





THE CHRISTMAS GIFT

I am Lenise Lee



Lenise Lee

A thousand lives to live...one breath...one word...one story at a time...

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Author's Note:

This is a work of fiction. Although the characters in this fictitious writing engage in unprotected and experimental sexual acts, the author does not endorse unsafe sexual practices in real life situations.

A Special Holiday Author's Note

Rejoice when destiny brings a new chance to hold loved ones while they are near.
Always treasure the power and purity of true love, which is the greatest gift two hearts
can share as one...Lenise Lee



I am Lenise Lee

To My Darling...Thank you for a decade of Christmas laughs and many more to come...



The Christmas Gift

I am Lenise Lee
By
Lenise Lee

The excited laughter of children echoed in Alex's ears. Their chaotic and joyful noises filtered in from somewhere behind him and snapped the young chauffeur's attention into the present.

In a swift rush of action, the busy metro scene sparked back to life at full speed all around him. From beneath his dark limousine driver's cap, Alex flicked his sea green eyes from side to side as he watched the never-ending stream of blank-faced pedestrians pushing on toward urgent and unknown destinations. Black sedans with blue and white New York license plates and taxis the color of ripe banana peels zipped back and forth along the wide asphalt street lining the park he was seated in. The young man, who was barely touching his mid-twenties, adjusted his frameless prescription lenses and took in an eyeful of the same drudging scenario that had been repeated to him dozens of times since he migrated to the vast metropolis. With one quick motion, he flipped off the black hard-beaked cap and tossed it beside him on the bench then dropped his eyes down to the gray concrete beneath his feet. He raised two big hands and smoothed his dirty blond hair forward then made fast work of ruffling up the short cut into a spiky mess. Loose and wild was his usual hairstyle when he was off duty; he loved to feel the cool November air running across his scalp.

A sudden impulse hit Alex and he pushed up the sleeve of his black uniform jacket to check his watch again. Only twenty minutes had passed since Alex dropped off his agency's new client, an Italian investor named Rossi, at the towering skyscraper on the other side of the jammed boulevard. Depending on how he viewed the situation, time was either ticking away much too fast or inching by at an extremely slow pace. The businessman wouldn't be exiting his meeting for another hour and a half, which would

give Alex plenty of time to mow through midtown traffic and reach his destination on the opposite end of the city. However, the reverse side of the scenario was that he wouldn't be able to drive back to this location without getting stuck in the middle of the evening rush hour. If Alex became held up in a signature New York traffic jam, he might as well consider today his very last day of employment with the shuttle company. Once his bosses found out he was late picking up an international *and very wealthy* client, they wouldn't hesitate to fire him on the spot. Why? Because in this roller coaster economy there were already ten more eager guys lined up and ready to take his spot in less than a moment's notice.

Was he really willing to risk a steady income just to chase after a fifty-fifty childhood dream? Alex sat up straight and stretched his long arms across the top of the green park bench while he considered his dilemma. This was the event that was supposed to change his entire life. The opportunity he had spent years of working overtime and planning for was waiting for him less than ten miles away, and all he had to do was to decide his next move. Finding an affordable piece of real estate within the crammed borders of this massive urban city should have been impossible for someone with Alex's tight pockets but fortune had dealt him a double dose of good luck. He was able to convince the realtor to wave the finder's fee *and* talked her into leasing the tiny art studio space for half price, with only one condition – a full year's rent was due in one lump sum by the end of this month. It was a once in a lifetime deal for a starving artist such as himself, and Alex couldn't simply sit here and let it fall through.

Out of habit, he tapped the top of his charcoal black uniform jacket. The sound of the paper check crumpling inside his pocket calmed the man's nerves by a few degrees.

He had the full payment folded inside of his jacket and the signed and notarized lease agreement to the studio was in the glove compartment of the limo. Now, all Alex had to do was to find a way of getting across town and back with enough time to close the deal before the real estate agent backed out and without being late for his scheduled pickup.

Another round of giggles flew through the air and drew Alex's eyes toward the source of the playful sounds. As he turned his head, a splash of hot pink shuffled across the corner of his vision. A little girl with flapping pink shoelaces ran toward a woman in a belted cream-colored wool coat sitting on the other end of the bench.

"Ms. Jasmine, they came untied again," a tiny girl with a puffy white coat and two braided ponytails breathlessly huffed out.


