

A Samhain Publishing Freebie

# *Unexpected Gifts*



*Kaye Chambers*

*The holiday season is the perfect time for giving. Unexpected Gifts is a tiny introduction to my new series launching in March with BLOOD AND DESTINY is my gift to you. I hope you like it.*  
– Kaye

Unexpected Gifts

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*"Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock."*

I sang along with the music over the mall speakers as I meandered through the crush of people rushing to get their last minute gifts. Mine wasn't last minute. Destiny and I had been doing our shopping for each other on Christmas Eve since our first jobs in college. It was tradition.

With only one name on the list, I didn't need to rush to grab the first thing that caught the eye. No, it must be the perfect gift. I was determined to find it while avoiding my determined sister's stalking efforts to get a peek.

The tune changed and with it the pace of the people who surged around me. The smell of fast food from the food court made my stomach growl loud enough to have the man hurrying past grin. The grin turned to a flirtatious smile, but a swift intake of scent told me he liked to party too hard for my taste. My frown sent him scurrying off like a frightened mouse in the moonlight.

Too easy to scare away by half, I decided. What's a werewolf to do for a decent guy?

With a mental shrug to keep from dwelling on the thought, I returned to my previous priority. Food. And since I had yet to discover that perfect gift for my feline foster sister, fresh red meat wasn't on the menu. I couldn't very well skip off to hunt rabbits in my canine form until my mission was complete. Fast food burgers would suit.

As I turned toward the enticing aroma of food, a flash of color caught my eye. My gaze tracked back. Silk pajamas dressed a mannequin in vibrant blue. Destiny loved silk and the color was the right shade to compliment her blonde coloring. They were perfect.

My breath caught as I hurried toward the display window. Excitement raced through me until my gaze dropped to the price tag barely visible from the sleeve. Reality dashed my hopes and I let my breath out in disappointment. It was far more than my meager salary would allow me to spend.

"What did they do, spin the silk themselves?"

I heard the disgruntlement in my voice. With a final look at the mannequin, I stepped back into the crowd and let the tide take me to the food court. After waiting my turn at the ridiculously long line to give my order, I was surprised at how fast it was served. Taking the tray, I saw a cozy table in the corner.

My luck was in.

Hurrying toward it lest someone else claim the prize, I realized why it was vacant. The seat against the wall was covered in someone's spilled fountain drink. Well, there was only one of me so I only needed one seat. It put my back to the food court, but there was no help for it. Short of sharing a table with a stranger, it was the only available option.

The first bite of burger tasted like manna. It was greasy, over-cooked, and exactly what I wanted. With a low growl of pleasure, I settled in to devouring my dinner, heedless of the glances of the people around me. I was so intent on my food that the arm reaching over my shoulder made me jump back as I swallowed the last bite. Blind luck kept me from choking on it.

Only lightening-fast reflexes of the man's hand kept my own fountain drink from joining the mess on the other seat.

"Steady, Yasmine."

I went from reactionary movement to stillness instantly. Kale Henderson, the love-of-my-life. I breathed in the scent of him over the stench of too much perfume, human sweat, and the cacophony of food around us. The tangy, musty smell of werewolf filled my

nostrils making the rest seem insignificant. For the first time in the six months, the werewolf instincts in me stopped begging for release and stilled.

Something bright and sparkly drew my gaze to the table. I welcomed the distraction. The box Kale had placed there glittered in the bright lights of the mall. The thin oblong shape was wrapped in silver foil paper and had a matching silver bow on it.

"What's that?" Stupid question, and an obvious stall, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances.

"Your present."

Having him at my back made me feel vulnerable. I turned to face him without picking up the box. Meeting his gaze, I stood up. On my feet, he was only a few inches taller than I. It made him the perfect dancing partner. I beat back memories of better times.

"I don't want it. We're done, remember?" My voice was harsh.

