

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

SHILOH WALKER

His
Christmas
Cara



HIS CHRISTMAS CARA
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HIS CHRISTMAS CARA

Shiloh Walker

Dedication

To everybody...

Merry Christmas, keep the spirit of the Season in your heart throughout the year.

My family...what do you want for Christmas...I'll give you the moon if I can.

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Chapter One

Eben Marley walked out of the main offices of Venture Advertising, his briefcase held loosely in one hand, his eyes flicking to his watch. The merry calls all around him went unheeded.

Merry Christmas!

Happy New Year!

Somebody brushed a hand down his arm, and a scent he had never forgotten surrounded him.

Slowly, he turned his head, already knowing who he'd see — Cara.

The pretty administrative assistant smiled at him, her eyes not reflecting the smile. A charming dimple winked in her cheek as she brushed her hair back out of her face.

The soft scent of her body drifted to his nostrils and he breathed it in deep, feeling it like a punch in his belly.

Three years... He could recall just how long it had been, and his body flared to sudden rampant life.

"Cara," he said, inclining his head at her, lifting a brow as he waited.

Maybe...just maybe... The thought never had time to complete itself. "I hope you have a Merry Christmas, Mr. Marley," she said before cutting sharply to the right to catch up with some friends.

Mr. Marley.

As she walked away, those words mocked him. A three-year-old memory loomed large in his mind. Just one night—one that had haunted every waking thought for months, until finally, he'd forced her out of his thoughts, suppressing the memory of that night. Except for his dreams.

She still haunted his dreams.

One night...that pretty admin, in the elevator at the Grand as he whisked her up to a room where he had fucked her throughout the night, starting with a quickie in the elevator after he'd pushed the stop button. It had ended with him leaving her the next morning with orders for his driver to take her home while he attended to business.

As she walked away, her head bent low against the wind, a memory of that sleek little body wrapped around his, grabbed him by the throat—err, maybe the throat wasn't a good term—he mused as his cock started to throb within the constraints of his underwear and trousers.

Now destined to spend the night hungering for another taste of her, he rolled his eyes and muttered, "Yeah...merry Christmas."

His idea of "merry" was knowing how much money people sank into advertising for Christmas. His company's profits were above last year's, and his own personal bank account was all but groaning.

That was the only thing that interested him about Christmas. Sooner or later, he might slow down enough to have some fun. A rich, husky laugh reached his ears, drifting to him on the wind, as he arrived at the black car waiting at the curb. He stopped, turned his head—the admin assistant, laughing in delight as she accepted a gift from somebody Eben placed as being in accounting.

A night with her definitely would be an improvement over the paperwork he planned to go over. She was grinning with delight as she tore into the present, and he groaned as another image, one he hadn't thought of in years, rushed to the front of his mind...that girl...Cara...sliding him that wide, wicked grin just before she'd closed her lips over his cock.

Tearing his eyes away from her lovely face, he ducked through the car door, telling Jacob, "I want to stop by the bank on the way home."

"Sir, the banks closed at noon today—about thirty minutes ago," Jacob said, his face stiff, eyes blank.

"Closed? Why – Damn it. Never mind, Christmas," he muttered, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Take me on home then. Hell, I should have stayed and gotten more work done."

"Work late? On Christmas Eve?" Jacob said gently. "C'mon, boss. Have a little fun."

Have a little fun... Unwillingly, his eyes drifted back to Cara as she threw her arms around the other woman's neck, obviously delighted with whatever gift she had received.

Shaking his head, he tore his mind away from her and laughed, running a hand through his tousled hair. "I make money for fun, Jacob. Let's get moving," he said, setting back and opening his briefcase, pulling out a handful of files to flip through on the drive.

Cara Winston glanced over her shoulder as that blond head ducked inside his sleek, sexy Benz and felt her heart flutter. Well, he hadn't growled at her when she wished him a Merry Christmas. There had also been a look of recognition in his eyes, of heat.

Damn it, why in the hell couldn't she stop thinking about him?

Why didn't she hate him?

Hell, now that wasn't really fair. He had told her, right off the bat, *I want sex, one night, that's all*. What gave her the right to still be hurt over his quick and total dismissal the morning after that rather spectacular night together?

No right...at all, she reminded herself.

"Give it up, Cara," somebody advised.

