

# Claire's Wish

By

Lynn Forest

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# CHAPTER 1

Claire Upton took a fifth mental inventory of everything she and her husband Martin had packed inside the covered cargo area of their pickup truck. She felt anxious as they were about to pull away from their elegant suburban Seattle home and make their way over the next two days to her family's cabin high in the mountains of Idaho.

The trip had become an annual one for them, always shared with relatives from either of their families who would meet them there. This time they would be joined by Martin's brother Edward and his wife Brenda. That factor alone would be enough to bring about the tension she was feeling – Edward and Brenda were experiencing a rocky phase of their marriage.

Unfortunately, Claire and Martin were going through trying times themselves. There was too much bickering, too little romance over the past twelve months, and an ongoing refusal of Claire to live contentedly with the working conditions of a husband whose professional exploits had helped attract her to him in the first place.

Those who enjoyed watching television programs featuring wildlife and rugged hunting trips certainly knew of Martin Upton. He even did endorsements and modeling for outdoor wear, hunting gear and cameras and his exploits had been chronicled in outdoor and photography magazines. He even did television advertisements for dealers in the Seattle and Tacoma areas who sold rugged trucks and all-terrain four wheeled drive vehicles.

Martin had been raised on a cattle ranch in Colorado, in the shadow of some of the best mountain hunting land. His uncle had taught him much, and had introduced him to the legendary and hearty guys who took him under his tutelage upon graduating from college. His father had sold the ranch and moved the family to Seattle to start a new business, just before Martin began his senior year of high school.

His career had had a remarkable launch. An article in a major outdoors magazine had touted the skill and instincts of the young man who had accompanied the magazine editors on an elk hunt on a mountain range in Idaho. He had been serving for a year as somewhat of an apprentice to that renowned guide who led the hunt. And before he had been out of college for a year, his wildlife photography was already among the most coveted in the business, so he was performing double duty for the publication.

But a random incident gave the hunt and Martin, in particular, legendary status. One of the editors had been ambushed and taken down by a cougar. Martin had actually pounced on the cat with a hunting knife and rescued the editor. The story was epic, and went viral. Soon Martin was a young man in much demand.

Two books he had authored on exotic hunts had sold well, and his set of videos on how to photograph wildlife had been wildly popular. Now there was talk of a movie based upon his exploits. The least of Claire's concerns was financial security. Her husband had become so well-known over the past two years, that it wasn't unusual for him to be recognized whenever going out in the community just to run simple errands.

She also had a professional situation that many would find enviable. She was a gifted graphic artist, doing advertising layouts, designs for greeting cards and book illustrations. In her free time, she was trying to establish herself as an author of children's books. And her schedule

was of her own making, often working at home one or two days per week instead of traveling into downtown Seattle where the firm she was part of was located.

Claire certainly loved Martin, and was never given reason to doubt that she was equally loved by him. It was simply the case that she had grown sullen and unresponsive at his frequent absences from home. It made her self-conscious that her friends were jealous of her, married to such a physical specimen and budding celebrity as Martin Upton.

In the case of Martin, he was hopelessly in love with the petite beauty who still looked like a college freshman, a woman who frustrated him at her own lack of realization of her attractiveness. But that attractiveness was simply a bonus to Martin, because he loved her more for the person she was inside. That was what kept him going through the difficult times, being able to remember the way she was when they had met and be cautiously optimistic that those loving expressions they both truly missed would return one day soon.

When they had married, it was a matter of a man who had experienced a couple of brief flings matching up with a woman of twenty-three who was a virgin until their wedding night. It did not take long for him to be stunned by Claire's sexual appetite that had been unleashed upon the marriage taking place. He was also seduced by her sense of humor, many instances of which were directed toward matters of their intimacy.

Martin caught the eye of many a woman as he would walk through a room. He was not quite six feet in height, but his shoulders were broad and his waist narrow, and he had rugged good looks. He also possessed the muscular build that allowed him to climb, crawl and maneuver himself through exhausting terrain.

The initial two years of their marriage had been one of passion and carnal creativity in the bedroom. With the exception of one desire that Claire had kept to herself, they had been open and uninhibited in expressing their favorite physical delights. Their love was deep, even though their lovemaking was, of late, much too infrequent and nearly robotic in nature. In fact, Claire loved everything about him, with one exception – he was the man who was away from home too often for her to fully appreciate.