When she pushed her small foot forward to seek help with her wayward laces, a pair of feminine hands reached down to rescue the frustrated child. A young woman, close to his age, was the owner of the silky brown hands. Before she dipped forward to tie up the girl's sneakers, Alex caught a glimpse of her side profile and found a muse for his newest painting. He silently wondered how he had neglected to notice such a beautiful face sitting so near to him until now. As Alex imagined the brilliant earth tone mixture of tan, brown, and bronze he would use to capture the stunning woman's image on a fresh canvas, his artistic vision switched on and temporarily blocked out the impasse he had been struggling with a moment ago.

His sensitive eyes snapped a mental photo of the female's elegant outline while she smiled at the little child. Afterward, the highly skilled sketchpad embedded in his mind immediately went to work etching out a rough draft of her captivating profile. Even the weakened autumn daylight could not mask the soft glow hovering on the woman's

cocoa shaded cheek. If he touched her face right now, would his fingers glide effortlessly over her flawless skin? His imaginary pencil strokes were careful to trace out every curve and loop of her full and natural hairdo, which she secured with a cream-colored cloth headband placed perfectly around the crown of her curly head. Glints of sunlight that streaked between the cramped towers surrounding them caused the twisting strands at the extreme edges of the dark Afro hairstyle to shimmer like blazing amber.

The man was helpless to pull his sights away from his mocha-shaded beauty. A small smile lifted the corners of Alex's rosy lips while the woman finished her task. Once the tiny sneaks were taken care of, she popped up and zipped the girl's open coat.

"Samantha, sweetie, what have you been doing over there, playing war?"

 he laughed low and, without realizing it, Alex laughed in sync with her. He followed her smooth motions as she carefully straightened the child's twisted denim skirt and tugged her crooked white leggings back into shape. Once the woman had rearranged the little girl into a neat and tidy condition, she cupped the child's miniature hands and beamed a gentle grin at her.

"What are we going to do about these laces of yours? If I keep tying them for you, you'll never learn how to do it yourself."

With each softly spoken word, the young woman's velvety voice wrapped itself around Alex's senses. An enchanting stranger unknowingly commanded his full attention and, at least for these few intriguing moments, all of his worries were lost to the four winds.

“I know, but I can’t cross them as good as you.” The small girl pouted then peeped glumly down at her bright shoestrings. “I only make knots.”

Her sad expression tugged at Alex’s heart. He had completely forgotten how a task such as learning how to tie shoelaces could easily become a six-year-old’s first proud leap toward independence.

“Bunny ears.”

After he spoke the phrase, two sets of peering eyes darted in his direction.

“Excuse me?”

The woman leveled her sight at him and Alex offered her a polite half grin in return.

“I heard you talking about remembering how to tie shoes...and then it just hit me...bunny ears.” He glanced down at the floppy loops of his shiny black driving shoes then smiled at the little girl. “That’s how I learned. Plus rabbit ears never try to trip you during the first round of hide and seek.”

The girl giggled but the pretty woman only responded with a hesitant upward tilt of her tinted mouth.

“Mind if I show her?”

Big brown almond shaped eyes, colored in with an alluring shade like deep roasted coffee, watched him cautiously. He understood her initial suspicion and waited patiently while she decided on what to do.

“Um...sure,” her cocoa cheeks lifted up into a small smile.

“It’s easy,” Alex said as he scooted up a few feet further along the bench. The curious little girl watched his instructions closely while he showed her the quick and easy

shoestring fix. First, he untied and retied his own dark laces. Afterward, he guided her through looping her sneaker strings into two sets of secure candy pink bows. “And now you’re a pro.” Alex grinned at little Samantha while she smiled in amazement at what she had accomplished all on her own. “No more emergency help needed, right?”

“Nope,” the girl shook her braided pigtails vigorously, “I can do it myself now. Thanks, mister.”

Size three pink and white sneakered feet wasted no more precious playtime minutes. The child quickly abandoned the two adults as she skipped away and then jaunted into a sprint toward another adventure in the grassy distance.

“I’m Alex.”

He held out his hand and his attractive companion accepted by laying warm fingers across his own. The pair shook hands lightly and he had to push off the urge to hold onto her sleek palm for a few seconds longer. She smiled and Alex snapped another keepsake photo in his mind. Two dimples pierced the curved cheeks of a pure and lovely face. His years in the city had conditioned him to staring at hard scowls for most of the day, and encountering a kind expression again was like taking in a refreshing breath.

“Jasmine,” her sweet tone instantly trapped his affections, “thanks for doing that.”