Cara glanced back and saw Toni shaking her head. "He's a waste of time," Toni continued. "Hell, this is the first year in the ten I've been here that he finally gave up trying to get people to work on Christmas. And he didn't even want to pay overtime. I can't believe he actually gave us a half day off."

"Well, I had to take it without pay," Chloe said, rolling her eyes. "I didn't have any time left."

Somebody Cara didn't recognize snickered and said, "*Total* waste. I bet the only thing that turns him on is seeing profit and shareholder info, and gross revenue statements."

Cara shivered, her lids drooping. No, that wasn't true. Her nipples tightened as she recalled just exactly how turned on he could get, that raw, hungry look on his face, replacing that cool, blank exterior...*no, not true at all.*

Swallowing, she shook her head, shoving those memories away.

She had too much to do, and reminiscing over one wonderful night wasn't going to get it done. Sighing, she turned and hugged her friends. "I've got to go. Duty calls," she said, wagging her fingers at them before turning away and heading for the garage.

Jacob kept sliding him odd glances in the mirror.

At first, as he relived that night with Cara, he hadn't noticed.

But the sensation of being watched sank in, and he looked up with narrowed eyes to see Jacob studying him in the rearview mirror, instead of focusing on the drive as he normally did.

Eben tried pretty damned hard to ignore him. Jacob was the first decent driver he'd had in months, easily. Since he'd fired Tom, he thought. Of course, Tom had kept nagging him about a raise.

Subtly, but hell, he'd given the man a raise six months earlier. He was still driving the same damned distance, still did the same damn thing every day. Why in the hell give him another raise? Especially since he seemed obligated to give everybody at Venture a raise at Christmas.

Jacob had appeared from the agency Eben had contacted about two weeks ago. Silent, for the most part, and respectful, keeping his eyes averted and his questions to

himself. Finally, somebody who understood that Eben wanted a driver, not a golf buddy, a drinking buddy, a fishing buddy...just a driver.

But those sidelong looks when the black man thought his boss wasn't looking, they were starting to piss Eben off.

He sighed, and flipped through a few more pages before glancing out the window. He scowled as he realized they were speeding down 64 West, toward Louisville, in the opposite direction of home. "So, Jacob... Have you forgotten where I live?" he asked casually, mentally tallying up a mark against Jacob. *That's one.* He gave his employees three chances when they fucked up. And three only.

"No, Mr. Marley, I remember where you live," Jacob said softly, flashing him a dazzling grin in the rearview mirror. "It's just...time, I suppose...that I do what I'm here for."

A cold chill ran through Eben at those obscure words. "You're my driver, that's what you're here for. Now take me home, if you like your job."

Jacob chuckled, a deep, rolling laugh that probably invited others to laugh with him. "This job? Driving you around? No—I don't care for it, in particular. Wouldn't be a bad one, heaven knows it's easy enough. Except you have got to be the coldest man I've ever met in my life. And it's been a long one."

Eben's eyes narrowed and he said, "Jacob, you are pushing it."

The driver laughed. "Boy, *you* are the one who's been pushing it. And you're too damned stupid to even know it, all that money, that brain of yours...shoot, you're even a good-looking kid," Jacob mused, shaking his head slightly as he took an exit that led even farther away from Eben's home. They were close to Louisville Metro's city limits now, and home was a good twenty miles away.

"Why, thank you. Now turn this fucking car around, take me home and I'll cut your check. Your final one," Eben snapped, furious.

Jacob continued on as if Eben hadn't spoken. "Smart, rich, and you're good with people, when you want to be. Yet you're concerned with one thing, and one thing only. Yourself. But that's okay. That's why we're here. To open your eyes. Hold on."

Eben opened his mouth to bellow...but Jacob wasn't there. The front seat was empty.

"Mother fuck!" Eben shouted, diving over the seat in a desperate attempt to catch the steering wheel.

The car smashed into something, and Eben went flying through the windshield. How odd...it didn't even hurt...

Damn it...why now? he wondered and then blackness —

Chapter Two

Damn it, she was so sweet, so hot... Eben groaned as she levered up away from him, laving his cock with one last gentle stroke of her tongue before she crawled over him, one knee on each side of his hips.

She stared at him as she held his cock steady with one hand, her fingers pale and small against the ruddy flesh of his sex. Eben swore his heart was going to stop in his chest as she slowly lowered herself down over him, taking his dick deep inside the wet, swollen depths of her pussy.