When his career began to go into high gear three years ago, Martin had sat down with Claire and explained that probably over the course of the next couple of years he was going to have to be traveling frequently, as he was wishing to branch out into more international wildlife photography. Then his plan was to back off from his absences so that over the course of the years they could reap the residual rewards of those efforts. Claire had readily agreed, but after a while it became evident to Martin that she had not fully comprehended what all would be involved. It was not unusual for his work to take him away from home from anywhere from ten to fifteen days each month

Even though their companions for their mountain getaway were struggling, Claire was relieved that she and Martin would not be left alone to fill their time and have to confront and communicate with each other. That was added pressure she could do without, even though she acknowledged to herself that they were simply treading water. She understood that they were reaching a point of either separating or accepting each other as little more than housemates who would occasionally engage in a roll on the mattress. Deep inside, she knew that if she ever lost Martin she would spend the rest of her life living with regret.

She was so lost in her thoughts on their first morning of their getaway that she was startled when a smiling Martin hopped inside the truck and started it. He reached over and put his hand on her knee. "Thanks for going along with inviting Eddie and Brenda. Maybe it will do them some good."

She nodded and looked away as the truck pulled out on the cul-de-sac. “I have no problem with that at all. My Dad never wanted just one couple up there alone, just in case of something going wrong. It will be fine to have them there.”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “And you really don’t mind your birthday up there with the pine trees and the bears?” Claire forced a smile. “I like the trees and the bears... from a distance. Maybe you can get some good photos tomorrow afternoon.”

He sighed nervously. “It’s when I know they will be active up there. I will be out for around three hours.” Claire simply murmured something he could not understand and continued to look out the window.

As they headed toward the freeway, Martin hoped that once Claire got away from the typical routine for a couple of days at a family cabin that held precious memories, her mood would lighten. They made small talk and Claire related more stories about past family outings at the cabin in the years before she had married Martin. He knew that it was not his imagination that she was acting more upbeat. The cabin and all the precious family memories attached to it meant much to her.

Neither had been able to get much rest the night before they left on the trip, and when they checked into a motel late in the evening, both were ready to simply go to sleep. Without verbalizing it to each other, both were hoping that some romantic moments would be had in the cabin despite the presence of the other couple. When Claire cuddled against Martin’s chest and went to sleep, he realized he could not remember the last time she had done so.

They resumed their trip early the next morning, as there were several more hours of travel ahead of them. To their mutual relief, their discussions that day were cordial as well, and then even cheerful as they neared the final turn off to go up the mountain. Claire could feel a sense of wistfulness overtaking her the moment the cabin appeared in the distance as they made their way up the narrow, winding gravel pathway.

The moment they pulled up near the cabin, Claire’s mind was consumed by recollections of times with her parents and maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins. She could close her eyes and see the images of tents in the front yards for the children, and the fire ring where one of the adults would sit and spend the night on watch for wildlife.

The cabin had been a place for family unity all her life. She wondered against logic and hope that it could do something for her marriage.

They had not been at their destination for more than thirty minutes before Edward and Brenda arrived. As Claire thought to herself that she would feel the tension between the other couple, she chided herself in thinking that they could probably sense the distance between herself and her own husband.

Although everyone knew in advance that Martin would be leaving the cabin for several hours in the hope of finding some active, feeding bears at the stream, he apologized to all of them before putting on his backpack and making his way into the forest. Everyone turned down his invitation to accompany him on what they knew would be an arduous hike. The three remaining went into the cabin to begin putting things away, and to Claire’s chagrin, things could not have gone any worse, any faster.

\* \* \*

Two hours after Martin had strolled away, Claire anxiously looked out over the panoramic valley below, as she pressed her hands to the sides of her head while attempting to cope with the stress of the situation taking place in the Idaho mountain cabin forty feet behind her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath to attempt to calm herself and still her churning stomach, feeling

ashamed of herself for seeking respite from the bickering going on between her husband's brother and his wife.

Martin would hopefully be returning to the cabin soon. Not only was she left dealing with a family crisis, but darkness was about to fall. A renowned wildlife photographer and hunting guide, Martin had left two hours before to hike to a nearby bluff overlooking a stream in the hope of finding a grizzly bear or wolf in the range of his camera lens.

