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Twenty Wishes

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Extract

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Chapter 1

It was six o'clock on Valentine's Day, an hour that should have marked the beginning of a celebration—the way it had when she and Robert were married. When Robert was alive. But tonight, on the most romantic day of the year, thirty-eight-year-old Anne Marie Roche was alone. Turning over the closed sign on the door of Blossom Street Books, she glanced at the Valentine's display with its cutout hearts and pink balloons and the collection of romance novels she didn't read anymore. Then she looked outside. Streetlights flickered on as evening settled over the Seattle neighborhood.

The truth was, Anne Marie hated her life. Well, okay, *hate* was putting it too strongly. After all, she was healthy, reasonably young and reasonably attractive, financially solvent, *and* she

owned the most popular bookstore in the area. But she didn't have anyone to love, anyone who loved her. She was no longer part of something larger than herself. Every morning when she woke, she found the other side of the bed empty and she didn't think she'd ever get accustomed to that desolate feeling.

Her husband had died nine months ago. So, technically, she was a widow, although she and Robert had been separated. But they saw each other regularly and were working on a reconciliation.

Then, suddenly, it was all over, all hope gone. Just when they were on the verge of reuniting, her husband had a massive heart attack. He'd collapsed at the office and died even before the paramedics could arrive.

Anne Marie's mother had warned her about the risks of marrying an older man, but fifteen years wasn't *that* much older. Robert, charismatic and handsome, had been in his mid-forties when they met. They'd been happy together, well matched in every way but one.

Anne Marie wanted a baby.

Robert hadn't.

He'd had a family—two children—with his first wife, Pamela, and wasn't interested in starting a second one. When she'd married him, Anne Marie had agreed to his stipulation. At the time it hadn't seemed important. She was madly in love with Robert—and then two years ago it hit her. This longing, this need for a baby, grew more and more intense, and Robert's refusal became more adamant. His solution had been to buy her a dog she'd named Baxter. Much as she loved her Yorkie, her feelings hadn't changed. She'd still wanted a baby.

The situation wasn't helped by Melissa, Robert's twenty-four-year-old daughter, who disliked Anne Marie and always had. Over the years Anne Marie had made many attempts to ease the tension between them, all of which failed. Fortunately she had a good relationship with Brandon, Robert's son, who was five years older than his sister.

When problems arose in Anne Marie and Robert's marriage, Melissa hadn't been able to disguise her glee. Her stepdaughter seemed absolutely delighted when Robert moved out the autumn before last, seven months before his death.

Anne Marie didn't know what she'd done to warrant such passionate loathing, other than to fall in love with Melissa's father. She supposed the girl's ardent hope that her parents would one day remarry was responsible for her bitterness. Every child wanted his or her family intact. And Melissa was a young teen when Anne Marie married Robert—a hard age made harder by the family's circumstances. Anne Marie didn't blame Robert's daughter, but his marriage to Pamela had been dead long before she entered the picture. Still, try as she might, Anne Marie had never been able to find common ground with Melissa. In fact, she hadn't heard from her since the funeral.

Anne Marie opened the shop door as Elise Beaumont approached. Elise's husband, Maverick, had recently passed away after a lengthy battle with cancer. In her mid-sixties, she was a retired librarian who'd reconnected with her husband after nearly thirty years apart, only to lose him again after less than three. She was a slight, gray-haired woman who'd become almost gaunt, but the sternness of her features was softened by

the sadness in her eyes. A frequent patron of the bookstore, she and Anne Marie had become friends during the months of Maverick's decline. In many ways his death was a release, yet Anne Marie understood how difficult it was to let go of someone you loved.

"I was hoping you'd come," Anne Marie told her with a quick hug. She'd closed the store two hours early, giving Steve Handley, her usual Thursday-night assistant, a free evening for his own Valentine celebration.

Elise slipped off her coat and draped it over the back of an overstuffed chair. "I didn't think I would and then I decided that being with the other widows was exactly what I needed tonight."

The widows.

