

Christmas *Wishes*



LEX VALENTINE



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CHRISTMAS WISHES

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Christmas Wishes

Lex Valentine



PPB

Dedication

For Jimmy Thomas, who fills out a pair of jeans better than any other cover model and whose sweetness makes us all long for a man like him to brighten our lives. Here's to our first cover together!

Anne-Marie glared at the woman who had been her best friend since they'd both been in pigtails. Elle Forbes had grown up riding horses, the same as Anne-Marie, yet she had the worst seat of anyone who had ever crawled into a saddle. Eyeing Elle's Converse sneakers, she said, "Why didn't you wear boots? You shouldn't wear sneakers to ride."

Elle slouched over the pommel of the saddle, arm propped on the horn, the reins hanging slackly from her hands. "I don't have boots."

"Do too," Anne-Marie snorted. "You grew up here. You *have* to have boots."

"No, I don't. At least, I don't have riding boots or cowboy boots. I have a pair of black thigh high Maddens with the highest spike heel you've ever seen," Elle replied with a dreamy sigh. "Riley loves those boots."

"I just bet he does." Anne-Marie felt a twinge of jealousy. Her best friend's marriage often made her feel like she was missing out. Even when her husband Danny had been alive, Anne-Marie had envied Elle her closeness with Riley. Being married to a military man meant that a good portion of the time, you didn't really feel part of a couple.

"Riley doesn't make me dress like a cowgirl. I love that about him," Elle said frankly. "I never liked boots. You know that."

Anne-Marie glanced down at her western shirt, wranglers, and round toed riding boots. She'd always liked western wear. Danny had too. Elle hadn't ever cared for it although Anne-Marie knew she liked Riley's ass in a pair of tight Wranglers or Levi's.

"It looks good on you." Elle's voice held encouragement. "I know Danny loved it when you wore boots and jeans. I think your butt in Wranglers is what got his attention in high school."

"Probably." Anne-Marie smiled sadly.

Elle's gelding sidled a step closer to Anne-Marie's mare.

"He's been gone five years, darlin'. That's longer than the two of you were married."

Despite Elle's soft tone, Anne-Marie heard a stern note in her voice. And she couldn't deny Elle's words. She and Danny had been high school sweethearts, glued at the hip for four years. Afterward, however, Anne-Marie had gone to Southern California to college and Danny had joined the Army. While Danny was gone, he'd gotten married, dashing Anne-Marie's hopes for the future.

She had a string of lousy short-term relationships until she'd gotten an email announcing a special Christmas Eve class reunion-get together. The sender mentioned that Danny would be there since he'd been granted leave to deal with his divorce. Anne-Marie had dragged Elle to the party and the instant she walked in the door her gaze had been filled with the only man she had ever loved. They'd married less than six months later.

The first year had been blissful. But Anne-Marie wanted kids. Danny didn't, at least, not until the Army decided to stop sending him into war zones. It had been the one thing on which they couldn't agree throughout their marriage. Then Danny had been sent back to Iraq. His first

deployment during their marriage had been for almost a year. He'd come home for a few months and they'd sent him back. His second deployment hadn't lasted as long as the first. He'd come home early in a flag draped casket.

For as many months as they'd been together, Anne-Marie had grieved and mourned. But one day six months shy of the four year anniversary of his death, she woke up and felt different. She missed Danny, but realized it was nothing new. She'd missed him most of her adult life. First, because of their separation after high school and his marriage. Then once they'd gotten back together, his job had kept them apart. Anne-Marie knew Danny loved her, but he took his job – his duty – seriously. That commitment came before everything else. And Anne-Marie had been left behind with a Purple Heart and a Congressional Medal of Honor bestowed posthumously upon Sergeant Daniel Stewart Mallory by the President of the United States for saving the lives of two dozen soldiers, a brigadier general, and a clutch of Iraqi children. There were times Anne-Marie hated those medals.

"Elle, he was gone most of the time we were married too," she whispered, hoping her best friend wouldn't be shocked by her irreverent words.

"Oh, honey."

Elle's knee bumped hers as the gelding pushed closer to Anne-Marie's mare again. A huge sigh escaped her. When she looked up, she found Elle's face filled with sympathy.

"I know it's not been easy for you all these years. You've spent more than half your life wanting to be with Danny while he was off in the Army or married to someone else." Elle reached out and brushed back a lock of Anne-Marie's errant hair. "You know he loved you more than anyone. Why that wasn't enough for him is beyond me. But you're still young. The dreams you've held inside you still have time to come true. You can fall in love again."

Heat rose in Anne-Marie's body at Elle's words. She didn't think she'd ever love anyone as she'd loved Danny but lately, her body had been crying out for a man. A particular man and one she shouldn't ever have looked at, let alone wanted. Her wayward desires had grown to the point that they now invaded her dreams on a regular basis.

She wished with all her heart that she didn't have the star-crossed past that she had. She wished she could just walk up to the guy and hit on him and enjoy the release their bodies could give them. She wished it was night so she could at least wish on the Christmas star and pretend that she had more than an ice cube's chance in hell of it coming true.

"Uh oh. What does that face mean?" Elle asked. "You look hot and bothered and totally depressed all at the same time."

Anne-Marie shook her head, feeling her Resistol hat slip on her head as the breeze picked up. "It means I doubt I'll ever fall in love again, but I understand where you're coming from. In fact, my body *really* understands where you're coming from. I have needs. They haven't been met in years, and as wonderful as it was being married to Danny, he was gone so much that I feel like my needs have never been met. I don't know what it's like to sleep in my lover's arms night after night and know that we have a wonderful future ahead of us. And I think I've forgotten what it's like to have a man make love to me."

"You just need to go find someone," Elle said softly, her eyes filled with gentle encouragement.

Oh, not just someone, Anne-Marie thought fiercely. Just *him*. Her body clenched with need as she called up his image in her mind's eye. Tall, really tall, with dark wavy hair, a little long and unruly. A hawkish face and intense golden brown eyes. And his shoulders. By God, the man had the biggest, most masculine shoulders and arms of any man she'd ever seen, and she'd spent her life around cowboys who did physical labor daily. She knew he had some kind of computer related job and that he'd gotten into body building to offset his sedentary hours behind a monitor. Didn't matter to her *why* he looked like a god, only that he did and she wanted those big arms around her in the worst kind of way, despite her guilt over Danny and despite their age difference.

"What if I told you I had my eye on someone already?" she confessed, her gaze holding Elle's.

Her best friend looked thoughtful for a moment. Then a smug expression settled on her beautiful face. "Ahhhh. The boy wonder."

Anne-Marie decided that she should have known Elle would figure it out. Elle knew her better than anyone else on the planet including Danny. Her best friend must have seen all her surreptitious glances at Bradley Marsh at his sister's wedding. Well, if she was honest with herself, she'd admit that she'd been sneaking looks at him for quite a few years.

"Gave myself away, did I?" Anne-Marie laughed self-consciously. She reached up and pressed her hat down harder on her head as the wind kicked up. "I probably shouldn't ever have looked at that boy, but he sure is pretty."

Elle burst out laughing, her face alight with amusement. "Oh, darlin', Brad Marsh is no boy and pretty doesn't cover it. He is as handsome as sin."

"Says the woman married to a supermodel," Anne-Marie grumbled.