Alex was already sitting very near to his muse but he had to hold himself back from leaning in to close the distance separating them. However, he never allowed their connected gaze to drop away.

“No prob...like I said, I’ve been using that method since my dad taught it to me when I was in first grade. Fast and efficient...no reason to change what isn’t broken.”

“Smart man,” Jasmine nodded and Alex couldn’t resist following every movement of her honey-painted lips and every quake of her thick curls.

Another admiring smile tugged at his mouth just before he answered.

“Nah...not at all,” Alex replied while rubbing a palm through his messy golden locks. The problems he had deserted while coming to a little girl’s rescue suddenly ran across his mind again, faster and more frantic than before. “If I were smart, I wouldn’t be stuck driving someone else around all day. I would have figured out a way to make a million off of my one and only talent by now...then some other guy in a penguin suit would be ushering *me* around town instead.”

Jasmine angled her curvy frame toward him and crossed one of her jean legs over the other. She lifted a sculpted eyebrow and tapped a slim finger to her closed lips, then spoke her appraisal of him aloud.

“Let me guess...you’re an aspiring actor.” Her cheeks rounded out and formed a pearly smile. “No, no...you’re definitely a struggling singer who’s waiting for his hit single to break a new pop chart record.”

Alex raised his own lightly tinted brows.

“Are you sure...do I fit the part?”

Although he was teasing, he was curious about what Jasmine would say. For him, the attraction was undeniable. One glance into her chocolate brown eyes and he was hers for the choosing, however, she might not feel the same.

Jasmine tilted her face and studied him closely. While curious eyes dashed across every inch of his features, Alex became lost in her roaming gaze. For once in his life, he didn’t seem to mind being the subject instead of the

artist.

“Hm,” she lowered her dark lashes and narrowed her eyes playfully, “Wild hipster hair...bright green eyes flashing behind stylish lenses...cute smile. Yeah...” she offered him a nod of certified approval, “If you were on one of those talent shows, I wouldn’t hesitate to phone in a vote for you, just so I could stare at you onscreen for one more week.”

A loud laugh rumbled from his chest.

“Thanks,” he winked and Jasmine responded with a slight cranberry blush. “I wish I had met you sooner, then maybe I would have realized I was wasting all my time and effort in the wrong place years ago.” He rubbed another quick hand through his messy blond strands. “Too bad I can’t even sing Jingle Bells on tune or you might have given me a new game plan to work with.”

He leaned back against the bench and folded his arms. A sudden feeling of dread and personal failure sunk into the center of his stomach. Perhaps he really was pointing his entire life in the wrong direction. Ten years of creative arts classes plus another two years dressed like a fancy mortician and shuffling the rich and famous from one urgent meeting and extravaganza to the next and all Alex had to show for his hard work and study was a low budget apartment, which doubled as his makeshift studio, and not one painting sold for any significant dollar amount. Even if he managed to lease a bigger space, would he be able to raise enough capital to keep his dream going? Or, after his yearlong lease expired, would he end up on this bench again, staring blankly into the distance and dressed in a tacky black suit and brimmed cap once more? Maybe it was

time to reconsider his options and do something more useful with his life and with his savings, instead of dropping every dime into a black hole of empty hopes.

“Are you all right?”

A gentle hand touched the square shoulder of his uniform jacket. Alex looked over, and when he connected with Jasmine’s caring glance, his mood instantly lightened.

“Of course, I am,” he said while staring deeply into Jasmine’s eyes. There was restrained excitement hiding behind her almond eyes. Was he the cause of the delight swimming in her sparkling irises? “I’m sitting next to the prettiest lady in New York County *and* I saved the day for a little girl. It’s like hitting two homeruns in a row...a man’s ego can’t possibly get any bigger after a rare play like that.”

“Was that sincere or sarcasm?” She tossed back a mocking laugh.

Alex shifted his position so that the couple faced one another and were once again held captive in a longing gaze. He took a chance and touched the tips of the silky brown fingers lying on the seat of the bench.

“With you, I promise to always be sincere.”

She laughed louder and her chestnut hair shimmered in the filtered sunlight. Jasmine’s crimson tinted cheeks were lifted high and Alex was tempted to lean in and lay a kiss at the center of the one closest to him. It would be too much to wish she might actually accept a full embrace. And if she did, the very next question would be...would he be able to control himself once their lips were pressed together?

“Mhm...*that* answer is exactly why I don’t talk to strangers in the park.”