They'd met in a book group Anne Marie had organized at the store. After Robert died, she'd suggested reading Lolly Winston's *Good Grief*, a novel about a young woman adjusting to widowhood. It was through the group that Anne Marie had met Lillie Higgins and Barbie Foster. Colette Blake had joined, too. She'd been a widow who'd rented the apartment above A GoodYarn, Lydia Goetz's yarn store. Colette had married again the previous year.

Although the larger group had read and discussed other books, the widows had gravitated together and begun to meet on their own. Their sessions were often informal gatherings over coffee at the nearby French Café or a glass of wine upstairs at Anne Marie's.

Lillie and Barbie were a unique pair of widows, mother and

daughter. They'd lost their husbands in a private plane crash three years earlier. Anne Marie remembered reading about the Learjet incident in the paper; both pilots and their two passengers had been killed in a freak accident on landing in Seattle. Lillie's husband and son-in-law were executives at a perfume company and often took business trips together.

Lillie Higgins was close to Elise's age, but that was all they shared. Actually, it was difficult to tell exactly how old Lillie was. She looked barely fifty, but with a forty-year-old daughter, she had to be in her mid-sixties. Petite and delicate, she was one of those rare women who never seemed to age. Her wardrobe consisted of ultra-expensive knits and gold jewelry. Anne Marie had the impression that if Lillie wanted, she could purchase this bookstore ten times over.

Her daughter, Barbie Foster, was a lot like her mother and aptly named, at least as far as appearances went. She had long blond hair that never seemed to get mussed, gorgeous crystal-blue eyes, a flawless figure. It was hard to believe she had eighteen-year-old twin sons who were college freshmen; Anne Marie would bet that most people assumed she was their sister rather than their mother. If Anne Marie didn't like Barbie so much, it would be easy to resent her for being so…perfect.

"Thanks for closing early tonight. I'd much rather be here than spend another evening alone," Elise said, breaking into Anne Marie's thoughts.

There was that word again.

Alone.

Despite her own misgivings about Valentine's Day, Anne

Marie tried to smile. She gestured toward the rear of the store. "I've got the bubble wrap and everything set up in the back room."

The previous month, as they discussed an Elizabeth Buchan novel, the subject of Valentine's Day had come up. Anne Marie learned from her friends that this was perhaps the most painful holiday for widows. That was when their small group decided to plan their own celebration. Only instead of romantic love and marriage, they'd celebrate friendship. They'd defy the world's pitying glances and toast each other's past loves and future hopes.

Elise managed a quivering smile as she peered into the back of the store. "Bubble wrap?"

"I have tons," Anne Marie informed her. "You can't imagine how many shippers use it."

"But why is it on the floor?"

"Well…" It seemed silly now that Anne Marie was trying to explain. "I always have this insatiable urge to pop it, so I thought we could do it together—by walking on it."

"You want us to step on bubble wrap?" Elise asked, sounding confused.

"Think of it as our own Valentine's dance and fireworks in one."

"But fireworks are for Independence Day or maybe New Year's."

"That's the point," Anne Marie said bracingly. "New beginnings."

"And we'll drink champagne, too?"

"You bet. I've got a couple bottles of the real stuff, Veuve Clicquot."

"*Veuve* means widow, you know. The widow Clicquot's bubbly—what else could we possibly drink?"

The door opened, and Lillie and Barbie entered in a cloud of some elegant scent. As soon as they were inside, Anne Marie locked the shop.

"Party time," Lillie said, handing Anne Marie a white box filled with pastries.

"I brought chocolate," Barbie announced, holding up a box of dark Belgian chocolates. She wore a red pantsuit with a wide black belt that emphasized her petite waist. Was there no justice in this world? The woman had the figure of a goddess and she ate *chocolate?*

"I read that dark chocolate and red wine have all kinds of natural benefits," Elise said.

Anne Marie had read that, too.

Lillie shook her head in mock astonishment. "First wine and now chocolate. Life is good."