Seating herself fully on him, she planted her hands against his chest, her head falling back. Eben thought his heart was going to explode as she arched her back, the motion thrusting her breasts up, the dark pink nipples tight and beaded.

His cock jerked as she started to move, slowly, lazily, the muscles in her pussy closing around him hot and snug. As she worked herself up and down on his length, Eben cupped the firm flesh of her ass in his hands.

Sleek, sexy...she was so damned hot, he thought she'd burn him alive. The air was heavy with the scent of her aroused body, a light sheen of sweat covering her supple curves. He shuddered as she slid up, then down, a fiery trickle of her cream burning his balls as it flowed down.

Damn it, I could fuck her for the rest of my life and never get tired of her, he thought mindlessly.

A soft, silken voice purred into his mind, *then why did you send her away?*

He jerked awake, viciously, abruptly, his cock throbbing against his belly, pulsating and aching like a bad tooth. His heart was pounding hard and heavy. And he hurt.

Oh, hell...he *hurt*. As the dream fell apart around him, Eben grew aware of just how badly he was hurting. And not just his swollen dick, either.

Head pounding, gut churning, body screaming at him in protest, Eben lifted his head, trying to see around him. Too damn dark... What in the hell had happened?

He'd been dreaming, that much he knew. Dreaming about Cara. Again.

But what had happened? Where in the hell was he? Not at home, that was for sure. And why the hell couldn't he see anything?

Jacob...driving... Where in the hell had he been going?

The pain in his head rose up, damn near drowning him, overwhelming the heat from the dream. As the lust-induced fog started to clear, Eben became even more aware of his pounding head. He pressed a hand to his temple, hesitantly, almost afraid he'd find his skull split open. But there were no bumps, no cuts, no wetness that might indicate he was bleeding.

And he could feel his body. Could move—although he sure as hell didn't *want* to.

What had happened? He didn't remember anything beyond climbing into the car with Jacob—

Jacob had been driving—*shit, where in the hell is he?*

But it was so black, he couldn't see. It wasn't even the black of night. It was the black of a cave, deep in the depths of the earth, the total absence of any light. "Jacob?" he tried to call.

But his voice was barely a whisper. Licking his lips, he started to pat his pockets. There was a light on his cell phone... He could use it to find Jacob...

Memory rushed back and he froze.

Shit.

Jacob had disappeared. Right in front of Eben's eyes, right after the man had said, *Hold on.*

"Son of a *bitch!*" Eben groaned, fisting his hand and slamming it down...and down...and down... There was nothing under him. No bed, no ground, no rock floor. Nothing.

And as his mind tried to wrap itself around that concept, he started to fall.

A harsh curse escaped him, his body tensing with fear. Arms flailing, he tried to grab onto something, to anything. But there was nothing there.

And still, he continued to fall, his clothes flapping around him, his hair streaming into his eyes, the wind striking his face.

Down and down, until his descent finally seemed to slow, and his clothes stopped flapping. That was the first sign that he might be slowing down—his clothes drifting loosely around him, his hair blowing around his face instead of slapping and stinging his skin and eyes.

A few moments later, his feet landed on the ground. Eben blinked. There was light now, bright blinding light, where moments before, there had been none. It grew brighter and brighter as he stared into it, until, like the sun, it eclipsed, and the light softened.

Now a warm, amber glow cast its light on everything.

Finally able to see, Eben turned and looked around him. He was in a room. Or he thought he was, although there were no doors, no windows. And when he looked up, trying to see where he had fallen from—just a ceiling, a domed, smooth shape that stretched maybe twenty feet over his head.

Bad enough that he'd fallen, now he couldn't see where he'd fallen from. He could have handled that. And he could have figured out how to explain his being in this room, although there was clearly no way out. Like he had been put in a box as the box was being constructed around him.

Yes, he could handle that. Figure it out. Deal with it.

But the soft laughter that was echoing through the room, *that* was a little harder to understand.

Because he knew that laugh.

And the person it belonged to was dead.

"Well, son, you never were one for listening, were you, Eben?"

Slowly, afraid his ears were playing tricks on him, he turned around.

And sitting there, twenty feet away, settled on a couch exactly like that one Eben had found him on the day he'd died, was Eben's father.

Rustily, he said, "Okay, what's going on? Is this some kind of sick joke?"