“*Stranger?*” Alex put his hand over his heart to pretend hurt feelings. “Come on, Jaz...you and I are practically dating already. I’m just waiting for you to pick the spot for our first dinner.”

“Jaz?” Another tip of an arched brow.

“Oh...I’m sorry...do you mind if I call you that?”

“Not as long as I can call you Al.”

“Deal,” he grinned wide. At the same moment, a burst of wild laughter tumbled from the playground behind the young couple. Alex turned and watched a new round of tag kick off. He spotted Samantha and was happy to see that her pink bunny laces were still holding strong. “You a teacher?”

“No,” Jasmine’s voice dropped an octave lower, “more like a social worker. I’m doing an internship for my MSW at a group home a few miles from here.”

Her answer surprised him.

“I’m confused...all of these kids look fine. Don’t social workers usually work with children who are dangerous or in some sort of trouble?”

Jasmine’s smile faded.

“Actually, all of these kids are in foster care. They’re staying at Holiday House, where I’m working.”

Alex regretted asking the question, however, his curiosity was starting to get the better of him. He could have changed the subject but he needed to understand how a kid as happy and vibrant as Samantha would be part of an at risk population. He checked for her again and was relieved to find that she and the other kids were still safe and having a good time chasing each other through the outdoor gym.

“But...they seem okay...energetic... cheerful...just regular kids.”

“We try to keep the children in a lot of group activities and events but each child will react differently, depending on their situation. Most of them have been to three foster homes this year alone.” She turned and took a survey of the excited children. When Jasmine faced Alex again, there was a satisfied smile painted across her cheeks. “Holiday House tries to give them a more permanent place to live until their cases are settled. It’s not good for a child to be shifted around too much; they need support and stability and that’s our goal.”

A hammer of realization stamped out his self-pity. Even with all the piles of issues Alex was facing as an adult, everyday life must be twice as hard for a little kid who has no idea why they can’t go home or why they keep getting moved from house to house.

“Well, it’s a good thing they have your organization to help.”

“Yeah, that’s one of the reasons why I chose social work. The classes are tough and the tuition is outrageous, but seeing the big smiles on the kids’ faces when they get to go out and just *play* and have fun for a few hours, without worrying about if they’re going to see their families again or what they have to say in court, is definitely worth every sleepless night and all of the hundred page reports that come with this field.”

Her proud smile dropped again. It was Alex’s turn to extend a bit of caring attention. He eased a few inches closer and gently draped a comforting arm around the woman’s shoulders.

“Jasmine...what’s wrong?”

She shook her head and looked in the opposite direction.

Alex placed a long finger under her slightly trembling chin and used the digit to coax her brown doe eyes back toward him.

“Jaz...I know we only met a few minutes ago but maybe if you tell me what’s going on, I can help in some way. After all, I’m an expert at quick fixes...Samantha will vouch for me.”

Alex lifted his mouth into a friendly smile and was relieved when his beautiful Jasmine returned a small grin.

“I’m just a little worried. The director of Holiday House says that Christmas is going to be tough to pull off this year. The children deserve to have something special to look forward to, and I’m not sure how we’re going to make that happen.”

Alex frowned. The thought of his new pal Sam not having a doll or one of those new talking ninja ranger thingies didn’t sit well on his mind.

“Don’t nonprofits usually get lots of funding and donations?”

“Not as much as we use to. Budget cuts hurt the books big time and then, of course, people have to provide for their own children before they can give what they have to someone else’s child.”

Alex nodded.

“True.”

The sound of an angry diesel engine rumbled onto the scene. An elongated yellow school bus pulled up and stopped at the concrete curb. The doors of the bus flipped open and the driver waived to Jasmine.

“Be right there!” After she yelled out to the transporter, Jasmine turned sullen eyes toward Alex. “Our ride is here...I have to go round up the kids and head back to the home.”

Alex presented his exquisite lady with a wide grin and a parting wink. However, on the inside, his heart was heavy and his chest was tightening.

“I’ll see you again soon, Jaz.”

“I’ll be waiting.” The image of tiny dimples pressed against toasty cheeks caused his faint pulse to thump hard once again.

Jasmine stood and adjusted her coat. A final departing gaze from ebony eyes and Alex knew he had to make good on his promise. He also knew there was a new task to complete before the end of the day.

“Hey, Jasmine,” Alex called out to her before she was out of hearing range. She turned and looked at him with a questioning glance. “Holiday House?”

She nodded and smiled, almost as if she was aware of what Alex was planning to do.