"Well, just goes to show that I know what I'm talking about." Elle winked broadly at her. "Look, Brad Marsh has had a crush on you for years. I say you take advantage of that to get yourself some Christmas cheer."

Anne-Marie's mouth dropped open in shock. "Jeez, Elle! What a thing to say! Besides, how do you know he's had a crush on me?"

Elle's slender shoulders raised and dropped in a careless shrug. Her horse dropped his head and nibbled at the grass as his rider put her hands on her thighs and leaned toward Anne-Marie. "Riley told me," she said in a conspiratorial tone. "He noticed that Brad checked my white board all the time and then just happened to show up to see Devon whenever you were due to visit. He's been doing it forever, going way back to when you and Danny were first married."

Anne-Marie felt a little shell shocked. The man who had been starring in her erotic dreams and fantasies for the last couple of years had a crush on her? And could you really call it a crush when the man was almost thirty years old?

"I'm too old for him." The instant Anne-Marie said the words she regretted it because her best friend suddenly looked like a thunderstorm about to happen.

"You're not. Age isn't important."

"Says the woman whose marriage vows included a vow never to mention the age difference between herself and her husband," Anne-Marie snorted trying to deflect Elle from giving her a lecture. "Look, Brad may not be interested in me. Riley could be wrong."

Elle shook her head. "I don't think he is. He's very intuitive about people." She tightened her reins and her horse lifted its head as she straightened in the saddle. "It's Christmas Eve. Wish on the Christmas star. I bet your wish comes true."

Anne-Marie's brows rose mockingly despite the fact that she'd thought the same thing Elle had voiced aloud. "You still believe in that stuff?"

"Of course." Elle smiled and winked. "You do too. You don't fool me at all with your talk of being too old for the pretty boy. You are hot for Brad Marsh and if you just get off your ass, I bet you can land yourself in bed with him."

"Elle! Damn it!" Anne-Marie sputtered at her friend's audacity, but Elle just laughed and waved a goodbye.

Anne-Marie watched Elle kick her gelding into a canter and head back toward Forbes Ranch. With a deep sigh, she turned her mare toward her own small parcel of land at the edge of the Forbes family's property. She stared into the distance, her eyes automatically going toward her closest neighbors, the Abbotts. She and Jared had been friends since they were kids, even longer than she and Elle whom she'd met in elementary school. Actually, Anne-Marie, Jared and Grayson Forbes, Riley's cousin, had all been in the same class in school. Elle had been a little older and Riley had been younger. Until Elle had married Riley, Anne-Marie had never thought about what it would be like to be with a younger man. Now, it was all she thought of.

She urged her mare into a brisk trot. She had a lot of things to do tonight since it was Christmas Eve. Even though she'd been invited to the Forbes house for Christmas dinner, she liked to have her own little celebration of the holiday. She had baking to do and a small ham to make. She even had a bottle of champagne, although she wasn't quite sure why she'd bought it. She and Danny had never drunk anything but beer or whiskey.

An evening spent doing all the things that made Christmas Eve special right down to fresh baked cookies and a fire in the fireplace were on her agenda. She hoped those activities kept her brain from dwelling on the man who currently starred in her holiday fantasies. If they didn't, she'd have to go outside and wish on the Christmas star as Elle suggested. She'd never been the kind of woman who wished on stars or made birthday wishes before blowing out the candles, but for the first time in her life Anne-Marie felt the need to try. After all, what could it hurt to wish?

~ * * * ~

"Why are you here?"

The suspicious tone and bold words turned Bradley Marsh away from his sister's kitchen window, where he'd been staring absently at a distant cow. Devon Marsh Abbott stood behind him, hands on hips, her amber eyes narrowed and calculating. He knew that posture meant business and discomfort pricked him. His sister had a formidable side to her that even Brad didn't like to cross. He shifted his shoulders restlessly and turned away to rinse his coffee cup in the sink.

"It's Christmas." He didn't want to give any more of an answer than that. He didn't even know if he had more of an answer inside him.

"You always go to Vegas with the wolf pack," she pointed out, referring to his group of best friends.

"Yeah, well, the wolf pack dynamics have changed, Dev. Vegas for Christmas is out of the question now. Pete's married. Chris is engaged. Greg's girlfriend just moved in." He shrugged. "Only me and Steve are single, and neither of us felt like going without the others."

His sister's expression turned even more suspicious. "Uh huh. There is more to this than the breakup of the pack, Brad. What's going on?"

Leaning against the granite counter, Brad heaved a sigh. He'd had it easy the last few years. Devon had been wrapped up in her new husband Jared, which had made it simple for Brad to keep his distance. Spending a lot of time in his sister's company meant she would eventually see through the thin veneer of his game face to the turmoil inside. Unfortunately, he hadn't thought it would happen on the morning of his second day in the Abbott house. He should have remembered how easily he underestimated his pushy sister.

Devon stepped closer. Her fingertip poked him in the bicep. Hard. He winced a little. Her fingers had always been like blunt daggers stabbing him. She knew he disliked it when she poked him so she always did it when she wanted to make a point.

"C'mon, kid brother," she hissed insistently. "Spill the beans. Fess up. Something's wrong. Tell your big sis."

Brad shifted away from her, scooting along the counter toward the refrigerator. "Nothing's wrong, per se."

Devon's brows rose. "Per se? Oh, now you really have my curiosity peaked. What's wrong, Brad? Did you break up with the girlfriend of the moment?"

Frowning, Brad circled away from her and went to sit at the kitchen table. He reached out and fiddled with the snowman and snowwoman salt and pepper shakers. "Nah. I was seeing someone a few months ago. Didn't last more than a couple months. Same as all the others."

Devon sat down next to him and covered one of his hands with both of hers, stopping his restless fingers.

"Then what's wrong?"

Brad shook his head. Trust Devon to know something wasn't right. Maybe he'd decided to spend Christmas with her because he knew she'd force the truth from him, force him to acknowledge his own emotions. And God knew if he faced how he felt, he'd either fall apart or finally be able to get on with his life. Living with unrequited love for eight long years had taken its toll on him emotionally.

"What would you say if I told you I'd been in love with someone for eight years?" he said, his voice pitched low and soft.

Stunned didn't exactly cover the expression on his sister's face. She stared at him open-mouthed, but when he tried to pull his hand free of hers, she gripped it with iron fingers.

"*Eight* years? Brad, you haven't known any women for eight years except me and Elle. I'm your sister and Elle's married."

"Yeah, well I never said the woman was single," he grumbled, jealousy tightening his gut. He couldn't believe he was spilling his secrets to his overly managing sister.

Now, Devon did let go of his hand. Her fingers flew up to cover her mouth. "My God. You can't be in love with Elle!" she whispered, her words muffled.

Brad heaved another sigh. "No. Not Elle."

Devon's hand dropped and her eyes widened. "Oh, Brad. You can't seriously mean..."

Waiting for Devon to actually say the words became too much for Brad. He shifted on the wooden chair, wishing he could just relegate the whole situation to a black hole so that eventually it would all go away. Instead, he told his sister the truth.

"I'm in love with Anne-Marie Mallory."

Sympathy flooded Devon's face. She took his hand in hers again. "Oh, Brad. I'm so sorry," she whispered.

Brad wanted to sigh again, but he figured it was way too much like some romance novel character so he settled for an unintelligible grunt. Both he and Devon looked up then as Jared came into the kitchen.

