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The Present
Beth Williamson

Holiday eBook Freebie

The Present

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December, 1894

Cheshire, Wyoming

The first snowflakes fell silently all around him as he knelt at Bonita's grave. Ethan Malloy would do anything to bring her back, to have her beside him again. Yet he knew no matter how he wished or whether he sold his soul, she was gone for good. It had been two years since she'd been taken from him, and he still felt so alone in the world.

Most folks would call him plumb loco to feel so alone. The Malloys were a huge family of six children and all the siblings but Ethan had children. They were a formidable force that invoked annoyance, joy, frustration and love.

Yet Ethan felt utterly alone.

A chill snaked through his body, sending a shiver from his head to his toes. He glanced down and realized the snow was falling heavily. In fact, it was already four inches deep.

How long had he been lost in thought at his wife's grave? Ethan stood and gasped at the pain in his legs. It felt as if pins and needles were being jammed into his skin. He had been there too long again. Not surprisingly the day had turned to night with the onset of the wicked storm.

It was only two in the afternoon, but it felt more like ten at night. He brushed the snow from his trousers as another chill hit him. He was supposed to have left for his parents' house hours earlier, but he'd put it off to spend time on Christmas Eve with Bonita.

Or perhaps he had been avoiding his family. They were overwhelming at times, especially after he became a widower. While no one was shoving women in his path, they constantly fussed over his single state and his empty ranch house. Ethan had had enough fussing, and had started avoiding family gatherings. Then of course he felt guilty, another dark emotion churning around in his gut.

As he made his way back to the house, the wind began to howl around him. Storms could whip across the Wyoming prairie and make a man snowblind. Hell, he could get lost going from the house to the barn.

His face grew stiff from the cold and his nose began to run. Suddenly he realized that he was in danger of not making it back to his house, much less to his parents' house.

Ethan could be in trouble.

Isabel Campbell cursed heartily as the horse simply stopped.

"Dammit, you old nag, what are you doing?" she flicked the reins, but the hellish beast wouldn't move. She counted to ten and tried again, but the horse stood still.

She glanced around at the snow as it blanketed the countryside around her. No doubt this was a typical Wyoming storm, but as a displaced southern belle, it was formidable. She could hardly see a thing through the swirling white flakes.

The man at the livery told her it was a short hour long ride to the Peterson's ranch, where she'd been hired as their new housekeeper. At the age of thirty, a comfortable bed, a steady job and the security of a home were what she craved.

Too bad the cursed horse didn't want to believe in that particular dream.

Isabel sighed heavily then climbed down from the carriage. She'd purchased sturdy boots, which didn't look especially handsome with her wool traveling outfit, but they were warm. The moment her feet touched the ground, the horse nearly flew into motion and left her standing there.

Her mouth fell open in disbelief as her belongings, and her safe passage to the Peterson's, disappeared into the white swirling mass.

She knew if she was on foot, there was the very real possibility she would die out on the prairie. That wasn't a very palatable future for a scrapper like Izzie.

"Hey, come back here. I didn't mean the old nag comment!" She hitched up her skirt and ran after the carriage.

Ethan lost track of how long it took him to reach the corral in front of the barn. His feet were numb—the only reason he knew they were still there was he was still walking. The snow had already reached eight inches deep, but it wasn't just the snow.

The wind whipped the snow crystals into his face, like little stinging bullets. His ears rang from the constant assault by the howling storm. An angel must've been riding his shoulder because in the midst of the hell around him, he saw a light.

Relief flooded him when he realized it was a lantern, then he was puzzled. If it was his house, and no one was home, how was a lantern even burning? He certainly would never leave the house with one burning—only an idiot would do that.

If he were honest it didn't matter why it was burning, just that it was. For Ethan it was a beacon in the storm that led him home safely.

When his boots touched the front porch, he breathed a sigh of relief even as the cold kept him in its tangible grip. He finally gripped the knob and stumbled through the door. His boots slipped on the caked snow stuck on them and he slid across the floor, then he hit the rag rug Bonita had made and landed flat on his back. The breath was knocked completely out of him.

As the snowflakes blew in through the open door onto his face, a woman with carrot red hair appeared above him.

"Well, hell's bells, look at my Christmas present." She reached behind him and closed the door. "You must be freezing."

He wanted to ask her who the hell she was and why she was trespassing, but he still couldn't catch his breath. Judging by her accent, she wasn't a native to Wyoming, Georgia or Alabama was more like it.