Samantha waved to him as she skipped along the edges of a large group of elementary age children and then one more time from the window seat next to Jasmine on the grumbling school bus. And each time, Alex made sure to return the favor.

Once the bus had driven off into the distance, leaving only a sooty trail of smoke behind, Alex checked his watch for the last time. He still had forty-five minutes to spare before Rossi’s meeting was done. It would be plenty of time to complete his latest business venture. Alex would only need twenty minutes to drive to the bank and get a cashier’s check issued for half of what he

would have squandered on an art gallery he wasn't even certain anyone would ever visit. At least now he could be sure that all of his money wouldn't be piled on top of a smoldering fool's dream.

While Alex was waiting in the post office line to buy a stamped envelope, he made sure to include a very specific memo on the check for his small Christmas gift to Holiday House – *To be used for super awesome toys and other cool stuff*. Afterward, he used the charcoal sketch pencil he was carrying in his uniform pocket to draw a novelty gift bow in one of the corners of the stiff cashier paper.

As the line inched forward, Alex wondered if Jasmine would ever see this sketch, and if she did, would his lady even remember their first date in the park. While he continued to color in his black and white picture, a short woman walking near the crowded line bumped into him hard then hurried on without excusing herself. He didn't yell out or curse at her as she dashed away, instead he turned his thoughts to Jasmine's pretty face and his nerves instantly settled. Alex replayed the photos of her he had memorized earlier and, in that exact moment, pledged to himself that he would find his charming lady again before the New Year rolled over. And when he did, he would present Jasmine with a colorful courtship gift like none other – an oil painting done specifically in honor of her charming beauty.

With thoughts of a tender reunion floating through his infatuated mind the entire time, Alex finished up his pencil sketch, dropped the envelope to Holiday House in the mail, then drove to pick up his passenger and finish up another work day.

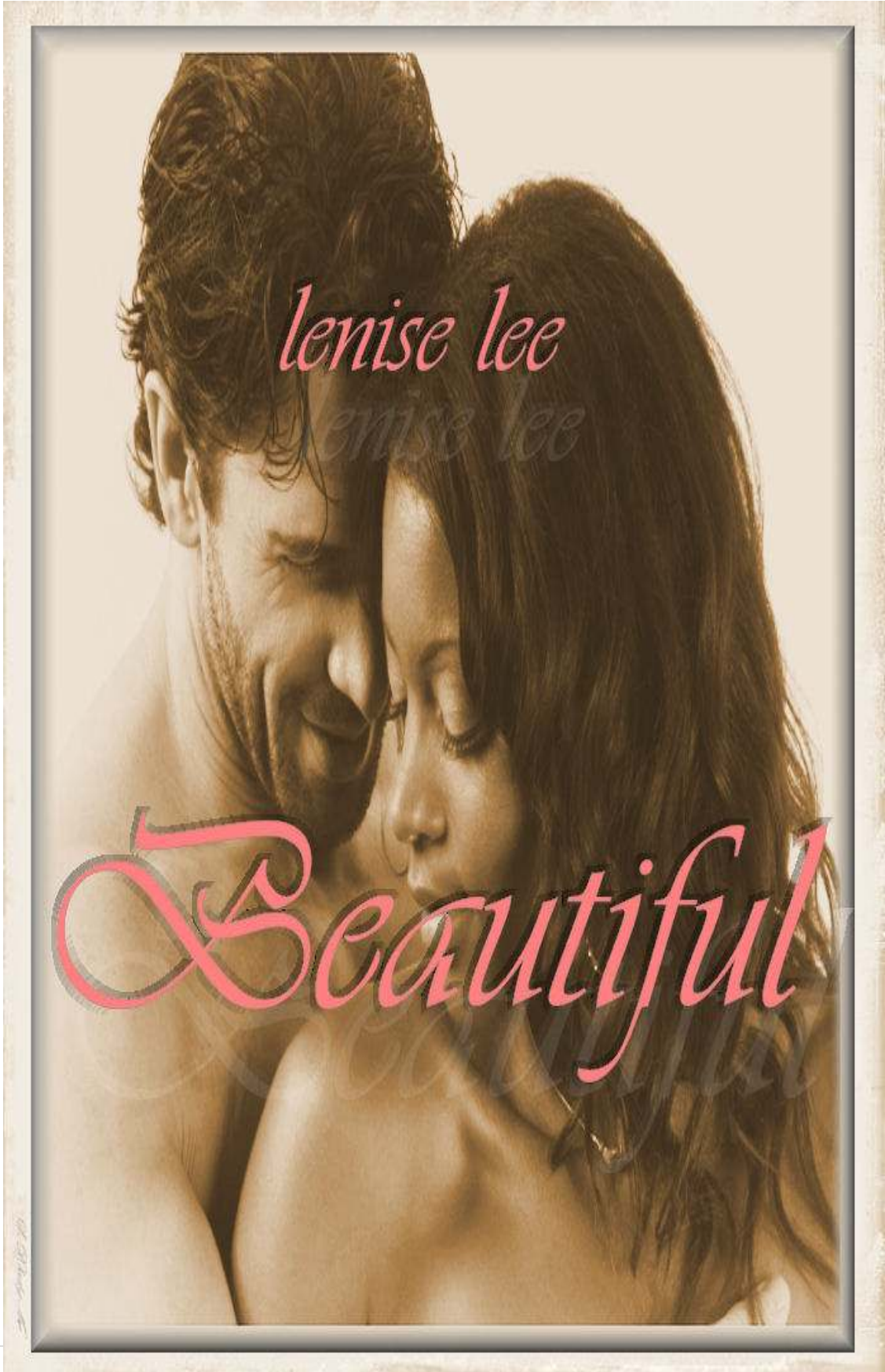
Could one Christmas gift actually usher the way toward the infinite possibilities which only true love can offer?