Claire had been left to deal with the fallout from yet another argument between her brother-in-law Edward Upton and his wife Brenda. Inside, the tension had become palpable and the voices loud. Martin had hoped that by inviting his brother and his sister-in-law to join them for a weekend and helping them to get away from the pressure of running their construction company, they could relax and enjoy each other's company in the midst of a marriage that was obviously faltering.

Just as she was beginning to head back to the cabin and see if there was anything she could do to settle things down, the front door flew open and Edward walked out carrying two suitcases, and a crying Brenda followed carrying two overnight bags. Edward saw Claire standing there, and his expression of rage turned to one of embarrassment. "Sorry, Claire. We're going to go back home. We both are so sorry, we want you and Marty to enjoy yourselves." He watched in silence as Brenda walked by him on her way to their SUV. "You won't be able to have a nice time with us around."

Brenda opened the back of their vehicle and tossed the bags inside, then got in the SUV and slammed her door shut in anger. Eddie approached Claire, and his face drained of all color as he placed his hands on her shoulders and shook his head. "I suppose things will have to get better with time. I don't know what else to say right now. Give Marty my apologies. It meant everything to me that he invited us to be here." Then he walked to the vehicle, got in and started it and immediately drove away over the bridge that crossed the stream just twenty feet behind the cabin. As if following them, she walked toward the stream and leaned against the storage shed where fishing tackle, some tools, emergency supplies and pieces and parts of various things were stored.

Claire walked slowly into the cabin, then went into the bathroom and splashed some cold water on her face to try to settle her emotions. She picked up a towel and dabbed at her face, then used her fingertips to fluff out the soft strawberry blonde hair that fell below her shoulders. It was a halfhearted attempt to look nice for Marty when he returned, as if their own relationship was much better off than that of the people who had just left in mutual anger.

She had been married to Martin for the past three of her twenty-six years. They had known each other since her family had moved to Seattle from Oregon when she began her freshman year of high school. She was immediately enamored of the handsome senior boy, learning quickly that he was not only an honor student, but one of the best athletes in his class.

She had a crush on Martin that lingered, even though her family next moved to Texas before she began her junior year. Of course, she had immediately lost track of him until he began to gain fame from his photography. She went on to her own university years to obtain a fine arts degree, and landed her job in Seattle. Due to her father's consulting work, her parents had once again relocated, this time to Spokane.

It happened one Saturday evening, she was with some new acquaintances in a Seattle tavern when Martin and one of his buddies strolled in and sat down at the table next to theirs. Due to the age difference and the passage of time, the recognition of the occupants between the two tables was slow at first, although there were glances of mutual attraction. All the while, Martin and Claire could not seem to divert their attention from each other.

Soon they had scooted their chairs next to each other to break the ice, and before the evening was over both had seemed to have forgotten that their companions were even present. They went out several times, but the relationship never did seem to gel, and they went their separate ways without either of them feeling hurt.

And then, two months later, Martin received a wedding invitation to the marriage of one of Claire's old high school crowd, and he called her to ask her to go to the wedding with him, as neither were dating anyone at the time. It must have been the romantic ambience of the wedding reception, but they found themselves holding onto each other during the slow dances as if neither of them wanted to let go. Everything clicked on their second try as if magic had enveloped them, and it happened that several months later, they were married.

She had her new graphics art job in Seattle, and since Martin's work was all of the freelance variety, living there worked out just fine for him. In any case, most of his work required him to take a plane to wherever a client needed him for a hunt, or where he chose to pursue wildlife for his photography, and his career was blossoming. He felt that all he needed was proximity to an airport and Claire to come home to.

For the first two years of their marriage, they found that the frequent separations only added to the fervor they would enjoy when they were together. But soon the downside of their lifestyle began to come to the forefront. They found it difficult to schedule visits with family and even their own vacations. When Claire was in her slow season during the summer, Martin was most active in his photography, often taking him to remote and even hazardous places that Claire began to find wearisome in her concern for his safety. The situation also brought them to accept the reality that starting a family under such circumstances would be most trying.

As she had often done since childhood when staying at the cabin, as night began to fall Claire undressed and put on her nightshirt and walked outside to sit on the bench and watch the stars begin to appear. But even that could not take her mind off the unfortunate departure of the others, and it reminded her of how her own marriage to Martin had become quite blasé and uneventful over the past two years. Neither had gone so far as to mention separation, but the spark was definitely gone. Then she heard the sound of a twig snapping, and she looked up and saw the welcome vision of Martin in the distance with his backpack and walking staff. For the moment at least, she felt a rush of desire.