My body tightened at his knowing expression and the memories threatened to overwhelm me again. That smile had coerced me into a lot of trouble over the years, but I'd sworn it was over the last time he tumbled me into bed. I meant it then, and I thought I meant it now. Unfortunately, six months without him had given me time to reconsider.

"You always say that. But it's never long before we're back to chasing after rabbits, is it?" His voice was smooth and low. Kale knew the effect he had on me.

He was right, on all fronts. This was our longest separation since he'd found me in college. I had been a young female werewolf, yet to make her first change, without any clue I was different from the world around me. He'd taken me out for that first run. He'd been my first in a lot of things. Pushing the memories away, I leveled a scowl at him.

I hadn't come back to him. I'd walked away and kept on walking. I was stronger than to fall back into his arms because he knew my habits well enough to lay an ambush. What else is a girl to do when she discovers the light of her life is engaged to someone else but leave?

"I'm out of here, Kale. Take your gifts and put them under someone else's tree." Gathering up my purse and the trash, I moved around him to deposit it in the trashcan.

Andre, Kale's bodyguard, took the tray from me with a genuine smile. I let him, with a sad one of my own, before turning away.

Kale was something of a prince among werewolves. The only male son of the reigning werewolf family, his darling mother never let him stray far without at least a pair of watchful eyes to ensure he made it home. Finding the second bodyguard took a good look around as I worked my way through the crowded tables.

Steven was standing against the wall mingled with couples and families waiting for a seat at the one official restaurant in the mall. Our gazes met and he lifted his hand in a wave.

It seemed everyone was glad to see me. I wished I could say the same about them.

Kale represented everything I dreamed about as a child during those long nights in St. George's Orphanage for Abandoned Children. The home and family I'd whispered to Destiny after the hopes that my parents might come for me were washed away by reality. I'd given him my heart along with my body and let myself believe in fanciful notions.

Live and learn.

"Yasmine, wait!"

I kept walking. Kale's mild curse earned him a reproving comment from a woman nearby. He wasn't used to being set-down for his actions, especially not by a stranger. I almost turned to see his reaction, but thought better of it. I threw myself into the path that opened ahead of me instead.

While not actually running, I hoped the other shoppers would hinder Kale long enough for me to duck into a store out of sight.

That hope was destroyed when I ran into a man's chest as he came out of the lingerie store. His arms went around me to keep me on my feet. I inhaled the scent of an

unfamiliar werewolf complimented by spicy cologne. I bumped into his bag stumbling back as he tried to be helpful and steady me on my heels.

"Easy there, little lady."

I was not little. Having been approached by more than one modeling agency over the years, I was somewhat conscious of my height. The hulking giant in front of me made me feel fragile, though. My gaze traveled up the eight inches or so he stood above me to lock onto his warm brown eyes.

His hands didn't loosen on my arms, but neither was the hold tight. It was just a friendly touch between strangers. Interest kindled in his gaze as he scented me. It made me step away from him. Surprisingly, his hands dropped without complaint.

"Joshua, handling your alpha's mate isn't going to help your petition to join us." Kale's voice was icy behind me. It startled me into turning around. He was close enough to touch as his words registered in my mind and ignited my smoldering fury.

"I am not your mate, Kale. I'm sure your fiancée would object to the reference even more strenuously than I." It came out bitter.

Advancing toward him, the look on my face caused alarm to flash across his. He took a step backwards. Fortunately for me, the people around us wouldn't let him go much further. Reaching him, I tried not to remember how easy he was to kiss. Poking him in his chest, I punctuated each of my points with a sharp jab.

"You have no right to call me your mate when you were just playing around the entire *seven years* we were together. You're a two-timing dog with absolutely no sense of honor. I'm done with you and your games."

Spinning on my heels, I stalked away as fast as the people would let me. It didn't take a werewolf's senses to know they followed me.