She knelt down beside him and frowned. "You own this place?"

Ethan managed a grunt and pointed a shaking finger at her.

"Isabel Carmichael." She shook his hand with a surprising firmness. "I was trying to find the Peterson ranch when my stupid horse decided to go off for a stroll in the storm. Old nag is probably safe at the livery by now."

He vaguely remembered Rick Peterson mentioning needing a housekeeper. However, this woman wasn't exactly what he expected. Most housekeepers were motherly types with big breasts and round shapes. Isabel Carmichael couldn't be farther from that description.

Her red hair practically glowed in the lantern light, then there was the matter of her clothes. She was wearing britches, a shirt that was far too big for her, and her hair was in an unfashionable braid, not unlike his sister Nicky. It was Isabel's hands, however, that told him the real story. They were callused and much too strong for a simple housekeeper.

Her bright blue eyes narrowed as he continued to stare at her. "I assume you can speak and not just stare, right?"

Ethan wondered if Isabel ever held onto a thought she didn't speak. It appeared to him she just simply let everything roll off her tongue. He managed to suck in a much needed breath and pushed himself up on his elbows.

She watched him, her head cocked to one side as if assessing him. "You're one of those Malloys, aren't you?"

It was his turn to frown. "I'm Ethan Malloy and this is my house. You, Isabel Carmichael, are trespassing."

She cocked one brow. "I thought about simply cowering on your front porch, but then I thought you might trip over my carcass."

Apparently Isabel was cursed, or blessed, with a sassy mouth and quick wit.

"How did you find my house anyway? It must've been dark." His back ached right along with his head from the fall, accompanied by his cheeks and ears burning with the warmth in the house.

"I don't know to be honest." She started unbuttoning his coat and picking the crusted snow from the wool as she spoke. Ethan didn't know what to make of her behavior. "I was chasing the blasted horse for a spell, then I saw a light burning and followed it. It turned out to be your house. I did knock, but no one answered. There was a fire burning and well, I couldn't resist saving my hide."

Ethan sat up completely and simply stared at her. "I don't mind you took shelter in my house from the storm, but telling lies about how you got here isn't helping either of us."

She moved to his feet and tugged on his boot. Ethan couldn't help but allow her to help him although only God knew why.

"I did no such thing, Mr. Malloy. You aren't the grumpy one are you? I heard he was married, but it appears there hasn't been a woman in this house in years." She got one boot off, then wiped her hands on the britches.

Ethan snorted. "I'm not the grumpy one. You should be careful about judging people, you know."

She stopped and glared. "You should take your own advice."

His heart beat a steady tattoo in his chest as he realized it was the first time since Bonita's death that he felt something other than numbness. This little carrot-topped woman had prompted him into feeling something, albeit annoyance.

He held up his hands in surrender. "You're right and I think we both got off on the wrong foot."

She dropped his boots beneath the coat hooks. "Darn tootin'. Now I've got some coffee on and I hope you don't mind but I made some biscuits too."

Ethan was astonished. She simply made herself at home didn't she? Isabel stood then held out her hand to help him up. He outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds yet when he took her hand, he was on his feet in seconds.

"Who are you?"

"I told you. I'm Isabel Carmichael. That fall must've rattled your noggin something good. Why don't you take a seat and I'll get some vittles for you." She walked into the kitchen leaving him standing there like an idiot.

That's when he realized the britches and shirt she wore were his.

"Hey, those are my clothes!"

She looked back at him, braid swinging. "Yes and thank you for letting me wear them. My wool suit was soaked through."

Ethan glanced at the fireplace and noticed a green wool ladies' traveling suit along with ruffly underthings hanging on a rope strung on the mantle. Jesus, was she nude beneath his clothes?

Suddenly he felt something more than annoyance coursing through him.

Isabel couldn't believe her luck. First the doggone horse ran off and left her stranded. Then she found this little house like Goldilocks in that bear story.

And of course, the bear did arrive.

Ethan Malloy was exceptionally handsome. With deep green eyes and wavy reddish brown hair, the big man was sensuality personified. However, he was also grumpy and growly like a bear.

When he accused her of lying, she had all she could do not to shout at him. Izzie might be many things, but a liar was not one of them. She prided herself on being honest no matter what. There had been a lantern in the snow leading her to his house. She had expected someone to be home considering a light was burning as was the fire in the fireplace.