"Hey, did you leave me any coffee?" Jared's green eyes twinkled with good humor. He headed straight for the coffee pot without waiting for a reply.

"Oh, Jared! Brad's in love with Anne-Marie!"

Brad's gaze met Jared's. His brother-in-law's expression held equal parts sympathy and humor. Jared knew his wife only too well and he knew Anne-Marie too.

With a frown, Brad yanked his hand from Devon's. "Did you have to just blurt it out like that, Dev?" he grumbled.

"Well, uh, yeah." She glared at him. "I don't keep secrets from Jared."

"I think he means you could have told me in private, darlin'," Jared said with a chuckle.

Devon's brows came together. "Huh? This is private. No one's here but us."

"It's the embarrassment factor." Jared clued in his wife.

The narrow-eyed expression returned to Devon's face. "Nothing to be embarrassed about here, Brad. Is there? Or have you done something you shouldn't?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he muttered, shoving the snowman salt shaker across the table. "I fell in love with a woman who's grieving over the death of the love of her life, some super duper Army Purple Heart hero. I'd say that's something I shouldn't have done!"

Jared pulled out a chair next to Devon and sat down, cradling his coffee mug between his palms. "Don't say that, Brad. While you may not have chosen to fall for Anne-Marie had you been able to pick and choose, that's not to say that it's wrong. Karma makes things happen for a reason. There's some greater plan in the works here."

"I'd like some clue what that plan is. I've been a crazy man for years because of her. I'm tired of it. When is my life gonna start?" Brad shook his head sadly. "Almost all of my friends are starting their 'couple' lives. I'm alone. Still. I'm almost thirty years old and the only woman I've even been remotely interested in having a life with thinks I'm some kid. She doesn't even see me as a man. I don't know how much more my ego let alone my heart can take."

Taking Devon's hand in his, Jared stared at Brad long and hard. "You sound like you've already given up. You know, you can't win a woman over if you never try. If Anne-Marie doesn't see you as a romantic partner, then you need to do something to make it inevitable that she does."

If you want her to get over Danny then you should give her a reason to stop grieving. Don't just sit here and wait for things to happen. *Make* them happen."

His brother-in-law's words struck Brad with the emotional impact of a bullet. Jared was right. He'd sat on his ass for years, gazing at Anne-Marie from afar, so sure that she could never get over her husband. He'd avoided holidays in Heil with his sister, just so he could avoid seeing Anne-Marie. And while that might have been for the best when he was twenty-five, now he was two months short of thirty and a kid's game of avoidance wasn't what he wanted or needed. If he wanted her, he needed to show her. If she shot him down, he'd try again. And again and again and again, until he decided he'd done everything he could to make her love him in return. If she still didn't care after that, well, then he'd just have to accept that it wasn't meant to be.

A smile curved Jared's mouth. "I can see my words have got you thinking."

"A little more than thinking," Brad admitted with a chuckle as a hundred ideas began to shuffle through his brain.

"Whatever it is you're hatching, Bradley, we'll help," Devon said with an emphatic nod. "Elle and I were just saying last week that Anne-Marie needs to start living again."

"Whoa there, darlin'," Jared murmured, his hand dropping to his wife's rounded belly. "Don't forget what the doc told you. Rushing around like you aren't pregnant is not conducive to a healthy first pregnancy."

Brad watched as his sister blushed under the steady gaze of her husband. They had what he wanted, a real relationship. Devon and Jared shared everything. Their fights were few and far between but when they had one, it could be explosive. Still, no matter how mad they got, their love still eclipsed it. After years of casual relationships, Brad craved the kind of passion they shared.

"I'm not rushing around," Devon protested. "I'm just gonna help Brad brainstorm. And I know Elle will want in on this too."

Brad bit back a groan. It was embarrassing enough to have his sister and brother-in-law discussing his unrequited love. Now, he'd have to suffer through Devon's boss and her husband knowing too because Brad was pretty sure Elle would tell Riley.

Devon leveled a finger at him. "I know that expression and I know exactly what you are thinking, Brad. Riley and Elle will be a big help with this. So will Grayson and Mitch," she said with a nod.

This time, Brad let the groan out. "That's pretty much everyone, Dev! What the hell? I can do this on my own."

His sister shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm going to make sure Anne-Marie sees what a total hottie you are. There isn't a single person on this ranch who doesn't want to see her happy, and you're a good man, Brad. She can't do better than you."

"That's debatable. In the five years since Danny died, I haven't been able to get her to even speak more than a handful of words to me each time we've seen each other," he said with a sigh. "I always made sure I knew when she would be at Elle's and then I'd drop by to see you."

Devon's eyes widened. "How the hell did you do that?"

Brad snorted. "Easy. Elle writes everything on that big ass whiteboard in your office. Her whole schedule and Riley's are on that board for the world to see."

Before Elle had moved her office from Los Angeles to the Forbes family ranch, Brad had learned about Devon's boss's habit of using a whiteboard to keep track of her schedule and that of her supermodel husband. Brad had been using it for years to find out when Anne-Marie would be around. From the moment he'd seen her eight years before, he'd wanted her. Back then she'd been happily married to her high school sweetheart and Brad had been young enough to realize that what he felt was a just crush. After all, he only saw her briefly three or four times a year.

However, by the time Anne-Marie had been widowed, his sister had begun to spend holidays at Forbes Ranch and then she'd married Jared. Devon's wedding had sealed Brad's fate. During the wedding festivities, he'd been thrown together with Anne-Marie countless times. Then Elle had moved her business to the ranch and Brad found himself traveling to Heil every chance he got. Well, except for Christmas which he always spent with his best friends in Las Vegas. Still, the more he went to the ranch, the more he told himself it was to see Devon, not Anne-Marie.

"You have it bad."

Jared's quiet comment made Brad realize they were sitting around the kitchen table discussing his love for a woman seven years older than him who'd had a hero for a husband and wasn't looking to replace him. Depression gnawed at the edge of his determination. He needed to make something happen between him and Anne-Marie this Christmas. Forget presents and Christmas dinner and even being with his sister. Brad had a single Christmas wish, just one thing that would make his holiday perfect...the woman who had invaded his dreams for eight years.

~ * * * ~

As an adult, Brad hadn't particularly liked or disliked Christmas. His sister Devon had hated it for years, something Brad had never understood. Then she and Jared had gotten together on Christmas Eve, the sentimentality of which had Brad rolling his eyes. Especially since Devon's boss Elle and her husband Riley had also hooked up on Christmas Eve, albeit a handful of years before Devon and Jared.

Now, Christmas held a special place in the lives of the people connected to Forbes Ranch. However, their emotional investment in the holiday didn't extend to Brad. He actually felt a bit Scrooge-like this particular year, sitting in his sister's living room on Christmas Eve watching Devon and her husband untangle wrapping paper and ribbon while chattering about how different things would be next Christmas with a baby in the house.

Brad's gaze skated over Devon's rounded belly and he wondered why he felt not a single twinge of excitement about being an uncle. He looked away from the happy domestic scene and gazed out the big picture window of the ranch style house. Acres of green pastureland stretched before him, broken only by the private road that led from Jared's house to the Forbes house.