Alex and Jasmine, plus my darling Nichole and Pierce (*After the Sunset*), will return for special guest appearances in *Giovanni, My Love*.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, Dear Reader...LL ☺

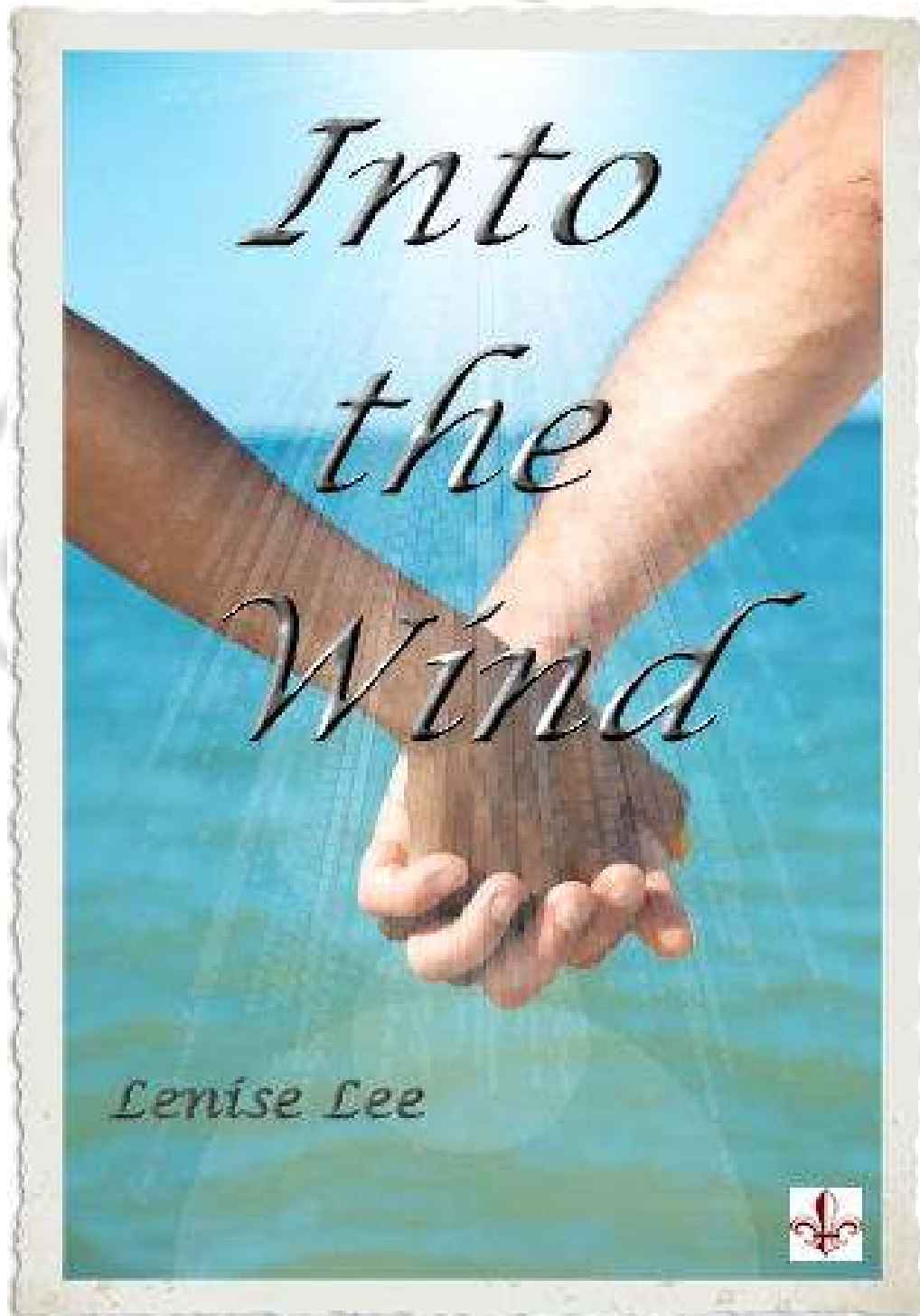
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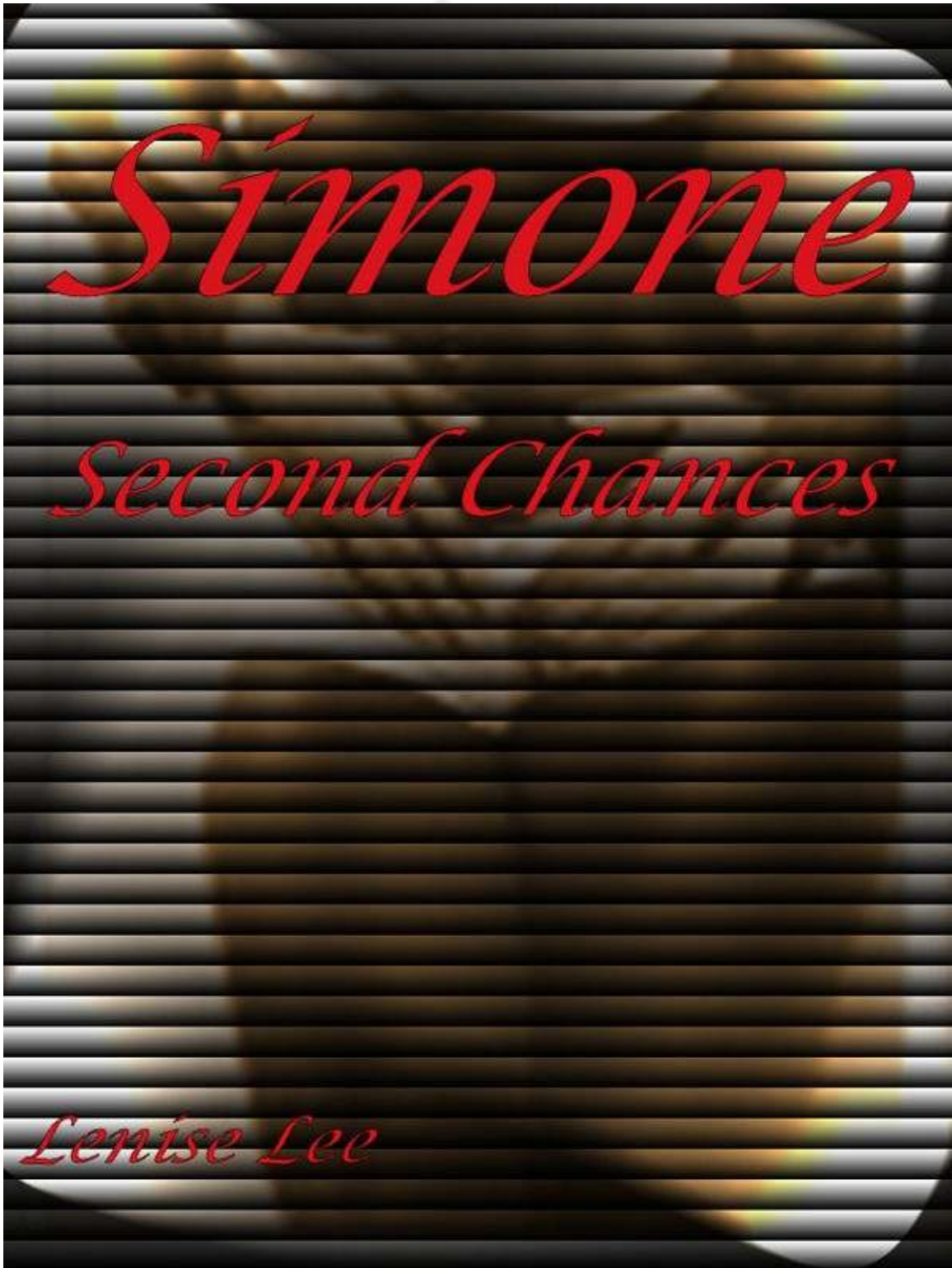