Leading the way to the back room, Anne Marie dimmed the lights in the front of the shop. Beside the champagne and flutes, she'd arranged a crystal vase of red roses; they'd been a gift from Susannah's Garden, the flower shop next door. All the retailers on Blossom Street were friends. Hearing about the small party, Alix Turner from the French Café had dropped off a tray of cheese, crackers and seedless green grapes, which Anne Marie had placed on her work table, now covered with a lacy cloth. Lydia had insisted they use it for their celebration. It was so beautiful it reawakened Anne Marie's desire to learn to knit.

She wished she could see her friends' gifts as more than ex-

pressions of sympathy, but her state of mind made that impossible. Still, because of the other widows, for their sake as well as her own, she was determined to try.

"This is going to be fun," Elise said, telling them why Anne Marie had spread out the bubble wrap.

"What a wonderful idea!" Barbie exclaimed.

"Shall I pour?" Anne Marie asked, ignoring the sense of oppression she couldn't seem to escape. It had been present for months and she'd thought life would be better by now. Perhaps she needed counseling. One thing was certain; she needed *something*.

"By all means," Lillie said, motioning toward the champagne.

Anne Marie opened the bottle and filled the four glasses and then they toasted one another, clicking the rims of the flutes.

"To love," Elise said. "To Maverick." Her voice broke.

"To chocolate!" Barbie made a silly face, perhaps to draw attention away from Elise's tears.

"And the Widow's champagne," Lillie threw in.

Anne Marie remained silent.

Although it'd been nine months, her grief didn't seem to diminish or become any easier to bear. She worked too much, ate too little and grieved for all the might-have-beens. It was more than the fact that the man she'd loved was dead. With his death, she was forced to give up the dream of all she'd hoped her marriage would be. A true companionship—and the foundation of a family. Even if she were to fall in love again, which seemed unlikely, a pregnancy past the age of forty was risky. The dream of having her own child had died with Robert.

The four sipped their champagne in silence, each caught up in her own memories. Anne Marie saw the sorrow on Elise's face, the contemplative look on Lillie's, Barbie's half smile.

"Will we be removing our shoes in order to pop the bubble wrap?" Lillie asked a moment later.

"Mom has this thing about walking around in stocking feet," Barbie said, glancing at her mother. "She doesn't approve."

"It just wasn't done in our household," Lillie murmured.

"There's no reason to take our shoes off," Anne Marie said. "The whole idea is to have fun. Make a bit of noise, celebrate our friendship and our memories."

"Then I say, let 'er rip," Elise said. She raised her sensibly shod foot and stomped on a bubble. A popping sound exploded in the room.

Barbie went next, her step firm. Her high heels effectively demolished a series of bubbles.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Pop.

Lillie followed. Her movements were tentative, almost apologetic.

Pop.

Anne Marie went last. It felt…good. Really good, and the noise only added to the unexpected sense of fun and exhilaration. For the first time since the party had begun, she smiled.

By then they were all flushed with excitement and champagne. The others were laughing giddily; Anne Marie couldn't quite manage that but she could *almost* laugh. The ability to ex-

press joy had left her when Robert died. That wasn't all she'd lost. She used to sing, freely and without self-consciousness. But after Robert's funeral Anne Marie discovered she couldn't sing anymore. She just couldn't. Her throat closed up whenever she tried. What came out were strangled sounds that barely resembled music, and after a while she gave up. It'd been months since she'd even attempted a song.

The popping continued as they paraded around on the bubble wrap, pausing now and then to sip champagne. They marched with all the pomp and ceremony of soldiers in procession, saluting one another with their champagne flutes.

Thanks to her friends, Anne Marie found that her mood had begun to lift.

Soon all the bubbles were popped. Bringing their champagne, they sat in the chairs where the reader groups met and toasted each other again in the dimly lit store.

Leaning back, Anne Marie tried to relax. Despite her earlier laughter, despite spending this evening with friends, her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away, but new tears came, and it wasn't long before Barbie noticed. Her friend placed a reassuring hand on Anne Marie's knee.

"Does it ever hurt any less?" Anne Marie asked. Searching for a tissue in her hip pocket, she blotted her eyes. She hated breaking down like this. She wanted to explain that she'd never been a weepy or sentimental woman. All her emotions had become more intense since Robert's death.

Lillie and Barbie exchanged knowing looks. They'd been widows the longest.