Halfway between the two houses lay a road that led to another house. Brad had gone exploring in Jared's truck the first time he'd ever come to Forbes Ranch and discovered the road to the Reston property. According to Devon, Clarence Forbes, William Abbott and Earl Reston had been best friends who'd purchased adjacent chunks of farm and pasture land. Riley and Grayson, Jared, and Anne-Marie's grandfathers had been cowboys together on a huge spread in Texas before coming to the small central California coastal valley where they all settled, married and started families.

With both Grayson's and Jared's parents dead and Riley and Anne-Marie's parents retired, the families still carried on a tradition of friendship with the latest generation. Christmas Day would be a big deal at the Forbes house with everyone in attendance from all the Forbes cowboys

to the descendents of Clarence, William and Earl. Brad knew Anne-Marie would be there and he figured the time would be ripe to make his move.

While Devon and Jared wrapped the last of the gifts, Brad slipped out of the house. He walked down the road, lost in thought, thinking of how he'd spent most of the Christmases of the past ten years. Drunken revels in Sin City. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans and shook his head. The first couple of times he'd gone, it had been fun. After that, it had just been something to do so he didn't have to think about Anne-Marie. This year he wanted to think about her. Think about her and touch her and love her...

Tipping his head back he looked up at the sky. Stars gleamed like diamonds on black velvet and he swiveled his head until he found the brightest one. It was probably Venus or some other planet he figured but what the hell. It would serve as the Christmas star. After all, wishing on stars wasn't about science, but belief.

Swallowing hard, he fixed his gaze on the star and said, "I wish I could make Anne-Marie mine. I wish my feelings for her were reciprocated."

The moment the words left his mouth the star gleamed brighter, and Brad shook his head in surprise. No way. It was a trick of light or his stupid wishful thinking. Suddenly, he felt self-conscious for making the wish aloud and a little foolish for making it at all. He'd never really celebrated Christmas, yet here he was making a wish on a star as if Christmas held some special power. What he really needed to do was come up with a plan for maneuvering Anne-Marie into his bed. Or himself into hers.

He wandered along the road, glad that he knew it to be a smooth expanse of pavement because there was very little light by which to see. Used to the ambient light of the city, the darkness enfolded him and gave him the sense that he walked into the unknown rather like stepping into the absolute darkness of a carnival Fun House. The sounds of the night seemed amplified to his ears and the weird chirps and clicks made him wonder just what was out there. When he came to the road that led to Anne-Marie's house, his feet turned in that direction although his mind had no clear cut plan.

A slight breeze kicked up, ruffling his hair, and he fancifully wished the air were female fingers. In the distance, he could see the dense black outline of Anne-Marie's house and the faint glow of light from a window. His feet dragged to a stop. He couldn't just walk up to her door, and if she found him hanging round outside her house, she'd think he was being stalkerish. But he couldn't stop himself from wanting to be near her.

Frustrated, he stepped off the paved road, his hiking boots sinking into the thick grass. He stomped away from the road, one eye still on the distant glow of the house. Just as he was thinking about sitting down so he could contemplate the house and its owner, his booted foot caught the edge of something that gave. A muffled squeak rent the silence of the night and off balance, Brad pitched face first into the grass. Pain radiated out from his rib cage and he came to the stunned realization that a boot dug into his right side.

"Holy shit! You scared the crap out of me," a soft voice grumbled.

Despite the ache in his ribs, pleasure rippled through him. He'd fallen on Anne-Marie.

He sucked in a breath and the toe of the boot dug in harder, reminding him that he sprawled across her foot and lower leg. With a grunt, she pulled her leg out from under him and his face

rolled into a clump of grass. He bit back a sneeze, and turned his head, trying to see her in the dark.

“What are you doing out here?” he blurted, his mind scrambling for a logical thought.

She chuckled, the sound skittering over him like the brush of fingers on bare skin. “It’s my land, Brad. What are *you* doing out this way? Jared’s land is a half mile away.”

He heaved a sigh. “I had to get away. They’re just a little too happy, you know? Besides, I needed to see the stars and get in my wish...” He broke off, cursing himself silently for not only falling on his face at her feet, but for blurting out the truth behind his Christmas Eve stroll.

The grass rustled as she turned onto her side, facing him. He realized she’d been lying on her back in the grass, probably looking up at the sky.

“You too?” she said quietly, a note of surprise in her voice. “I thought I was the last person on the planet who believed in wishing on the Christmas star.”

“At the rate I’m going, I figured it couldn’t hurt,” he muttered, disgusted with himself. “Look at me. I’m a pathetic dork who went flying face first into the grass in front of a beautiful woman. And I can’t even muster a coherent thought with which to give you some kind of graceful reply. I’m lying here in a wretched heap.”

Anne-Marie laughed again. He saw her dark outline move as she reached out and her fingers brushed the side of his face. He barely stopped himself from turning his face into her hand and kissing her palm.

“You’re no dork even if you do work with computers.”

As her hand dropped from his face, he rolled onto his side, bringing his body closer to hers. He shuddered a little at her proximity even though it was so pitch black he could barely see her.

“I feel like a dork when I’m around you,” he admitted.

She sucked in a breath, the sound loud in the quiet night. Then she said in a voice that he swore trembled, “What did you wish for?”

Brad couldn’t remember the last time a woman had given him such an opening without being completely scheming. However, Anne-Marie was no schemer so he did the only thing he could do. He told the truth.

“You.”

~ * * * ~

The darkness called to Anne-Marie the instant the sun fell. She’d left her ham in the oven and her cookies cooling on a rack and wandered out into the night, ending up on her back in the grass staring at the brightest star she could find. She’d made her Christmas wish before she lost her courage, asking to find love again, to not spend the rest of her life alone, and to have Brad Marsh see her as desirable. She figured she’d best not push her luck and ask for Brad to fall in love with her. A guy like him wouldn’t want to settle down with a woman like her. She could see him with a tiny, petite blonde, fresh faced and a perfect foil for his dark good looks. But she could, using Elle’s phrasing, ask for a little “Christmas cheer” from him.

The instant she made the wish, the star had seemed to gleam at her, winking as if in acknowledgement of their secret. Moments later, Brad Marsh had stepped on her and fallen face first at her feet. While she'd never been one of those people who believed in omens, neither was she one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Whatever force of nature had sent Brad out into the night, she wasn't about to question it at this juncture. When she bravely asked him what he'd wished for, she hadn't expected an answer that would dampen her panties.

She sat up, conscious of the fact that he lay only inches from her in the grass. "You wouldn't tease an old lady on Christmas Eve, would you?" she asked hoarsely, using her words to put a barrier between them, just in case she had misinterpreted the meaning of his one word answer.

Brad jackknifed upright and one large hand snapped out, catching her chin and turning her face toward him. She stared at the dim lines of his face in the dark. Even though she couldn't see his expression, she somehow sensed that he hadn't liked her words.

"You're not an old lady. Don't put yourself down, Anne-Marie. I won't tolerate that."

His firm tone made her tremble, and she realized he was much more than she'd ever expected. Her husband had been all man, a soldier, a protector. But there was something primal about Brad, something very Alpha that called to the most feminine part of her. She drew a breath and put herself into his hands both figuratively and literally. Leaning forward, she pressed herself against him and his big hands came up to cup her shoulders before he slipped his arms around her.

"You're playing with fire," he warned.

Anne-Marie savored the feel of those big arms enfolding her, pulling her closer to his hard body. "I'm not. You aren't going to hurt me, Brad. You're not made that way." As she spoke the words, she knew the truth of them. When he walked away, it would be her own hopeful heart that caused her pain. Brad wouldn't mean to.