As he approached, Claire could see that he was looking to where his brother's vehicle had been parked. Even from a distance, Claire could see the look of concern on Martin's face. When he reached the bench where she was sitting, he leaned down and they shared a kiss. Then he pulled the backpack off and set it on the ground and sat down beside her. Before he could even ask, Claire spoke up, "I'm sorry. You tried to give them a pleasant time away. But they started arguing and left about an hour ago. They're not coming back."

Martin's expression darkened and he clasped his hands and looked down at the ground. "I should've known better than to think a little getaway with us was going to heal their marriage." He did not realize at the moment that the comment being made about another couple was taken to heart by Claire.

Claire put her hand on Martin's thigh. "We were just sitting in there talking, and somehow they started arguing about how the record-keeping for the business wasn't being kept up to date. Then Brenda started shouting about how she needed some time to go out with her friends, and it all went downhill from there. I didn't realize until they left that they had never even unpacked. I suppose they didn't have much optimism in the first place about coming here."



Martin shook his head and then repeated himself: "I never should have invited them. Maybe I was being too optimistic."

Claire reached over and put her arm around him. "Marty, I thought it was wonderful that you invited them. You were trying to help them because you're a good brother. I got the impression they do this a lot. Please don't ruin your time here by worrying about them."

Martin looked up and shook his head. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better. But it was unfair to you, since today's your birthday. It was bad enough that I left for several hours, then to stick you with my unhappy relatives... I'm really sorry."

She scooted over next to him and put her arm around his waist: "I really didn't mind you going off for a while. When you're in bear country, you need to go out when the time is right. Did you get anything?"

Martin's demeanor changed, a wide smile emerging as he reached into his backpack and pulled out his camera. He could not recall the last time Claire had expressed any enthusiasm about the results of his photography. "Since it's getting dark, I hope you can see this okay." Suddenly, on the small screen of the camera emerged a photo of a grizzly bear swatting a trout out of a stream.

Claire squealed with delight and began to clap her hands together. "That's just so..."

Martin sighed deeply, overwhelmed by the enthusiasm he had not seen in quite some time. "Of all the years I've been photographing grizzlies, that's only the second good shot I've gotten of the moment when the critter has the fish tossed up in the air. This is a freeze-frame. I got the video as well. All of this should sell for a tidy sum."

Claire leaned against him. "I'm very happy for you." Martin felt, once again, stunned by her reaction. For some reason on this day she was like the Claire he had married.

Martin put the camera away and then he reached his arm around Claire's waist and held her tightly. "I didn't mean for you to have such a rough day."

She shook her head. "I'm just glad you're here with me right now."

He reached over to her bare crossed legs and placed his hand on her thigh. "At least the view here is tremendous."

She nodded her head. "These mountains are beautiful."

He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I was talking about the vision of you in that cute little short nightshirt."

He heard her quietly grumble. "You really enjoy seeing my chubby legs?"

He turned partway toward her, just far enough that he could take her by the shoulders and look her directly in the eyes. "Your legs are not anything but full and shapely and sexy. And I think that the freckles are pretty sexy. They make your legs even more attractive."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "And they lead to my chubby ass."

Quickly, impatience overtook Martin and he sprung up from the bench and began to pace the ground. Both remained silent while he took a couple of breaths, then sat down next to Claire and put his arm around her waist again. "We seem to go through this so often. I wish that you could get it through your head just how attractive I find you. And you know that I love you just the way you are. You are nothing but hot!"

She took a deep breath and looked down. "Are you sure you don't wish that I was built like Brenda? I think she could slide both her legs into one of the legs on a pair of my jeans. Whenever we have gone away together, I swear when she's getting her clothes out of the suitcase she holds her slacks close to a pair of mine just to see how much bigger mine are." She placed her hand on his abdomen. "But you look like you're ready for the Olympics. I don't match up with you anymore."

She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. "And Brenda always teases me about looking so much younger than I really am. I know that when I'm older I will like looking young, but whenever we have gone out somewhere she makes it a big deal about how I get carded and that they probably think that my driver's license is a fake. And she even calls me baby face."