"I don't know, Kale. I think you had me buy the wrong size. I know you had me get the wrong color. That lady should be in red, not that I think you've got much of a shot anymore. I was expecting some petite blond flower, not a fire-eating Amazon." The new addition, Joshua, chuckled and I stopped abruptly.

I bumped into the man coming out of the lingerie store. The same one with the pajamas on display. Turning around, I glared.

"What's in the bag?"

"The pajamas from the window. You wanted them for Destiny, right?"

It annoyed me to know he watched me without my realizing it. That he knew me well enough to surmise why I'd stopped at that particular window was even worse.

*Get a grip. This is the one predictable ritual in your life and he knows it.*

I squelched the tiny voice. Seven years together gave both of us a certain edge in the game of chase. Retaliation was the key.

"Trying to buy your way back in, Kale? So like you." My tone was waspish. His face hardened immediately. Lifestyle was the easiest bone to pick at between us. There were so many other issues to attack with, but they were too complex to use as ready ammunition.

"And so like you to remind me how hard you rail against anything resembling gracious acceptance of small tokens." Kale's voice grated across my skin like sandpaper. The menace and wounded pride gave it enough depth to make my hackles rise.

"That's the difference between us. Small tokens are a matter of perspective. Yes, I wanted to buy those pajamas for Destiny's present, but money doesn't buy happiness. It's the thought that counts. Sometimes it's the sacrifice to make something possible that makes it special. When have you ever sacrificed for love?"

The giant beside Kale whistled softly between his teeth. Kale didn't answer. The chasm between us was more than physical distance. Pain and dashed hopes caused my heart to ache. Tears sprang from nowhere and I spun on my heels to stalk away. My last tears had already fallen over Kale Henderson.

"Yasmine!"

I walked on. The red exit sign at the intersection pointed the way out. I took it knowing it wasn't even remotely close to where I'd parked.

Crisp winter air helped me get a hold of my emotions. I pulled my jacket closed against it and started walking. By the time I turned the corner to the lot holding my car, I buried the pain under determination. Destiny still needed a present. Kale was not going to ruin our Christmas. The lights of the mall tempted, but I resisted. I would just have to find it somewhere else.

The wind was in my favor as I strode to my car. The sharp musk of werewolf stopped me in my tracks. My eyes scanned the lot. It wasn't Kale, but it was a pungent male. A large shadow stepped away from the camouflage of a massive SUV. Joshua was easily recognizable on size alone.

I expected him to approach me, but he simply raised a hand in acknowledgement. The wind carried no more alarming scents, but I took the long way to my old Chevy keeping several vehicles between us. The remote on the car had long since broken so the first clue I had as to my silent companion was the illumination of the cab when I opened the door.

The pink bag sat in the passenger seat. I recognized the logo. Joshua had taken my moment of distraction to slink off into the night I discovered when I looked for him. He would have made a convenient whipping boy. Trust the male of the species to run away and hide instead of standing to fight with a female. His scent was still on the air, but it was fading. The realization that I couldn't return them without a receipt made me reevaluate the situation.

How much would it hurt just to take the gift? It was for Destiny and perfect. Sliding into the driver's seat, I buckled my seatbelt without looking at the bag. I might be too proud to take a gift for myself, but Destiny deserved a few of the finer things in life. While I had been playing house with Kale, she had been on her own without a safety net. She had also supported me without question since I left the pack. My new secretarial job didn't pay enough to cover my half of the expenses.

My mind made up, I fought the late shopping traffic across town to the old Victorian serving double duty as Destiny's office and our home. She had converted her downstairs file room into a bedroom for me. It meant I had my own kitchen and bathroom on the first floor while she lived on the second. That made it easy for me to sneak in with the bag in hand after finding parking on the street.

The tree twinkled in the dim lights of the downstairs parlor lamps. White lights and cheap colored balls gave the room a festive atmosphere. We both pretended that it made the office area welcoming while ignoring the fact Destiny didn't like traditional trimmings in her living space. Hearth and home weren't very high on her priority list.