When the dark blur that was his head closed in on her, she held her breath. His features grew more distinct the closer he got and she could see the glitter of his eyes even though she couldn't see the color.

"Open your mouth for me," he whispered as his lips descended.

She obeyed automatically, her lips parting as he kissed her with deliberation. At first his mouth clung to hers, the damp, but firm pressure expressing passion but not desire. She could sense the emotion behind the kiss but couldn't quite label it. Clearly, the man cared for her, a fact that shocked her to her core, but she couldn't discern how much or why. The kiss quickly escalated from the emotional to the physical with the simple sweep of Brad's tongue over her bottom lip and into her mouth.

Tasting Brad sent shivers through her. She'd dreamed of this moment, but the dream didn't touch reality. Dreams didn't taste of chocolate and mint. Nor did they artfully command her tongue to duel with his. In her dreams, his hands didn't sweep her back with smooth strokes that lit her skin on fire. And her breasts were never crushed against a wall of solid muscle, behind which she could feel his heart thundering.

The memory of her Christmas wish colored her response, her loneliness and fear partnering with her intense attraction to him. It fueled the almost desperate urgency of her mouth and tongue against his. She clutched his huge biceps and clung to his body like a limpet. He was bigger than any man she'd ever been with and somehow that just turned her on more.

When Brad lifted his head, Anne-Marie gasped. In part because she needed air but also because the kiss had devastated her. She'd expected to enjoy it, but not to such an extent. The kiss unlocked a part of her she hadn't even realized she'd locked away. Suddenly, the cool night air felt crisper than it had only moments before. The stars shone brighter. The heat of the hard body beneath her palms seared her. Everything came sharply into focus including the yearning of her body and heart.

He stared at her, his face scant inches from her own, and she began to smile, letting him see every emotion that churned within her. It was too late to hide anyway. She knew a man as intelligent as Brad would have already taken stock of the feelings that overwhelmed her and shorted out her usual self-control. She pressed herself against him and dipped her head to nuzzle the strong column of his neck.

"Come home with me, Brad."

His big hands gripped her shoulders. "Are you sure, Anne-Marie?"

The gravelly rasp of his voice held a note of uncertainty and Anne-Marie licked the spot behind his ear. He shuddered, and she could sense how tightly he held onto his lust. If she told him no, she knew he would back off. He'd get up and walk down the road to his sister's house and leave her alone.

Alone.

Tears pricked behind her closed eyes. She didn't want to be alone. She couldn't bear another lonely night, another lonely Christmas. Yet, had it been any other man with her, she would have borne it. With Brad's scent in her nostrils, his body tensed beneath her hands, and the taste of him on her tongue, she could do nothing but give in to the urgings of her body and her heart.

"I've never been more sure of anything, Brad. Please come home with me," she said quietly, knowing that her soft but sure tone would ease his concerns.

In a swift move he rose to his feet, pulling her up and into his arms. He molded her against him so that every inch of her pressed into his hard frame. The hard ridge of his erection rubbed her lower belly. His size made her shiver with anticipation.

"It's cold out here. Let's go," he murmured, rubbing his hands down her flannel covered arms.

She threaded her fingers with his and turned toward the road. They walked the quarter mile to her house in silence. In the dark, the Victorian loomed like a Gothic monster, softened only by the porch light's golden spill. At her door, he hesitated and she glanced up to find him staring at her with an expression of near pain.

"I can still leave if you've changed your mind," he said in a low voice. His hand came up and brushed her hair back from her shoulder.

Anne-Marie smiled gently. "I haven't changed my mind." She pushed open the door and the scent of the baking ham wafted out, mingling with the piney scent of her tree.

Brad sniffed the air, his eyes widening a little. "It smells like Christmas in here."

She pushed the door wider and tugged on his hand, leading him into the foyer. "I made Christmas dinner. Ham, potatoes, salad, dessert."

"Why?"

She shut the door, trying not to think about how big he was, how he filled the small foyer with his body and presence. "I needed to. I know the housekeeper up at the Forbes house does an awesome job, but I needed to work in the kitchen. I needed to make my family's recipes."

Brushing past him, she led the way into the huge kitchen. As she went to the oven to pull out the ham, she noticed him looking around, taking in the racks of cookies and pies. If he thought her crazy, he wouldn't be that far from the truth, she realized. She'd been crazed with the need to have her own Christmas even if she was alone.

As she set the roasting pan on the stove, she saw him snatch a freshly iced gingerbread cookie from a rack. Her heart slammed against her ribs. She wasn't alone. She was with a man who wanted to be with her. He pulled up a kitchen chair and sat down, calmly munching the cookie and gazing at her with bright golden eyes, very like his sister's.

"Are you hungry?"

His eyes glittered at her question and his mouth quirked up in a mischievous smile. "Ravenous. But I could eat first. I missed dinner in favor of making sure I had my shot with the Christmas star." He glanced at her wall clock. "I should call Devon so she doesn't go all mother hen on me. She's gotten seriously maternal now that she's pregnant. And if you'll point me in the direction of the washroom, I'll clean up."

She drew a breath. The intensity of his gaze told her he still wanted her fiercely, but he'd banked his desires in order to give her some space. Letting the breath out, she felt herself relax. He was the right man and this was the right place and the right night. Whatever nerves she'd had slipped away in the face of their calm domesticity. Dinner, some quiet conversation, and then some champagne in front of the fire would make it even easier to take him upstairs to her bed. The knowledge that she was going to touch him and make love to him filled her with heated anticipation.

"Bathroom's the first door on the right down the hall. Do you have a cell phone? Or do you need to use the phone?" She couldn't believe how matter of fact she sounded. Her voice didn't even tremble. It just reinforced her conviction that what they were going to do was more than right.

With a smile that held an intimate warmth, Brad rose to his feet. He came toward her and caught her chin in his hand, tilting her face up. He brushed his lips against hers.

"I've got my phone. I'll be right back," he murmured.

The sensual intent in his golden eyes sent a quiver of anticipation through her. When he disappeared into the hallway, she went to work, quickly setting the dining room table, lighting candles, and pulling out side dishes from the warming oven and the refrigerator. By the time he returned, she was slicing the ham, arranging the fragrant meat on a platter.

Brad rolled up the sleeves of the flannel shirt he wore open over a t-shirt and reached for the platter. Anne-Marie led the way into the dining room. They seated themselves, Brad at the foot of the table and Anne-Marie to his right.

"This is some spread," he commented as he reached for a basket of homemade rolls. "What were you going to do with all this food?"

She shrugged. "Give it to the ranch hands. A couple of them are single and appreciate the home cooking. One of the others is a widower with two college age sons. They have no one to

make Christmas for them except for the big dinner at the Forbes house. I was going to pack most of this up into care packages for them all. It's hard to be alone at Christmas and I thought the home cooked meals would help."

He eyed her keenly for a long moment, then reached out and wrapped his hand around hers, stilling her fork. "You're not alone this year. Not now. How do you feel about that?" he asked simply.