It felt cozy and homey, even welcoming. Until the bear arrived.

Any normal human being would be kind enough to realize she had no choice. Considering the amount of ice and snow caked on her clothes, she was lucky to be alive. No doubt within thirty minutes, she would've been the carcass for him to trip over.

He walked into the kitchen like an old man with a hand pressed to the small of his back. Izzie felt bad but it wasn't her fault that he fell on his ass. She followed him, careful to keep a good distance away lest he decide she was the nefarious trespasser he accused her of being.

"The biscuits smell good." He sounded moderately displeased by that fact.

"Well I was hired as a cook and housekeeper for a reason, Mr. Malloy." She went around him to the stove and pulled out the biscuits.

The simple chore allowed her to focus on what she was doing. Truth was, she was trapped in a stranger's house for God only knew how long, with no means of protection other than her intelligence and her sharp tongue. Ethan Malloy was in for a surprise if he tried to take advantage of her.

With a mighty groan, he sat at the small table and watched her. She could feel his gaze on her and it made her jumpy. Dratted man was too suspicious.

"I'm not a thieving crazy woman." She popped some biscuits onto a tin plate she found on a shelf above the wooden sink.

"I never said you were."

Isabel let loose a very unladylike snort. "Well, you could've fooled me. I thought for certain you wanted to throw me back out in the snow."

"I would never do such a thing."

She didn't respond again. Mr. Malloy could say anything he wanted. Isabel was no fool—she'd been too long on her own not to distrust people she didn't know. People out west were friendly, but others were downright mean.

She didn't know which this Malloy brother was, yet.

"My mother taught me to be a gentleman and to help those in need." He sounded almost resentful of the fact. "Our, I mean, *my* house is always open to folks."

"Except stranded women in snowstorms."

As she set the plate in front of him, he took hold of her wrist. Isabel twisted and immediately got free, her heart pounding. He looked up at her with genuine surprise on his face.

"I understand you're upset I came into your house without your say-so, but I needed to stay alive. But if you plan on hurting me or worse, I'll take my chances outside." She wasn't about to

let anyone take advantage of her. After all, Isabel didn't get by without using her brain and her instincts.

Ethan dropped his head into his hands and sighed deeply. "I'm sorry Miss Carmichael. I don't have any excuse for how I treated you." He paused. "*Lo siento.*"

Isabel plopped down in the seat across from him and watched him carefully. She considered herself a good judge of character and Ethan was convincing her of his. "You speak Spanish?"

He peeked at her through his fingers. "My wife was part-Mexican, part-Indian. She taught me... a lot."

She was surprised to hear he'd been married, considering the barrenness of the house. Although she knew she shouldn't ask, she did anyway. "What happened to her?"

Ethan sucked in a breath and uncovered his face. "Did you really ask me that?"

She shrugged. "Why not? After today you'll never see me again. I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

Ethan did not know what to make of the redheaded spitfire who'd appeared in his house. She lied to him, used his kitchen as if it were her own, made him feel guilty, then asked him about Bonita.

Did the woman have no shame?

Yet at the same time, he was still *feeling*. Annoyance, interest, even a bit of amusement at her witty responses. Christmas Eve was becoming an almost surreal day and he had his own little angel, or perhaps demon, to keep him company.

"Fine, you start." He sat back and picked up the biscuit. As he brought it to his mouth with a bit of trepidation, she tsked at him.

"I'm a good cook, Mr. Malloy."

The first bite told him she was telling the truth. The biscuit nearly melted on his tongue, hot and salty with a touch of honey. He couldn't stop the groan from escaping.

"I'm guessing that's not a groan of poisonous dismay."

He swallowed the chuckle that threatened. "Yes, it was. Your biscuits have spoiled me for life."

Isabel simply stared at him with her mouth slightly open. That's when Ethan noticed her lips were a sensual shade of pink and her teeth were straight and white in her tiny mouth.

He shook himself as a wave of pure arousal snaked through him. It had been so damn long since he'd been with a woman. Bonita had been unable to be intimate the last year of her life. And if he were honest with himself, he'd had no desire to be with anyone since she died.

Until Isabel Carmichael invited herself into his house.

Damn.

“Did you just compliment me?” She glanced at the biscuit then back at his face. “And here I didn’t think I’d get a gift this Christmas.”

Although he didn’t want to, Ethan smiled.