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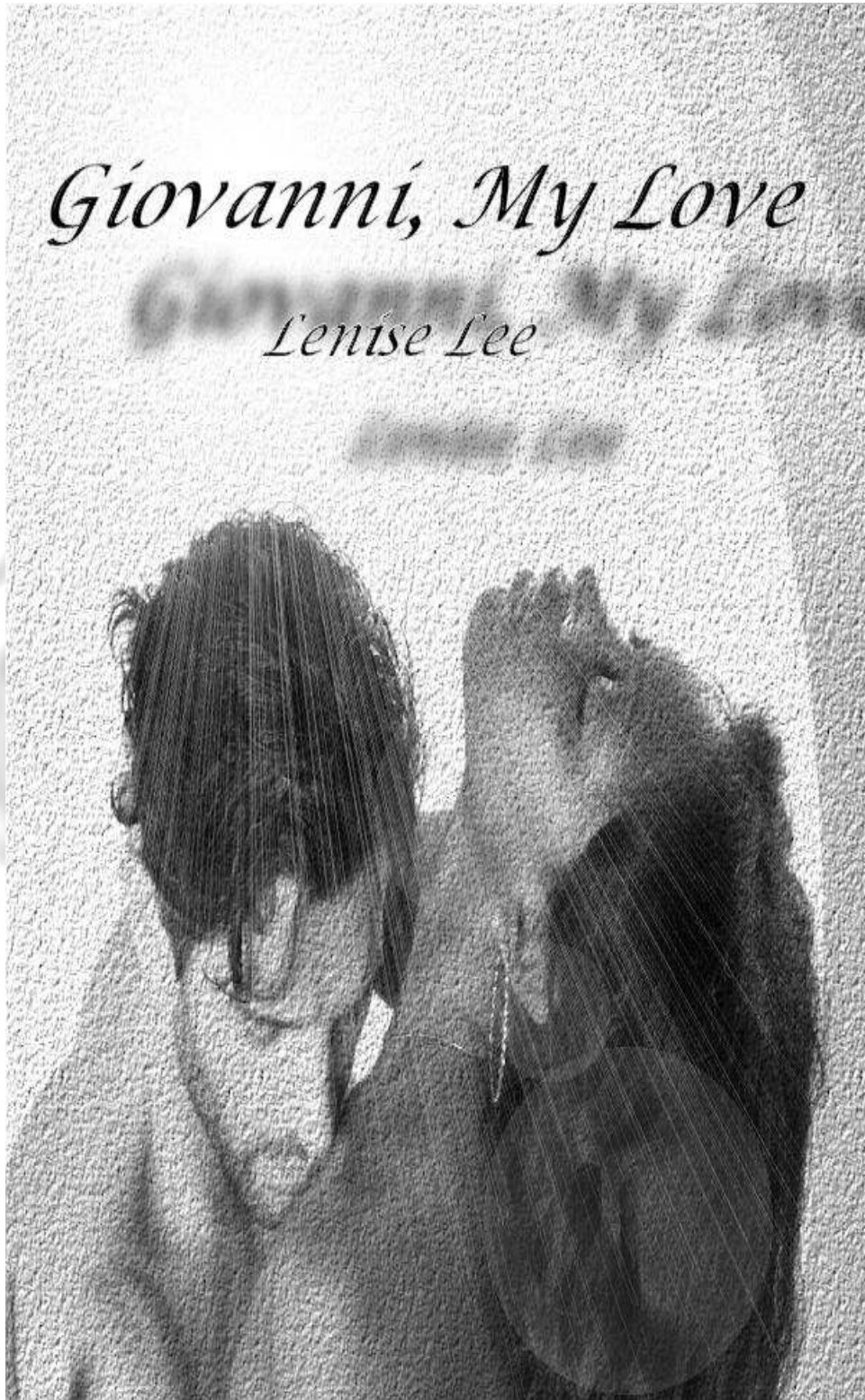
Beautiful





Giovanni, My Love

Lenise Lee





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