She dropped her fork on the tablecloth and turned her hand to grip his. She gazed into his handsome face and bared her soul. "A little scared. I guess I wouldn't be human if I wasn't, but mostly this feels right. What's between you and me, this...desire...I can't ignore it. I don't want to ignore it. I don't know about you but it's been building inside me for awhile. Lying in the grass wishing on the Christmas star for a chance with you made me realize that I've spent a lot of my life waiting. I don't want to wait anymore. I want to live and I want to do some of that living with you."

The expression on his face turned hungry and sexual, desire blazing from his eyes. "You know, it's a little odd that I was out there wishing on the star for you while you were out there wishing for me."

Anne-Marie squeezed his hand then let it go, picking up her fork. "Not odd at all. Fate works with what it's given. I've been interested in you for what seems like a long time. But the age difference made me think I had no chance."

Brad cut into his ham. "What made you change your mind?"

"Elle. The age thing is nothing for her and Riley. She pointedly reminded me of that. Gave me a lecture about how I shouldn't let it bother me and I certainly shouldn't let it stop me from taking what I want."

He swallowed hard, his expression so filled with lust that Anne-Marie could barely stop herself from pouncing on him.

"Tell me this isn't just about you wanting to get laid," he whispered.

She began shaking her head before he'd even finished speaking. "No, this is about how I've been lusting after you for months, Brad. This is about the crush Elle says you have on me," she told him boldly.

He visibly relaxed and humor sparked in his eyes. "It's no crush, baby. Crushes don't last years."

Her brows winged up in surprise. "Years? You're kidding me. Devon says you're a good time guy, always taking off to Vegas to party."

"To forget is more like it," he snorted in derision. "It's tough to have a thing for a woman who sees you as a kid."

Anne-Marie swallowed a mouthful of cranberry sauce, almost choking on it. "I never saw you as a kid!"

His broad shoulders shifted in a movement that conveyed a slight discomfort with the subject. "You gave a good impression that you did. You wouldn't really talk to me when I tried to engage you in conversation. You always brushed me off as if I was some annoying kid," he confessed.

Her mouth dropped open in shock. "I didn't mean to! At least, I did mean to brush you off but not because I thought of you as an annoying kid. It was more a case of needing to get away from you because of the desire you made me feel. Something I was sure you *didn't* reciprocate," she explained honestly.

Brad set his fork down, took her fork from her and held out a bite of ham. Confused, she opened her mouth and he popped the meat in.

"Eat up. We have other things to do tonight besides have Christmas Eve dinner," he growled.

They rushed through dinner and cleaned up together. Finally, Anne-Marie pulled out the chilled bottle of champagne and handed it to Brad with a couple of flutes.

"If you take that into the living room, I'll bring dessert."

She watched his back disappear into the hall and reached for a pie that she'd set apart from the others. Deftly she sliced it and set out two plates. She dusted them with cocoa and placed a slice of pie on each, then garnished each plate with a flourish of whipped cream and a sprig of mint leaves.

When she entered the living room, the Christmas tree glowed and twinkled in the firelight, its branches giving off a fresh pine scent. Brad had removed his shoes and socks and flannel shirt. He lounged on the floor in front of the fireplace in a t-shirt and faded jeans that molded his thick thighs. Beside him on the coffee table sat the champagne flutes sparkling with golden liquid.

He grinned up at her. "I stoked up the fire and turned on your tree. And I made myself more comfortable. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." She set the tray with the plates on the coffee table and sat on a chair to remove her boots and socks and whip off her own flannel shirt. She knelt beside him on the braided rug her grandmother had made, her heart thumping against the thick cotton of her thermal Henley shirt.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing to the plates.

"Bourbon Chocolate Pecan pie. My grandmother's recipe." She felt breathless as she handed him a plate and a fork. "The flavor is decadent. My grandmother said it wasn't for just anyone. Only someone special. Every year, she only made one and if you were good you got a slice. Piss her off and no pie for you."

Brad chuckled. "I must have been good this year."

Anne-Marie stared at his handsome face, committing the hawkish features to memory. "Only a little thus far, but I'm anticipating that you'll be very good later." Her words came out soft and husky, laden with the passion she felt rising within her.

He handed her a flute. "I think a toast is in order." He gazed at her over the rim of his glass, his face alight with arousal. "To us. And to the Christmas star. May all our Christmas wishes come true."

"Auf uns!" she murmured, echoing his "To us" in her grandmother's native German.

They touched their glasses and drank, never looking away from each other. Anne-Marie felt heat rise within her. Staring at Brad with the firelight gilding his handsome features and dark curls, she wondered what he'd look like naked. What would the golden light look like on his skin, his muscles?

Brad took her glass from her and set both flutes on the table. He picked up one plate of pie and sliced into it, forking it into his mouth. Bliss descended on his face.

"My God. This is the best pie I've ever had. It melts in your mouth!"

He cut into the pie again but this time he turned the fork toward Anne-Marie. She opened her mouth and he slipped the fork between her lips. She shivered a little at the thought of the fork that had touched his lips, touching her own. She barely registered the sweet, alcohol laced chocolate confection that filled her mouth. Her thoughts were so consumed by the man who sat inches from her. Her breath puffed out as she chewed and swallowed, her gaze never leaving his.

The plate slipped back onto the table and Brad reached for the hem of his t-shirt, pulling it over his head in one swift move. Anne-Marie gasped softly as her field of vision filled with lightly tanned skin and more muscles than she'd ever seen on a man before.

"You're so beautiful," she whispered reverently, one hand reaching out to touch the point of his shoulder.

He shuddered visibly. "Men aren't beautiful. You're beautiful." He pulled her thermal shirt from the waistband of her jeans, his fingertips delving beneath to caress the skin of her belly. "I want you naked, Anne-Marie. Naked and beneath me, writhing with your orgasm, the orgasm I'm going to give you."

Brad's mouth touched hers and Anne-Marie tasted chocolate and bourbon, sugar and champagne on his tongue. And then her head spun with a heady mix of desperate need and fiery arousal. Dimly, she registered Brad removing her shirt, her bra, and her jeans. His mouth and hands touched her everywhere, and by the time he pulled her thong down her thighs, he'd somehow managed to shuck himself out of his clothes, too.

She stared at him in amazement. Firelight slid over the perfectly sculptured muscle and bone that made up his body. He rose above her like a god, so astonishingly beautiful that he took her breath away. She touched him reverently, her hands gliding over his skin, shaping every slab of muscle she could reach. Speech became impossible and only inarticulate moans and mutters of passion issued from her mouth as she caressed him.

Heat flowed through her, slicking the folds between her thighs. She parted her legs and Brad knelt between them, his back bowing as he kissed his way from one hip bone to the other then up to her ribcage. His big hands cupped her breasts, kneading them at first gently, then with more ardor as his thumbs flicked at the hard tips. He sucked one nipple into his mouth and his tongue laved the turgid tip. Anne-Marie jerked as a bolt of lust arched down to her pussy.

When he moved to her other breast, she shifted restlessly, her hands trailing down his chest to the flat ridges of his abdomen. He had the most gorgeous body she'd ever seen and she loved touching him. With one hand splayed across his abs, she let her other hand drift lower. Brad hissed in a breath as her fingers curled around his thick erection. She stroked him slowly, measuring him carefully, testing his flesh for the most sensitive spots. Her thumb found a bead of wetness at the blunt tip of his penis. She spread it in a circular motion and his hips moved, thrusting against her.