Taylor Marley laughed again, shaking his head, flashing that familiar old smile. "No, son. Not a joke. It's just me, your dad," he said, smiling at Eben, a smile that seemed bittersweet.

"Not possible. You died. More than fifteen years ago," Eben said flatly, shaking his head. "What in the hell is going on? Who in the hell are you? Did somebody hire you and that bastard, Jacob? You two playing some weird kind of joke?"

"Well, now, that's not a nice thing to say," Taylor said, his mouth twisting into a frown as he stared at Eben. "Jacob isn't a bastard—he's one of the finest men I've met since I came here. And I've met quite a few outstanding individuals."

"Awww, now that's okay," a low, deep voice said, that southern accent as musical as it had been when he was telling Eben to hold on.

Eben whirled, forgetting that his body had been screaming at him moments before, forgetting the pounding in his head.

Forgetting everything but the man who was standing in front of him, staring at him with those dark, dark brown eyes and a friendly smile. Pointing at him, Eben said, "Jacob, you're lucky I don't kick your ass right here. Get me the hell out of here. *Now.*"

"Oh, in good time," Jacob said, smiling.

"In good time," his father echoed.

Eben finally stopped pacing, a growl of frustration ripping from his throat. No damned way out...no way *in* that he could see. So how had they gotten in here? Blowing out a soft breath, he decided that didn't matter.

What mattered was getting out.

So he tamped down the anger, and the fear, he was feeling and went to stand before his father, ignoring the man seated in the armchair next to them, playing solitaire. "What in the hell am I doing here?" he asked without preamble.

Taylor laughed and clapped his hands together. "Damn, it's about time," he said. Then his face sobered and he leaned back, staring at Eben with inscrutable brown eyes. "Did you forget what I told you?"

Don't waste your life...

His father's last words to him echoed through Eben's mind, even as he searched his memory, trying to figure out what in the hell his old man was getting at.

"Well, that's an improvement, at least. You admit he *is* your father and this isn't a joke," Jacob mused, slowly turning over another card and tossing it down before lifting his gaze to meet Eben's.

Eben's eyes flew wide and he whispered, "What?"

"You heard me. And yes, for the record, I can read your mind...sometimes." Jacob crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back to stare at Eben with shrewd eyes. "As can your father."

Taylor lifted a brow at Eben and sighed tiredly. "Boy, I tried to tell ya, then. And you didn't listen," he said quietly, leaning his head back.

Eben said forcefully, "I don't know what you are talking about. I'm done with this. Take me home."

"You do know what I'm talking about. I told you not to waste your life," Taylor snapped, standing up and stalking away from them, going to stare at a blank wall. "Don't go trying to search that steel trap of a mind, looking for some other reason. Not when you know damned good and well what I'm talking about. You. Wasting your life."

"I'm not," Eben said, startled by the vague, accusatory glance Taylor Marley shot him. "Damn it, I run a multimillion dollar advertising business, have a vacation home in California and one in France. I was —"

Taylor waved his hand and spat, "Bah! It means nothing...because *you* are empty. When was the last time you were truly happy?"

Eben stilled. He blinked, staring at his father as those words echoed in his mind. Then he shook his head and said, "I *am* happy."

Empty... The words resonated through him. *Empty*. He clenched his jaw, and through gritted teeth spat, "I am happy."

"You're not," Jacob said from behind them.

Eben turned and demanded, "How in the hell would you know? You're my driver — or you were. I'm firing your ass."

Okay, Eben...buddy, you're sounding crazy. You know this isn't really happening.

Taylor had lifted his eyes skyward and was murmuring silently to himself when Eben looked back at him. A deep, weary sigh escaped the older Marley as he leaned forward, pinning his son with an intense, stark stare. "Boy, this *is* really happening. Deal with it. As to firing Jacob, well, he's already got a pretty good job. I think he'll do okay without yours."

Jacob chuckled, a deep, rolling sound that echoed in the room. "That's the truth. Though I don't know much about earthly ways anymore, I suppose the pay was pretty good. But the atmosphere sucked." He lifted a black brow at him and smiled.

Eben couldn't stop the flush that heated his face. *Sucked, did it?* "Well, that will teach me to let employees have half days off on Christmas Eve."

Jacob laughed, lifting his face to the sky as he murmured, "You are clueless, aren't you?"