“And there’s another one.” Isabel stood and walked toward the stove. As she picked up the towel and coffee pot, she turned back. “I’m originally from North Carolina, one of the last war orphans from the south. My pa hadn’t fought a day because he and my ma were just too old. They had me in their late forties. I was a wee babe when they were killed for their food stores in the root cellar.”

Ethan could hardly believe she told the story so matter-of-factly, as if her parents weren’t murdered.

“Don’t look at me like that. I was only a few months old. Mama had hidden me in a basket. After the soldiers left, a neighbor came over and found me.” She shrugged. “It wasn’t bad the first five years, then the neighbor who’d taken me in, an older woman named Mary Foster, died. Then, it got bad.”

She poured him a cup of coffee and he saw in her eyes she knew what pain and suffering were. A bond between them was formed—fragile and tentative, but it was there.

“Now you tell me yours.” She sat down with a biscuit and a cup of coffee, watching him expectantly.

Ethan didn’t want to talk about Bonita, truly he didn’t, but she was right. They were two strangers on a Christmas Eve. Why not confess some secrets?

“Bonita and I were married when we were very young, barely eighteen. Life was good the first five years, but she never got with child. We talked to Doctor Brighton, but he just told us some women weren’t meant to be mothers.” He closed his eyes and pictured the devastating look on Bonita’s face. “It was hard, real hard. You see my brothers and sister started having kids and I could see it was killing her.”

He paused to take a hot gulp of coffee and it was good. No, it was damn good. “Is there anything you can’t cook?”

She winked. “You may never find out, cowboy.”

Ethan should be shocked, but he wasn’t. Isabel had a way of putting him at ease with her wit and charm, not to mention her forthrightness. Somehow he felt, well, comfortable with her.

“Bonita took sick about six years back. She started by just feeling weak and tired, then it progressed until she couldn’t walk.” He swallowed, knowing the damn invalid chair was still in the barn. After she passed, he couldn’t get rid of it. It reminded him of what he lost and damned if he wasn’t a stupid martyr. “It was like her body just stopped working right. She didn’t last long after that, six months maybe.”

He met her gaze. “She died on Christmas Eve two years ago.”

Isabel didn’t blink, didn’t look away, surprising the hell out of him. She must have seen the misery in his eyes, yet she endured it, in heaping handfuls no less.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Malloy. That must make Christmas so hard for you."

"Ethan, please, call me Ethan." This time when he smiled, it was genuine. Just talking about Bonita made his heart and his conscience a bit lighter.

"Thank God. I have a hard time calling folks by their full name. Or maybe I just have a hard time with authority." She picked a piece of the biscuit. "You can call me Isabel or Izzie, whichever you prefer."

Ethan shook his head. "Izzie?"

"After Miss Foster died I ended up in an orphanage in Raleigh. The little ones had trouble with Isabel so they shortened it." She dipped the piece of biscuit in her coffee. "The name sort of stuck for a while."

"A while?"

"Okay, for twenty-five years." She dipped another piece of biscuit. "When I work as a housekeeper, a lot of times there's young'uns and they always call me Izzie."

When her blue gaze met his, Ethan felt as though he had finally met Izzie. The knot that had taken up residence in his stomach many years ago, began to loosen.

"I'm pleased to meet you Izzie." He was surprised to realize he actually meant it.

The even bigger surprise was the shock on her face.

"Has no one ever said that before?" Ethan sipped his coffee, wondering exactly when his life decided to take a left turn.

She swallowed audibly. "I don't think so. You know, most times the fact is I was always trying to please everyone."

"Like making fresh biscuits?"

Her cheeks blossomed into a light pink color. "Apparently."

Ethan reached out and touched her hand. A jolt of awareness slammed through him and he pulled back so fast, he almost fell off the chair. She looked as surprised as he did.

"What was that?" she sounded a bit breathy.

"I don't know." His mouth dried up like he'd swallowed cotton.

A log snapped in the fireplace and both of them jumped. Isabel let out a nervous laugh.

"Christmas Eve is turning out to be an odd night." She met his gaze, and Ethan knew then something, or someone, had led Isabel to his door.

Goosebumps raced up his skin at the thought. The question was, why?

Isabel busied herself cleaning up the kitchen while Ethan went into the other room. Thank God. She needed a few minutes to figure out what had just happened.