They fumbled hands and arms then as Brad rubbed one finger against her labia and Anne-Marie's other hand slipped down to cup his balls. His manscaping surprised her but she found she loved the smooth feel of his big sac in her hand. She rolled his balls and his cock jerked in her other hand. He pressed one thick finger into her and her hips bucked at the penetration.

Harsh breaths, moans, pants and other sounds of pleasure filled the quiet of her house. When he slipped a second finger into her, his thumb unerringly finding the swollen bud of her clit, she arched against him. Her hand moved from his balls to grip his shoulder, her other hand still stroking his cock. He circled her clit again, his fingers fucking her, the knobby thickness hitting the walls of her cunt and sending her closer to orgasm.

Suddenly, pleasure burst over her, taking her unexpectedly. With a cry she convulsed. She released his cock and gripped his hard shoulders. Her body bowed, seeking his heat, as her thighs gripped his hips.

Brad's mouth trailed damp kisses over her throat as his hand slid from her. There was a crackle of foil and then the still shuddering flesh of her pussy parted under the onslaught of his cock. He carefully eased himself inside her, his eyes watching her every inch of the way. Finally, seated deeply inside her, he rested his forehead on hers.

"Oh, fuck," he whispered reverently. "You feel amazing, Anne-Marie."

"You feel pretty good yourself, stud," she murmured, stroking her hands down his back.

He flexed his hips and the muscles of his back bunched beneath her palms. Wrapping her legs around him, Anne-Marie tilted her hips and he sank deeper into her. They both moaned. Then Brad went into motion, thrusting fiercely within her wet pussy. He filled her so tightly that every stroke hit all the most sensitive spots inside her. Even though she'd just come, a second orgasm spiraled closer, winding tighter with each of his thrusts.

His cock fucked her with increasing strength as his mouth loved her with equal parts of tenderness. The combination drove her wild, and she writhed beneath him, licking at his shoulder, her nails raking his hard back. He nipped at the sensitive side of her throat as he pulled one of her thighs higher and plunged deeper into her cunt. Fire licked at her body; she cried out as it consumed her.

Brad's big frame shuddered and his shout of satisfaction vibrated against her neck. He pulsed within her, and she held him tightly with arms and legs as they both shook from the force of the pleasure that swept through them.

Anne-Marie's mind whirled in a fog of satiation, but one thing burned brightly inside her as she held Brad close. She loved him. There was no mistaking the emotion swamping her senses. She loved him, was *in* love with him. And her heart roared with triumph as he nuzzled her sweetly. Somehow, her body, brain and heart had decided to love him. Despite the heartache that might cause her come morning, she couldn't regret a moment spent with him. Her past burned away and all she knew was the happiness of being held in his arms and loved within an inch of her life, something for which she silently thanked the stars.

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Brad awoke in the night, a slender thigh resting between his, a knee gently nudging his balls. For two beats of his heart he thought he was dreaming. Then reality slammed into him and he found himself rigid with lust. Memories of the best Christmas Eve of his life played out in his head as Anne-Marie slumbered beside him.

The first time he'd made love to her, beside the fire, had been shocking in its intensity. When they'd roused from their stupor, they'd banked the fire and headed upstairs to the bed Anne-Marie told him had once belonged to her grandparents. The huge four-poster was surprisingly comfortable, and the posts had given him ideas. Once he'd lit a fire in the fireplace, the big room

had become warm enough for him to tie Anne-Marie's hands and feet to the posts, spreading her open so he could feast on her pussy without the distraction of her caresses.

He smiled to himself thinking of her incoherent cries of pleasure as he brought her to orgasm several times, licking and sucking her swollen flesh until her whole body shook. By the time he untied her, she'd been ravenous for his cock. She'd sucked him expertly, her hands fondling his balls just the way he liked. But he'd disappointed her by not coming in her mouth. Even as he rolled the condom on, she pouted, but one thrust inside her, and she completely forgot about anything else.

A soft, satisfied sigh escaped him. Making love to Anne-Marie had eclipsed every other sexual encounter he'd ever had. And he'd known it would be that way. He'd known she would blow his doors off. He also knew that she didn't think what they had would last. He could see in her beautiful dark eyes that she was storing memories. He could see a slight hint of despair and loneliness in her expression. Her Christmas star wish might have been for him, but he doubted it had been for anything more than a night of passion. He could tell she didn't believe in forever yet, but he'd convince her.

The knee between his thighs nudged his balls. He turned his head and found Anne-Marie gazing at him, her long dark hair haloing her face from the depths of the white-slipped pillow. She looked like a naughty angel, languorous and sated. He smiled at her with lascivious intent.

"How old were you when you learned to ride?" he asked softly.

Confusion clouded her eyes. "I dunno. Four-ish I guess. Maybe five. Why?"

Brad let his grin widen as he reached for the remains of a strip of condoms Anne-Marie had produced when they'd gone upstairs. "You must be a good rider."

Her bare shoulder raised in a shrug and when she spoke her voice was husky from sleep and sex. "You could say so. I never did stuff like barrel racing though. I wasn't into the whole rodeo thing."

"Doesn't matter. I'm sure you're an excellent rider." Deftly he sheathed himself. "I'm all saddled up now. Time for this cowgirl to ride," he said as he pulled her on top of his body.

Anne-Marie hissed out a breath. The wet glide of her pussy along his cock made him moan. Her hips undulated and he watched the sway of her breasts at the movement. Her coral nipples were hard twists of flesh, turning more ruddy by the minute as her arousal increased. She reached between their bodies and took hold of his cock. He groaned at the pressure of her hand sliding along his hard length. Then, with a swift twist of her hips, she sank down on him.

Brad thought he'd died and gone to heaven. The feel of her wet, velvet flesh tightly encasing his cock made him want to fall into a coma of bliss. He didn't want the sensation to ever end. But then everything kicked into high gear. Anne-Marie rode him like the consummate horsewoman that she was. Her hips rolled and snapped. Her thighs gripped. And her inner muscles milked him.

He stroked the parts of her he could reach, up her back, down her arms, her breasts and belly. He slipped his fingers between them and flicked her distended clit. She jerked and cried out as an orgasm hit her. She rocked harder on him, her palms braced flat on his chest.

Staring at the lust that infused her expression, he grabbed her by the hips and thrust up into her. She cried out and tossed her head, thrusting her breasts out toward him. He reached up and

squeezed her breasts together, pinching one nipple as he thrust again. And then her pussy clamped down on him, and he found himself coming, his cock throbbing within her.

Anne-Marie slumped on him, panting. "Oh, God. You are so good. It's never been this good before," she wheezed, trying to catch her breath.

He held her tightly, reveling in the feel of her body on his and his cock still inside her. "Only for you, baby. All of this is only for you," he muttered.

She tensed a little, and again it reminded him that she probably didn't think what they had would go farther than this one night. As he held her close, he vowed that wouldn't be the case. She might not have wished for forever, but he sure as hell had.

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Dawn lightened the sky, but fog had rolled in during the hours of the night and everything remained gray and silent as the sun rose behind the cloud cover. Standing on the porch of the gingerbread Victorian built by her grandfather for her grandmother, Anne-Marie felt the presence of their love. Earl Reston had been a simple man, a cowboy who had worked hard and saved his money and then poured it all into an expression of his love for a tiny German-born woman named Anne-Marie Horst. Earl had brought her to the brand new house as his bride and they'd had two children and nearly fifty years together before death had separated them.