Pulling the red and silver wrapped shirt box from the bag, I stared at it before sliding it under the tree. I ran my fingers down the sides of the bag to fold it and felt a heavy weight on the bottom. Confused, I turned it upside down to empty it.

The oblong silver wrapped box Kale had tried to give me bounced on the wool area rug. I cringed instinctively as I listened for the sound of breakage. There was none.

Trust Kale to be sneaky. I didn't want his gift. Okay, that was a lie. I wanted it badly. It didn't matter what was inside the box. The importance was what it represented.

Dropping down on my knees, I reached out with a trembling hand to pick it up. I was so distracted by the present that I didn't hear Destiny creep down the back stairwell or through the kitchen.

"Damn," she cursed in a happy tone, "You beat me again. How do you always manage to get finished before I do?" Average height, blonde, and my absolute opposite in every way, she skipped into the room waving a four-inch square box wrapped in metallic green paper with a green and gold bow. It was obviously store wrapped because there wasn't a single wrinkle on the flat sides. "That's okay. I found the perfect... What's that? One gift is the rule. That had better not be for me."

"It's not." I crossed my legs under me to sit on the rug. "Yours is under the tree."

"So I see. Back to the original question, what's that?"

I lifted my gaze to follow her as she dropped into a graceful crouch beside me. She leaned forward and put her package on top of mine. Not for the first time, I envied her feline grace. I wondered if I could get away with not answering her, but she wasn't one of the best private investigators in town because of her grace. She was tenacious.

"It's a present."

"From?" She prompted.

"No one."

"Uh huh," she muttered as she snatched the box from my hands. "When did you see him?"

"Hey," I protested. "Give that back. He was waiting at the mall to shanghai me in the food court. Wait. Don't."

It was too late. Her finger slid under the tape and the expensive paper ripped with a loud sound. The name of an expensive jeweler was embossed in gold on the black top of the box.

"Oh, jewelry. Kale always had excellent taste. Do you want to finish? You can always throw it at him later. Better yet, you can hock it and send him the ticket."

I glared at her and took the box back. She showed no remorse as she grinned at me impishly. My hands didn't shake anymore as I finished removing the paper and pulled the outer box open to reveal a velvet box inside. A white piece of paper fell to the floor. My heart jumped in my chest at the recognition of Kale's strong handwriting. Destiny's hand reached for it, but mine beat her to the punch dropping the box top in the bargain.

"Read it. I'm dying to know what story he's concocted to get him out of this one."

I ignored her as I carefully put the box down and opened the heavy paper.

"*Yasmine,*" the note began. " *I am not now nor have I ever been engaged to Marissa Palettie. Don't make me pay for our mothers' scheming. Her heart belongs to another just as mine belongs to you. Please come home to me. - K*"

I read it twice. Did I dare believe? It was like his mother to arrange a marriage behind his back.

"Oh, for God's sake. Give it here." Destiny pulled the note away to read to herself. Instead of saying anything, she reached over to pluck the green box and toss it to me. I caught it out of reflex.

"Well, if you're spending Christmas with the dogs, open my present now so I can see your face."

Was I going to go?

"No boys this Christmas, remember? We're going to sit around and man-bash tomorrow while I cook."

"We cook," she corrected.

"I cook," I insisted. Destiny was a hazard in the kitchen.

"I microwave. In fact, I have a nice turkey meal in the freezer as we speak."

I narrowed my gaze at her smug tone. Her golden gaze locked with mine and waited. "Are you going to open it or leave me in suspense. It just might kill me, you know. There's a saying about it."

I rolled my eyes and picked back up the jeweler's box. Without bothering to remove it from the outer box, I flipped the hinged case open and gasped.

Inside, nestled on a background of vibrant blue, was a platinum bracelet. It was made up of links creating an elegant forest scene. The two end pieces were carved in relief and made up of smaller segments, but the center piece was a solid enameled insert obviously hand-painted. I recognized the scene. Kale and I were running in our canine forms in the moonlight. The image was so vibrant I blinked away tears.