Taylor sighed sadly as Eben opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again as he tried to think of what to say to that last comment. "It's my fault, Jacob. I should have raised

him a little better, made him understand there's more to life than money, than working. Of course, I didn't really understand that until I met Liz. My sweet angel... I miss her."

"Isn't she here with you?" Eben asked. Then he smacked himself in the forehead. "Hell, I'm actually believing this. What is wrong with me?"

Taylor smiled at him. "Relax, son. It's going to be okay—I think," his father said. "Liz is with me—just not here. I've been watching you for the past few months, pretty closely. And she couldn't come. It was tough leaving her, but this is important."

Eben spread his hands and demanded, "What's important? What's going on? What in the hell am I doing here?" Then an awful thought occurred to him and he paled, flinching instinctively as the possibility reared its ugly head. "Am I...dead?"

"No, son, but you're running out of time. Either live as you *should* or keep going down the path you're going. And end up alone and lonely," Taylor said.

Jacob said quietly from behind them, "Listen to your daddy, Eben. Clock's ticking. You've got tonight, and then we just walk away. No more chances. And son, without somebody hitting you in the head with a two-by-four, or disappearing in a car right in front of you, you aren't going to try to be different. Not on your own. You've lived like this for more than twenty-five years, and if you haven't changed by now... Well, you aren't going to rediscover life at age fifty-five like Marley Sr. did."

Sweat beading on his brow, Eben asked, "What do you mean I have tonight?"

Taylor was silent, cocking a brow at Jacob. The black man crossed his arms in front of him and pursed his lips, lowering his brows, reminding Eben for some odd reason of Sidney Poitier in the movie *Sneakers*. His dark face was serious, solemn, and his eyes just as penetrating as the actor's.

"You have tonight. A chance to look back over your life and see if you're really living it the way you want. After tonight, you'll have a choice, to be *more* than what you are. Or just keep going. If you choose that, that's fine. We won't interfere anymore. But there will come a time, and possibly very soon, when you will regret the choices you've made in life."

Hell, I already do. Hiring you, Eben thought sourly. “So what am I supposed to do tonight?” he asked, jamming his hands into the deep pockets of his coat.

“Just watch...and listen. You’ll have some guides. Just go where they tell you, and listen to what they have to say,” Taylor said, smiling gently.

“And if I don’t?” Eben asked, cocking a brow at his father. “If I’m happy as I am?”

“Well, you don’t have much choice about whether or not you go with them tonight. You *will* go,” Taylor said flatly. “But after that, if you really think this existence of yours can be called happy – so be it.”

“You will have three guides –”

Eben interrupted Jacob with a laugh. “Three guides. Oh, hell, this is good. Three guides,” he muttered, shaking his head. “You know, with *my* name, I thought I’d heard every joke about the *Christmas Carol* and old Scrooge imaginable. But this is definitely new.”

Eben spun around and plowed his fingers through his hair, staring off into the amber light that surrounded them. “Look, Dad, it’s not that I don’t appreciate your concern, but –”

A deep peal of sound echoed through the room and darkness fell once more, hiding everything from sight.

“Dad!” Eben called out, searching his pockets frantically for his cell phone. Silence...no answer. “Dad!”

He finally found the damn phone and tried to remember by touch alone where on the dial pad the button for the mini flashlight was located. But, before he could find it, the darkness lifted, and he was standing on the street where he grew up.

Only that wasn’t possible. They had torn that neighborhood down and put in a golf course. *Years ago*. So how in the hell could he be seeing it now?

His eyes alit on a small boy, wispy blond hair falling into his eyes, the thick lenses covering them magnifying his eyes to damn near twice their normal size.

Holy shit!

"You were such a sweet kid, you know that?"

Eben blinked, his corrected vision graying for a second. Then he turned, his eyes widening as he stared at a statuesque, lushly built woman. Damn, talk about a wet dream...

She wore a wine-red robe of velvet, the real kind, his experienced eye decided, with that luster that only silk velvet had. The velvet gleamed richly against the deep cleavage revealed by the plunging neckline. Her skin looked satiny, touchably soft, and Eben felt his fingers itch to touch, for just a minute. Thick black hair waved down past her full hips, and nestled in the dense black waves was a crown made of flowers and...*fruit?*

The woman's eyes were a deep, fathomless blue, and they twinkled as she stared down at him. And she *did* have to look down—she must have been nearly seven feet tall.