Martin closed his eyes and took another deep breath while struggling to keep a straight face. "Claire, I know you look more like eighteen than twenty-six. So, what? I look young, too. And to me, you are slender or, at least, just right. I don't know what to say anymore. I know that things aren't right, I mean the way they used to be. We're going to have to get all of our issues straightened out. Maybe we should take advantage of the unfortunate fact that our guests have bailed out on us.

"Since we're here alone with nobody else within a couple miles of us, we'll be without distractions for the rest of the weekend, and I think that we should stay a couple of extra days while we're at it. I'm even going to put the camera away, because I think I should devote all my attention to you. After all, it is your birthday."

He put both arms around her and held her tightly, then coaxed her to sit on his lap. "I would sing happy birthday to you, but you know what that would be like."

Claire began to laugh. "Sad to say, that's not one of your many talents. I'm afraid you may accidentally call the wolves in too close. I think it's safer this way." She laughed again and leaned forward and kissed him. "It's the thought that counts." She held up her wrist and turned it in the moonlight. "And thank you for the beautiful bracelet." He kissed her once again. "A beautiful bracelet for a beautiful girl." Then their lips met once again for a long and deep kiss.

Martin heard Claire sigh deeply and she spoke in a voice he could barely hear, "I can't remember the last time we kissed like that."

He murmured in agreement. "And I can't remember the last time I held you on my lap."

She placed her head on his chest. "And I realized today... I can't remember the last time we got it on. But after what happened today, I don't think I can relax enough as good as that sounds."

Martin patted her on the hip. "That's okay. It gives us something to look forward to. Tomorrow is Saturday, so how about if we just pretend that tomorrow is your birthday and start our weekend all over?"

Claire began to laugh. "Are you going to join me in the little bathing tradition in the morning? The water should be nice and cold."

Martin moaned theatrically and placed his hands over his face. "You and your family and your traditions. I suppose that I will. It's worth it just to see you jogging naked out to the stream. Of course, as usual, I'll just about go into shock when I get into the water."

They stood up, Martin picked up his backpack and they began to walk toward the cabin and Claire began to laugh. "Since it's just the two of us, I think that I'm going to spend the rest of the weekend here in my nightshirt... just my nightshirt." Martin responded by applauding as they walked into the cabin. He wondered if it was simply because they were at that special place that meant so much to Claire, but she seemed to be unwinding and drawing closer to him by the moment.

Although it was still early, Claire felt mentally exhausted after being a witness to the long argument and shouting match that had taken place between her in-laws. And as for Martin, although he was only thirty-four years old and extremely fit, most of his energy had been expended during his hike and the subsequent climbing needed to get into position to watch for the grizzlies and wolves likely to visit that particular section of the stream.

They went into their bedroom, the larger of the two tiny bedrooms in the cabin and talked more about the unfortunate goings on with his brother and sister-in-law. As they chatted somberly, Claire watched from the bed as Martin took his holster and revolver from his belt and placed it on the bedside table, then stripped off the rest of his clothes and crawled beneath the covers next to her.

She reached to her own bedside table and turned off the lamp, and they cuddled up next to each other in silence until Claire spoke, "I guess that seeing how your brother's marriage has started to go to pieces kind of scares me. I don't want that to happen to us. I don't like the distance that seems to have developed between us."

Martin turned up onto his side and drew her tightly to him. "I know that we have some issues to work out. We just have to feel free- and willing -to talk."

Claire sighed. "Ouch. I got that."

"Babe, we have to talk things out. I'm convinced that if we can just hear each other out... if we just listen to each other, everything can be just fine."

She placed her head on his shoulder. "I know I get too impatient and stubborn. I realized the other day that when you brought up making modifications in your work, I just shut you out because I was just so certain that it wouldn't be enough of a compromise." She leaned her head up to look at him. "I'm sorry."

He nodded his head and smiled. "I have to admit that I have felt really steamed at you at times over the past few months when you wouldn't listen to the changes I've had in mind." Against his own will, he began to yawn.

They snuggled closer and kissed, then Claire ran her hand across his cheek. "Maybe tomorrow morning after we take our little dip in that cool water we can come back inside and do some kissing and making up."

At that moment, Martin would have given his right arm for just one night with the voracious and eager Claire of their first two years of marriage. He pressed his lips to hers and initiated another long kiss. "We can start your birthday off with a bang." Both laughed and they soon went to sleep in an embrace.