Destiny leaned forward for a better view and whistled softly under her breath. "Man, I can't compete with that. It's stunning."

"What am I going to do?" I didn't mean to ask the question, but Destiny answered it anyway.

"You're going to pack an overnight bag and take him up on his offer. Give him a chance to explain what's going on. If you don't believe him or really and truly want to be free of him, you can come back here. But, Yas, I know you. You're miserable. It's been like you're a shadow of yourself without him. He made you glow with happiness. He's not perfect. Hell, he's a man. That goes without saying...." She stopped when I raised my hand. Best not to get her started on that tangent.

"It's Christmas. You shouldn't be alone. We're family."

"Oh, obligation. I get it. Open your box and get out of here. Who says I haven't had a better offer all on my own and turned him down because I thought you needed female solidarity." The way she said it admitted the truth of it.

"The vampire."

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with Marcus. In fact, how many guys do you know who will drop all his holiday plans at a phone call from a woman who blows him off repeatedly lately? It might not be love, but it suits me just fine."

I wanted to object, to give her the lecture I always gave her about finding her heart's desire and settling down. But I didn't. The reason was cradled in my hand.

"Fine. We do our Christmas tonight, then. Open yours first."

With a delighted laugh, she pulled the box from under the tree and tugged the paper free with childlike glee. When she pulled the box open, her face dropped in openmouthed astonishment. Her hands reverently pulled the silk top from the box and held it up.

"Wow. I failed my test this year. You definitely win the better gift award."

I laughed at the breathlessness in her voice. It seemed that I had a lot to thank Kale for tonight. When she put the shirt down to look at me expectantly, I was ready. With more enthusiasm than I thought I had in me, I ripped the paper off and frowned at the brown box crookedly taped. After a few moments of work, I managed to get the box open to dig through the tissue paper until I found the small plastic baggie inside.

Pulling it out, I felt tears spring up again. A silver charm sparkled in the tree lights. A puppy and a kitten played under a Christmas tree.

"For your charm bracelet. I'm sorry it's not more, but I saw it and..."

"Please don't apologize. It's perfect." I leaned forward and hugged her tightly. She returned it. We sat there for several minutes before she pulled back.

"Well? Don't just sit here. Go put him through the ringer."

With a laugh, I jumped up and headed for the door stopping only long enough to grab my purse and drop the jewelry into it.

"Clothes?" Destiny called after me.

"Who needs clothes?" I closed the front door on the sound of her laughter. The smell of werewolf brought me up short two steps from the doorway.

Kale stepped away from his SUV. Without a word, he opened his arms. With a rush of emotion, I ran toward him and let him sweep me around in a wide arc.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into my hair.

"For what?"

"For being an idiot. I should have come over here begging months ago."

I pulled back to see his face illuminated by the street lamps. The pain I saw there broke something inside me. "Don't beat yourself up over it. I probably would have set the vampires on you. Besides, there's something to be said for elaborate gestures."

"That's only the tip of the iceberg. I've got grander plans for you."

Heat sizzled between us and the months of separation melted away. I loved him. For better or worse. Maybe it was too early for vows, but I didn't need marriage to admit what was in my heart to myself.

"Then by all means, let's get to it."



## **About the Author**

Kaye Chambers has led a wild life. With her college degree in hand, she set off on an adventure to find herself. She's soaked in the hot springs in Iceland in the middle of a blizzard, sat on a volcano to watch the magic of the Northern lights, stood on the coast in the eye of a hurricane, and been awed by ruins of pagan temples. Somewhere along the way, she found herself along with her wonderfully supportive husband. Marriage, children, and life went in a different direction and her personal goals went with off in another. Finally, in 2005, she sat down and began to write. She hopes to put all the wonderful inspiration of her life into the pages of her books for the enjoyment of her readers.

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