Eben was about five-ten, so he felt like a damned midget, much like he had felt through most of high school, until he'd finally shot up from his five-two skinny stature. Well, he had still been skinny, until he'd started swimming and running, finally developing some muscle.

Not that he had a bad view from here—he was on eye level with a very nice, very round set of breasts, and he could smell the seductively sweet scent of her body.

"Ahem."

He tore his eyes away from that lovely set of tits and met her gaze, seeing the laughter lurking there. "I'd be offended, if I wasn't so pleased to actually see a human reaction from you," she said, her deep, throaty voice caressing his ears, stirring his blood. "You so easily ignore women, ignore life...ignore everything but the money you love to make. Well, there *was* one woman who made you feel human...but we'll get to her later."

As she laughed again, Eben scowled, turning away. That deep chuckle echoed in his ears as he stared at the boy—the long forgotten image of himself as a child. That was

back before Mama had left them, running off to be with her rich lover. Eben had learned years later that she had died in a car wreck after she and that bastard had partied it up too much just a few months after she'd left them.

He hadn't known—his dad had figured he'd been through too much trauma already for a five-year-old, losing his mama once. He didn't need to lose her again. "That's me, isn't it?" he asked, his voice oddly husky.

"Yes, it is," she said. Long moments passed as they watched the boy. When she broke the silence again, her voice was soft and gentle as she told him, "I'm your guide."

He snorted. "I figured you were going to say that. Do we really have to live this entire Dickens charade through?"

Again, she laughed, lifting her face to the sun. "It's been a long while since I thought of him," she murmured, a soft smile curving up the corners of that wide, sexy mouth.

"Dickens?"

"No, Ebenezer Scrooge. You share a great deal in common with him—not just your name," she said softly, her eyes softening as she watched the boy stand up, cradling a model aircraft precariously in his hands. "Such a remarkable boy, you were, so smart, so quick. He was, too."

"He *who*?"

"Why, Ebenezer Scrooge, of course," she replied, the expression on her lovely face saying that he *should* already know that.

"That's a fictional character," Eben said, rolling his eyes.

"Hmmm...are you so certain?" the guide asked, winking at him. "I remember him rather well. You are so like he was...but you are a great deal younger. Too young to be so cynical."

Eben shook his head, at a loss for words. Now he was being told one of the great works of classic literature was based on truth. That was ridiculous. He cocked his head,

watching the boy as he carried the model airplane up the sidewalk to the porch of the house. "I wanted to be a pilot," he murmured.

"Yes—I believe you would have been a remarkable one," she mused.

In the blink of an eye, they were at the window of the house, staring in. Eben watched with reluctant fascination as one of the most hurtful memories of his childhood played out before him. Eyes shining, the young child proudly displayed the aircraft to his father, and was rebuffed. His father was too intent on his books, his files, his notes, barely glancing at the model as he scowled. "Ben, I've no time for your toys and foolishness. I have to..."

The words faded into the distance as Eben watched the child image of him deflate. "Five-year-olds generally can't do models by themselves," he said thickly. "I tried to get Dad to help me—but he was too busy."

"Hmmm, I know, sweetie," the guide murmured, lifting a long, graceful hand to rest on his shoulder. "You rarely played with toys, did you?"

"There was no point. Toys didn't do anything," he said, his voice husky. Why were his eyes stinging? He wanted, badly, to go up to that boy and hug him close.

"Your father did love you," she said quietly. "He was just hurting so terribly inside."

"Hell, it was just an airplane," he muttered, shaking his head tiredly, blinking away that peculiar stinging in his eyes.

"Was it?" she asked.

The image before them faded away, replaced by an image of an older Eben, one bent low over his books, his young face tightening with a scowl as a merry laugh echoed out. "Eben, all you do is study!"

Bella...his throat tightened. Damn it, he hadn't thought of her in years.

As he watched, the younger Ebenezer Marley lifted his head from his books, his thin face drawing tight in a scowl as he stared at his high school girlfriend. Why hadn't

he realized how lucky he was to have her? Girls like that never looked twice at scholarly geeks like him.

With her long, thick butter-yellow curls, and sparkling blue eyes, Bella Martin was a high school boy's dream come true—slender, svelte, open. So kind, so sweet, and she had wanted him.

