

Christmas Wish

The one thing Annie desperately wanted to give her mother for Christmas didn't look promising again this year.

She ambled down the tree-lined path to the barn. The breeze rustled through the branches. Her footprints leaving evidence of her trek in the powdery snow. Flipping her scarf around her neck, she burrowed her hands into her pockets. The temperature had dropped ten degrees in the last hour. Was her sister cold and hungry? Was she even alive?

Six years had passed since the kidnapping of her and her twin sister Abby. The memory as vivid today as the day the police found Annie broken and beaten in a ditch. Thrown away like garbage. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

She'd struggled and fought to keep her sister from being their captor's punching bag. Touching her cheek, a shiver ran down her spine. She had taken that role. It had almost cost her life, but it had been worth it.

Her final conversation with Abby whispered in her mind.

When the opportunity comes, run. Go get help. Abby. Do you hear me?

But, I don't want to leave you. I don't want you hurt.

Please, Abby. Promise me you'll go.

Okay. And I'll come back with help.

They had turned eighteen and were celebrating with friends when her life turned upside down. The last time she saw Abby, she had given her the opening to escape. A broken jaw, concussion, and fractured ribs had been her reward. But Abby ran like she promised. It was only when Annie's captors thought she'd die they threw her out along a country road. A farmer found her, but Abby never surfaced. No one had seen her since.

The police spent four years looking for Abby with no luck. With her degree in Criminal Justice, Annie joined a private investigative firm two years ago and quietly continued the search for her sister.

She pulled her jacket tighter and hung her head. *Oh Abby. Where are you?*

Hands gripped her shoulders. “You okay, sis?”

“No.” Tears burned her eyes.

“Come here.” Her brother, Adam, pulled her into a hug. “I miss her too.”

“I thought maybe...” She choked back a sob.

“Maybe you’d find her this year?”

“Yeah. Stupid huh.”

“Not at all. I think you’re pretty great for not giving up.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Now how about you come back in and have dinner. Mom’s worried about you. Says you’re too skinny. Not that I agree.”

She slugged him in the arm. “Thanks a lot.”

His chuckled and wrapped her in a headlock, knuckling her hair. She squirmed and squealed giving him the reaction he was looking for.

Her phone chirped. She pulled away and yanked it out of her pocket. Glancing at the caller ID, dizziness washed over her.

“Hello.”

“Annie. This is Detective Marsh.”

“Detective.”

“I have some news.”

His somber words rang in her ears.

Phone against her ear, she pulled keys from her pocket and ran to her car.

“Annie. What is it?” Adam yelled.

She disconnected the call and flung her car door open.

“Annie!”

“Tell mom I’ll be back in time for Christmas breakfast.” She slammed her car in drive, gravel spitting from the tires.

The rollercoaster of emotions from last night left her wrung out. She’d missed Christmas Eve with her family and now she was late for Christmas breakfast. She snuck in the back door of the house and made her way through the house. The aroma from breakfast leftovers hung in the air.

The chatter of voices ceased as she stepped into the living room. Lights twinkled and wrapped presents flowed from under the Christmas tree. One lone gift sat on the piano bench. Her heart squeezed. Every year her parents bought a gift for Abby and placed it on the bench. A symbol of love and hope. She blinked back the tears threatening to fall.

“Annie, honey. Where have you been?” Her mother stood and took a step toward her.

Annie held up her hand, stopping her mother.

“I ...I have some news.” She moved next to Adam and grabbed his hand.

Her mother gasped.

“I didn’t tell you, but I’ve been searching for Abby for almost two years now. Last night, I received a call from Detective Marsh.” She blew out a breath.

Adam squeezed her hand giving her the courage to continue. “I found out the night Abby escaped, she fell and hit her head. A homeless man discovered her and took care of her until she

regained consciousness. Problem was she lost her memory. She couldn't even remember her name. The homeless community took her in and she lived with them until two years ago."

She bit her lip to keep the tears at bay. So much time lost with her sister. "Over the years she gained back pieces of her past, but couldn't put enough together to find us. By then, the news of the kidnapping had died, and the family who took her in had no idea Abby was missing. Due to my investigation, information filtered to the right people."

Tears streamed down her mother's face. Annie's heart twisted. Oh how she dreamed of the day she could bring Abby home.

"Last night, I found Abby." She sucked in a sob. "Abby ... Oh Mom. She's alive and healthy, and..." Annie backed out of the room, grabbed her twin sister's hand, and tugged her through the archway. "And she's finally home. Merry Christmas, Mom."

A cry filled the room, and mom threw her arms around Abby. "My baby girl."

Abby fell into her mother's embrace and wept.

Worry had plagued Annie that her sister wouldn't want to come home. But once they met, she knew Abby's missing puzzle pieces had fallen into place. Her sister buzzed with excitement, but worry simmered beneath the surface. Annie attempted to relieve her sister's fear, assuring her they had never stopped loving her.

Here she stood in the living room. The years melting away.

Adam yanked Annie down on the chair next to him. "I can't believe you found her."

She smiled. "Our family's whole again."

"Merry Christmas, Annie." He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

A lump formed in her throat and her vision blurred. Her dream came true. Her twin sister was home.

For there is nothing that God cannot do. Luke 1:37 GNT

The Lord is all I have, and so in him I put my hope. Lamentations 3:24 GNT