Anne-Marie had always been acutely aware of the love that permeated the walls of the house she'd grown up in. She'd never felt it more than when her parents retired and as a new widow, she'd moved back into the house to stay. The house had never known Danny's presence. He'd always been gone, off being the hero, every time Anne-Marie had come home to visit. In truth, she'd come home a lot while he'd been deployed, needing the strength of family and home to bolster her during his absence.

As Christmas morning dawned, she thought about the man who slept in her bed. Brad had shown her the heights of physical pleasure. He'd been caring and attentive. When he looked at her, his entire focus was her. As much as she hated doing so, she contrasted that with the way Danny's attention had always been – in part anyway – someplace else.

She shivered and hunched in her plush robe, wrapping the folds more tightly around her naked body. Dan had been born to protect his world. Brad had been born to protect his woman. The nurturing side of both men had appealed to her, but Brad's intense focus on her not only unnerved her, it healed the raw wound in her soul. She needed that attention, needed to feel special to someone. She'd never really been first in Danny's world and that had been okay at the time, when she was younger and less needful. Now, after suffering his loss, she needed a more personal love.

Brad seemed like the real deal. He'd made her feel exquisitely feminine. She really couldn't recall the last time she'd been so aware of herself as a woman. After a single night in his arms, Anne-Marie knew she wanted more. She wanted to keep him forever and wrap him in the love of her grandparents' house. She could see herself spending every night tangled in the four-poster with Brad. He would never leave her for months at a time, lonely and empty inside...

Except that her vision of how life with Brad would be was only a vision, a wish her heart had made. Even though she had not said the words aloud when wishing on the star, her heart had spoken them nonetheless. She wanted Brad forever. She wanted a life with him. She'd just been afraid to acknowledge that she'd fallen so deeply for a man she knew little about and had never

even kissed. Now, after a night of the most exquisite loving, she had to face the truth. He'd spoken no words of love or commitment to her and once he awoke, he'd walk away. Christmas Day beckoned and he had family to be with.

Trying to swallow the lump that formed in her throat, Anne-Marie blinked back the tears that burned her eyes and squared her shoulders. Restons were strong. She was strong. That place inside her that longed for someone to lean on and rely upon would remain unfulfilled, but she would survive. And she knew that despite the pain she'd feel – already felt – when Brad walked away from her, she would not have traded her time with him for anything in the world. He'd taken away the pain of loving and losing Danny. He'd given her confidence and made her aware of her worth as a woman. She would always treasure his gifts.

"I can hear you thinking all the way upstairs."

Warm hands cupped her shoulders and Brad's mouth caressed the skin behind her right ear. She suppressed a shiver.

"It's Christmas Day," she murmured.

Brad went very still behind her. "So it is."

A deep sigh escaped her and suddenly Brad's hands dropped from her shoulders as his arms wrapped around her.

"I didn't wish for one night, Anne-Marie."

His words dropped into the muffled stillness of the fog laden air that swirled around them. She stiffened.

"I wished for forever. If you didn't wish for the same thing, I'm sorry," he said, sounding anything but sorry. In fact, he sounded fiercely determined. "Because I'm not going to let you send me away or push me away. What happened between us last night was magical and I'm not willing to chalk it up to Christmas Eve or the champagne or being lonely."

Happiness crept closer to her heart, its petals unfurling slowly with each word Brad spoke. Her stiffness began to ebb and her body eased back against his.

"I want you in my life forever, without regard to the age difference or the fact that you're a cowgirl, and I can't even figure out one end of a horse from the other."

A muffled laugh escaped her. "One end bites. The other poops."

"Hell. I think I knew that." His voice was rueful. His arms tightened around her. "The point is that it doesn't matter that there are differences between us. If Devon and Jared can make this work, you and I can."

He turned her in his arms and pressed her head back so that their gazes met. She saw the caution and determination in his expression. He guarded himself but she could see that he was ready to give her everything.

"I'm not Danny. I'm no hero. I know I could never compete with your memories of him, but I'd like you to seriously think about a relationship with me. I would give you everything in my power to give." He paused then his voice lowered. "I want it all, Anne-Marie. You. Me. Forever. And kids. The mini-van. I know it seems really soon to talk about this, but I've been wanting you for almost eight years so it's not soon to me."

The happiness that had crept closer to her heart suddenly bloomed and heat poured through her, fueled by joy and passion.

"Danny loved me. But Dan was a man of action who lived and died to serve his country," she whispered as she stroked Brad's bare chest beneath the open flannel shirt. "I spent all those years waiting for him. Waiting for him to love me as I loved him, waiting for him to disentangle himself from his first marriage. Waiting for him to come home from far off places. Waiting for his casket to be lowered into the ground so I could get on with the business of grieving."

She shook her head with remembered sadness and tears spilled down her cheeks. "I spent all those years knowing he loved me but wanting more. It was okay when I was younger and felt as if we had our whole lives ahead of us. But now, I know life is short and you have to live it before it slips away. You can't spend it waiting. *I* can't spend it waiting. Not anymore." She drew a deep, shaky breath. "I want you, Brad. I've fallen in love with you. I don't want a hero. I want a man who will be there for me, who will give me children and help me raise them. I want a man who puts me first and will be there for me day and night. I don't ever want to feel lonely again."

Brad lowered his head until their foreheads rested together and Anne-Marie touched his cheek with soft fingertips.

"I'm going to stick so close to you that you'll pay someone to get rid of me eventually," he murmured, as his hands cupped her ass, lifting her against him.

"Would never happen. I will cherish every moment you give me," she vowed. "Every touch, every kiss, every orgasm."

His brows rose. "Is that an invitation?"

She smiled lovingly at him, hardly able to believe her good fortune. "It's Christmas morning, what do you think?"

With one swift movement, he swung her up into his arms. "I think my Christmas wish just came true. Although I'll know it for fact when I have a ring on your finger and I've changed your last name."

Anne-Marie linked her arms around his strong neck and clung to the man she loved. "You can believe it now, Bradley Marsh. I love you. You're my Christmas wish come true. You're everything I was afraid to say out loud to the star, but my heart made the wish for me and the star heard. Every day I have with you is Christmas all over again."

Brad's shoulder nudged the door open and he carried her inside the house. "I think you need to let Elle know we'll be late to dinner," he murmured against the arch of her throat.

"They'll know what we're up to," she protested as he headed toward the stairs.

"Don't care. It's not every day that Christmas wishes come true."

Anne-Marie tugged on a lock of Brad's hair, and he stopped at the foot of the stairs.

She gazed up at him, feeling her heart near to bursting with love and joy. "Merry Christmas, Brad."

He pressed his mouth to hers, whispering against her lips, "Wish I may, wish I might, kiss my love each day and night. Merry Christmas, baby."

Anne-Marie held him tightly as he kissed her with a fierce passion that echoed in her heart. Silently, she thanked the Christmas spirits for the best present she'd ever received and then she

turned her attention to the man who held her and promised to love her forever.

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About the Author

LEX VALENTINE is a bestselling, award winning author who writes across genres from contemporary to paranormal, urban fantasy and sci-fi. A native of California's Central Coast, Lex now lives in Southern California with her college student daughter Nikki, her long haired, tattooed husband Ken, and a bunch of cats she calls "babies." She loves loud rock music, builds her own computers, and works full-time for a cemetery/mortuary company as the network administrator.

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