"C'mon, let's go sledding. The snow last night is perfect—we can go out to Morgan's Hill and sled, then go to Beth's and have some hot chocolate, watch movies," she said, kneeling down by him, running her fingers through his hair, her eyes imploring.

"I don't have time for that foolishness right now, Bella. I've got to get these papers done so I can turn them in after the break. I'll be graduating early, and I've got too much to get done to play," he said dismissively, moving his head away from the distracting caress of her hand.

The boy hadn't seen the look on her face. But the man watching them now saw, and he felt it like a punch in the gut. "That's was kind of shitty of me," he whispered, his heart clenching as her pretty blue eyes filled with tears, not just at his refusal to go and have fun with her, but from the way he moved away from her touch.

She probably wouldn't have understood that it didn't irritate him, it was *distracting*. Her touch, her laugh, the sweet way she smelled made him want to forget everything, and just be with her.

Her lips trembled and she sighed, her voice whisper soft as she said, "Okay, Eben. I guess I can go alone."

"Why in the hell didn't I just go with her?" he muttered, his eyes hard and grim as he stared at the downward angle of his head, the young Eben so focused on his books.

"Much like you are now," she said shrewdly. "Isn't he? Focused on nothing more than studying, while you focus on making money. You don't even spend that much of it. You hoard it. What are you saving it for?"

"Money's too hard to come by to spend it recklessly," he said absently, unaware of how his hand kept rubbing over his chest, right over the ache in his heart.

"Not for you," she countered. "You make money almost as easy as you breathe. When it comes to the business world, everything you touch turns to gold, doesn't it, Ebenezer?"

He shot her a narrow look. "Don't call me that," he said shortly as the world around them faded away, enshrouded in fog.

"Ahhh, you've always hated that name, haven't you? Eben or Ben, doesn't matter which one people call you, as long as it's not Ebenezer." She flashed him a grin, her full ruby-red lips parting to reveal a dazzling white smile. "Not that I blame you. The name *does* sound like it belongs to an old man. Can't understand why your mama named you that."

A cruel joke, he thought sourly, his eyes dropping to the lush mouth of the guide. Then he jerked away, spinning around.

And staring at yet another scene from his past. "No." His voice flat, firm and decisive, he shook his head and repeated, "No. I don't want to see this."

As Bella, older now, her face sadder, stared off into the distance, Eben, now twenty-five, and already rich, glared at her. "You're *what*?" he repeated, dismayed.

"I'm getting married," she said quietly. "I met him in France. Remember, you couldn't go with me, too busy." She shrugged, but he could see the echo of pain in her eyes. *Now*.

Then, all he had seen was her turning away from him. "Damn it, how in the hell can you be getting married? *We're* supposed to be getting married."

She gave a watery laugh and asked, "When? First it was after college, then it was after I got a higher paying job at a better school. I've been teaching at Country Day for two years now, Eben. And we haven't even set a date. Now you want to get this buyout done, then we can talk about it. But after that, something else will come up, and I'm

tired of coming in behind your desire to make money, baby. I need to come first, for once.”

Eben’s former self arrogantly said, “You do. Why in the hell do you think I’m working so hard? It’s for you, for us.”

She smiled sadly. “No, Eben,” she said gently, her eyes sparkling with the tears she’d held back for years. “It’s for you. I don’t need millions of dollars to be happy. All I ever needed was you. Once. Now I need to be away from you. I’ll never be happy until I’m free of you—because you’ll never be free enough for us to be together, get married, have a family.”

Eben’s belly tightened with disgust as he watched, knowing what was coming next. “Damn it, can he make you feel like I do?” he demanded, striding over to her, cupping her neck and arching her face up, savaging her mouth as he ran knowledgeable hands over her.

They’d lost their virginities together, and he knew that lithe, toned body like the back of his hand. She whimpered in her throat, her hands fisted at his chest. When she finally tore her mouth away, Eben could see the tears streaming down her face. Both the man he had been, and the man he was now, watched as she turned her face away and whispered, “No, Eben, it’s over.”

As she walked away from him, the fog closed in, hiding his past self from his view, but the memory of how he looked, shoulders slumped, eyes closed in defeat lingered. “She would have come back to me, right up until the very last, wouldn’t she?” he asked, his voice husky.

The guide sighed, shaking her head as she looked at him. “I don’t know, Eben,” she said honestly. “Bella loved you, with all her heart. Until your carelessness smashed it, time after time.”

