake, keep moving, but it was just so cold, and she was so tired. She needed to close her eyes, if only for a second...

When next she opened them, a man was cutting a path straight to her. A tall man, with wide shoulders, lean legs, and a strong, familiar gait. Everything inside her shuddered, and not from the cold.

It couldn't be.

He drew closer. His powerful, chiseled features floated before her, as beautiful as an angel's. Deep blue eyes shimmered with concern, and she knew beyond a doubt that she was dreaming. She must have passed out from the cold, was probably even now succumbing to hypothermia.

He leaned over, reached for her. His hands felt real—solid and comforting and so achingly warm. His lips moved, but all she heard was an unintelligible drone. Her brain was frozen, numb. She blinked, tried to focus, but part of her—the part that was lost in this fantasy—refused to wake. Next thing she knew she was being lifted from the snow, carried as if she weighed no more than a feather. Seconds later, heat enveloped her in a prickly blanket. Needles stung her flesh as she thawed. Pain assailed her, a wild rush that pried a moan from her lips.

"You're lucky to be alive." His words pierced through the cobwebs in her head, followed by a jumble of others she barely made out. "Senseless...driving in this storm...should've stayed in your car..."

Was Zach really here? He must be, she reasoned. If this was a dream, he'd be kissing her, not telling her off. Still, right now, she welcomed everything about him, even his anger.

He stopped the Jeep, pulled her from the passenger seat, and flung her unceremoniously over his shoulder. Then he bulldozed his way across the snow to the front door. Once inside, he placed her on the couch and hastened to light a fire in the hearth. Heat spread, a golden halo of warmth enfolding her. Her mind slowly began to clear.

He left the room to return a few moments later with an armful of blankets.

"You have to get out of these clothes."

How many times had she imagined him saying something like that to her? She would have happily complied, but she didn't even have the strength to move her pinkie.

"I need help," she whispered in a gravelly voice she barely recognized.

He hesitated. A shadow passed behind his eyes, dark and compelling. For a moment, he seemed as frozen as she. Then she shivered, and his doubts melted away. Quickly, efficiently, he stripped off her jacket, then got to work on the buttons of her blouse. Her jacket wasn't waterproof, and she was soaked to the bone. His hands slipped over her shoulders, gently nudging off the garment, his touch setting off tiny explosions deep inside her. Their eyes met, his penetrating and guarded, hers wide and vulnerable. She'd loved this man for six years, and finally he was touching her, slowly bringing her to life. It didn't matter that it was for all the wrong reasons. She intended to enjoy every second of it.

He pried the boots from her feet, rolled off her socks, and massaged her toes. A groan wedged itself in her throat, tangling with a sigh. Every cell in her being trembled. Thinking she was cold, Zach hurriedly unzipped her jeans and peeled the sodden fabric from her legs. Wherever his fingers brushed her skin, fire flared. If he kept sliding his hands over her body this way, she'd be warm in no time. Forget warm; she'd self-combust.

When only her bra and panties remained, she leaned into him, silently invited him to strip off what was left of her clothing. She wanted nothing more than to have him crawl onto the couch beside her, naked. Wasn't body heat the best cure for hypothermia?

Unfortunately, he didn't seem familiar with the theory. He pulled away, dumped a pile of blankets over her, then walked out of the room, leaving her alone with her disappointment.

Zach had to get a hold of himself before he did something he'd regret. Undressing Becca had taken every ounce of self-control he possessed. He'd always known her skin would be soft, like velvet and silk. He wanted to run his hands over every creamy inch of her, to remove her bra and cup her full breasts, to bring his lips to the hollow of her throat and trace a burning trail downwards...

Instead, he distracted himself by making tea. Tea was safe. This blistering need for Becca wasn't. If he dwelled another minute on it, he'd be lost.

While the water boiled, he called Lindsay to let her know Becca was all right. A conversation with his baby sister was the best way to quiet the hum of desire in his bloodstream, the best way to remind himself why he'd vowed to keep his hands off her best friend.

She urged him not to attempt to drive back tonight, to spend the night at the cabin with Becca. In fact, she was adamant about it. Too adamant. Zach shook his head and placed the receiver back in its cradle, fighting a smile. Lindsay had never mastered the art of subtleness. He would have liked nothing more than to take the hint, but he was older and knew better. Most relationships went down in flames, and when they did, there was hell to pay.

The kettle chimed, interrupting his musings. He quickly poured the water into a mug along with a teabag and carried it to the living room, where Becca lay snuggled on the couch, staring pensively at the blazing logs.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"I'm still cold. Nothing seems to warm me."

He could think of a number of ways to warm her, none of them appropriate but each infinitely exciting. He shoved the tempting images away, sat beside her, and offered her the mug.

"I'm afraid I'll drop it," she said. "My fingers are still numb."

His resolve crumbled. Despite his better judgment, he placed the mug on the coffee table and sandwiched her hands in his. Gently, he rubbed the chill from her bones. Her fingers felt so delicate, thin and frozen. Before he could stop himself, he brought the reddened tips to his lips. Her eyes went smoky, shimmering with blatant surprise, which struck him dumb. Surely she knew what kind of effect she had on him.