Two people who were alone in the world, who had suffered personal tragedy, had somehow found each other on Christmas Eve in a snowstorm.

Was it a coincidence she had stumbled onto his doorstep? Somehow she doubted it. Ethan was a Malloy, a huge family in the area, but he was alone on Christmas Eve. Apparently still grieving over his wife who had been dead two years. Even the house itself was lonely. The cheery blaze in the fireplace was the only welcoming part of her evening.

When he'd touched her hand, things had gone topsy turvy. She had already considered Ethan to be handsome, but her body had reacted as if she'd already known him. Intimately.

How was that possible?

Her mind went round and round over the same questions. By the time she'd wiped the table down four times, she couldn't put off seeing him any longer. She squared her shoulders and walked into the living room.

Ethan knelt by the fireplace, with a bright blue necklace in his hand. When he looked up at her, there was real surprise in his eyes.

"This was Bonita's favorite necklace. She wore it nearly every day. When she died, I couldn't find it. I tore the house apart looking for it."

Isabel swallowed. "Where was it?"

"It was lying on the mantel."

Every hair on Isabel's body stood on end. She stared into Ethan's eyes, wondering why she felt as if something monumental was going to happen.

"On top of your gloves."

Isabel sank to the floor beside him and stared down at the necklace. Her eyes pricked with tears as she thought of the implications of how the necklace came to be on top of the gloves she'd put on the mantel to dry an hour before.

"I didn't see any necklace when I came in." She wanted to touch it, glowing a beautiful blue in the firelight.

"The fire was burning, wasn't it? And the lantern lit?" Ethan finally looked as if he believed her.

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper. Isabel wasn't surprised to see a sheen of tears in his green gaze.

"This stone is the same color as your eyes."

Isabel's throat closed up as she recognized what he was trying to say. "She brought me here."

Ethan nodded as his fingers closed around the necklace. "I think she was watching over me and found you wandering in the snow." He met her gaze and smiled. "I think I finally see what I didn't want to."

Isabel was afraid to ask what he meant. She'd spent so much of her life alone, it seemed nearly impossible to imagine a ghost had directed her to Ethan's house. As if they were meant to find each other on Christmas Eve.

“What’s that?” Isabel wiped her eyes, her throat tight with emotion. She barely knew the man but there was a connection there already. It was like magic.

“I turned myself into a hermit who forgot how to live. Life is meant for the living, not the grieving.” He opened his fist and held the necklace out to her.

His hand shook with the slight weight of the necklace. He hadn’t believed in himself, or in the power of the love they’d shared. Now he did. All the signs were there, he had chosen to ignore them.

Ethan was tired of being alone, even when in the company of his huge family. This woman, this carrot-topped housekeeper with an even lonelier life than he, had shown him what it meant to live again.

He was sure Bonita had led Izzie to his door, a last Christmas gift for him. Ethan wanted to hold on with both hands to his second chance. When he was finally ready to meet her gaze, she stared at the necklace as if it were going to jump up and dance.

“You can’t possibly think to give that to me.”

“Why not? I think she wanted you to have it.” He took her hand, recognizing the same jolt of awareness when their skin touched. “*I* want you to have it.”

Ethan was ready to let go of his grief, his self-imposed loneliness and the darkness around him. He was ready to live.

Izzie touched a finger to the blue stone. “It’s beautiful.”

This time when Ethan smiled, he felt as if a two-ton weight had fallen off his shoulders. The fire popped again, sending a shower of sparks onto the floor.

She laughed. “You know I was joking when I said I was getting a gift for Christmas.”

“Looks like we both got something.” Ethan looked out the window, startled to realize the snow had stopped. Shining in the black velvet sky was the brightest star he’d ever seen.

When it winked, a warmth spread through him and he silently said goodbye to the woman he’d loved, and hello to the woman he could.

“Merry Christmas, Izzie.”

“Merry Christmas, Ethan.”

Author Biography

You can't say cowboys without thinking of Beth Williamson. She likes 'em hard, tall and packing. Read her work and discover for yourself how hot and dangerous a cowboy can be.

Beth lives in North Carolina, with her husband and two sons. Born and raised in New York, she holds a B.F.A. in writing from New York University. She spends her days as a technical writer, and her nights immersed in writing hot romances for her readers.

To learn more about Beth Williamson, please visit <http://www.bethwilliamson.com> or her daily blog <http://myblog.bethwilliamson.com>

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