She swallowed, looked up at him with shyness and determination. "My ears are still pretty frozen, too."

Heat pooled in his groin at the husky note in her voice. Was she purposely trying to unhinge him? Temptation was a powerful drug. It had a way of banishing all semblance of thought. He slid his hand beneath her thick web of reddish gold

curls, traced the curve of her ear with his fingertips. She waited expectantly, and he knew what he had to do. He simply had to taste her.

He lowered his mouth to her ear, let his lips feather over it. She smelled like snow, like lavender and sage. The taste of her filled him, a heady blend of all his desires wrapped in one intoxicating package. Damn, what had he done? He should have known one taste would never be enough.

She sighed, went liquid in his arms. "Are my lips blue?" she whispered seductively. "I can't seem to feel them."

The woman was a witch. That was the only explanation for the violent way his body reacted to such an innocent question. Blood pounded in his veins. His heart sped and crashed. Need rolled through him, incinerating his brain. Barely a breath passed between them before he crushed his mouth to hers.

Then there was nothing but heat.

Rebecca's senses swam in a sea of disbelief peppered with lust. Warmth unfurled inside her, and she forgot all about her throbbing fingers and icy toes. Zach's mouth was hot and moist, his tongue rough and sweet as it caressed hers. She tasted desire in his kiss. Desire and a hint of desperation. It shook her, filled her with wonder. He wanted her—after all these years of secretly aching for him, loving him—he really wanted her.

She buried her hands beneath his sweater, sucked in a breath as she explored hard muscle and smooth skin. The prickly hair on his chest tickled her palm and sent rivulets of pleasure rioting through her system. She ran her thumbs over his heart, felt it pound a ferocious beat against her fingertips, then continued downward toward his rippled abdomen.

God, he was beautiful. Solid and vital. Hard and defined. Her mouth went dry at the sheer perfection of him. An emboldening blend of yearning and eagerness lanced through her. She found the clasp of his jeans, her fingers brushing his erection as she struggled to unfasten them.

"Jesus, Becca—"A groan rumbled in his throat. He grew harder, deepened his kiss. Victory swelled beneath her ribs.

He tore away the blankets, freed her from her bra, and hungrily cupped her breasts. Her nipples instantly tingled and puckered at his touch. When he slid down and took one in his mouth, she nearly cried out from the pleasure and agony of it. She wasn't sure how long he tortured her, how long he sprinkled kisses down the length of her body and drove her wild with his lips and tongue. It felt like an eternity. Finally, no barrier of clothing remained between them. She arched into him, begged him without words to fill her. He resisted, heating her from the inside out, banishing every chill until she burned.

When she could stand it no longer, she wrapped her fingers around him, felt him lurch against her palm as a shudder raced through him. The man was suffering as much as she. Encouraged, she guided him to her. He entered her with a swift thrust but held himself back, struggling to be gentle while everything inside him screamed to possess. She understood his internal battle because she felt it too—the conflicting needs to savor and devour.

The storm consumed them, a wild deluge that threatened to drown them both. She lifted her hips and matched his movements like a sensual dance. Their bodies, their hearts, drummed to the same seductive tune. Then pleasure submerged them, a wild flood of sensation that left them gasping and clinging to each other.

Rebecca nestled against his chest, inhaling that familiar scent of mint and man. Something inside her splintered, made her want to laugh and cry all at once.

"I probably should have asked you out first, huh?" He sounded embarrassed, apologetic. "Brought you flowers, maybe a box of chocolates."

A grin tugged at her lips. "You saved my life."

"Is that what this was? Your way of thanking me?"

She brought her hand to his face and tenderly stroked his cheek. "No. It's what I've wanted for a very long time."

His gaze locked with hers. Emotion flickered in the bottomless depths of his eyes. "I think I have, too." He inhaled a long, suffering breath. "What now?"

"Now you ask me out."

"I do?"

"Yeah."

He hesitated. Defeat slowly loosened the hard set of his mouth. "Wanna go out with me sometime?"

A smile blossomed in that part of her heart where her most private desires dwelled. "Only if you bring me flowers. Forget the chocolate, though. My hips would never forgive you."

He ran his palm down her thigh, and the simple act sent tiny sparks ricocheting all the way to her toes. "I like your hips just fine."

That was all he said to her before his mouth found hers again, and a new, altogether different kind of storm began to brew.

## BIOGRAPHY

Anne Hope is the author of contemporary, emotionally intense romances with a twist—a twist of humor, a twist of suspense, a twist of magic. All her stories, however, have a common thread. Whether they make you laugh or cry or push you to the edge of your seat, they all feature the redeeming power of love and the heart's incredible ability to heal.

Anne's passion for writing began at the age of eight. After penning countless stories about enchanted houses, alien girls with supernatural powers, and children constantly getting lost in the woods, she decided to try her hand at romance. Her Golden Heart finalist, *Where Dreams are Made*, is her debut novel. She lives in Montreal, Canada with her husband, her two inexhaustible kids, her cat and a school of shamelessly multiplying guppies.

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