The fog lifted and he was now staring in through the window of his penthouse, as he brought woman after woman home with him for a few hours, but never the same woman twice. With every woman he fucked, he sought a replacement for the one he’d

lost, and he never found one. Never found anybody that touched something inside him the way Bella had.

Until one night... *Damn it.* She would make him watch this.

As he stared at an image of himself lying beneath a sweet-faced girl, he flushed. *Cara...*

"Ah, yes," the guide murmured, a smug, pleased little smile curving her lips as she glanced from the scene in front of them to Eben. "There's the girl. Even more than Bella, she made you forget yourself, didn't she? So much so, that you pushed her away."

"Stop it," he growled, staring at the image of himself in bed with Cara. His gut clenched, his cock jerked in remembered ecstasy as he watched himself slide his hands up the long line of her torso to cup her breasts. He could remember how she felt under his hands...soft, silken...perfect.

There had been love in her eyes, naked and shining. That girl had been an assistant in accounting, and had been promoted after just a few months to an admin assistant. For the past few months, she had been working pretty closely with him, and always staring at him with those pretty green eyes. He gave in to temptation one night – taking her to the Grand, wining and dining her – then he had fucked her silly.

The following Monday he'd had her transferred to another department, one where he wasn't likely to see her often, if at all.

Just so he wouldn't have to see that love again.

The final image of her was the one he had shut out of his mind, right as he'd closed the door to the suite on her, after telling her Tom would take her home. She had just sat there, staring at him, her pretty green eyes blank.

The guide whispered, "What is it about love that frightens you so, Eben?"

He went stiff as another scene from his past wavered into view, his eyes narrowing on the image of yet another woman – this one somebody he couldn't even remember. How could he forget a woman who had taken his cock into her mouth? A woman

whose thighs he had spread wide while he lapped at her pussy? How is that possible? But he had done it. Slowly, carefully, trying to keep the frustration he felt from surfacing in his voice, he said, "Love doesn't frighten me. It's just...useless."

"Useless," the spirit repeated, her voice flat and cool. "Love moves mountains, shatters lives and rebuilds them. Love is the most amazing, and sometimes, the most awful thing known to man. Only love could take a child who was raised by cruel parents and turn him into one of the kindest, giving men. Only love could teach a woman who had known only abuse at the hands of a man, to trust another man, and allow him to teach her true pleasure. Love is many things, but *never* useless."

Eben turned to scowl at her, only to find himself alone. Once more.

Chapter Three

When he looked back, he was staring through yet another window...and this time at Bella. She'd cut her hair.

That was the first thing he noticed. But then he promptly forgot as he realized what she held.

A baby, a tiny, towheaded baby with thick, golden curls, lashes lying low over smooth cheeks as the babe suckled at Bella's breast.

A deep, warm voice murmured, "See what you gave up?"

Unable to turn and meet this new guide, Eben ignored the spirit as he stared at Bella's face, at the happiness he saw there. His throat locked up as she started to sing quietly, rocking back and forth ever so slightly. She'd always had the most amazing voice... Swallowing, he whispered, "This isn't real."

Why did staring at the baby nursing wrench at his heart so painfully?

"Oh, it's real, all right," that voice behind him murmured. "The baby is three months old today. His name is Cameron. And he has a sister who is just barely two."

Two? Whirling, eyes lifted, he opened his mouth to rail at the woman in front of him. Only to still, his hand falling to his side as he stared at the exact opposite of the creature who had just left him. Five feet, *maybe*, reed slender, her mouth painted the color of cherries, her dark chocolate gaze curious, even friendly, as she stared at him. Soft black curls fell into her eyes, over the warm mocha hue of her skin.

She smiled at him sunnily. "Not Morgan, am I?" she teased, that deep throaty voice seeming so at odds with the petite, wraithlike creature in front of him.

"Morgan?" he repeated dumbly.

"Yeah, that tall lady you were just talking to?" she drawled, rolling her eyes at him before sauntering forward. "The Amazon?"

She propped her arms on the windowsill, staring in at Bella. Softly, she said, "She's happy, you know. She rarely even thinks about you, but when she does, she prays. Prays you'll find happiness in your life. But she doesn't even miss you — ain't that sad?"

Absently, he corrected, "Isn't. Isn't that sad?" But he barely even realized he had spoken as he stared in at Bella.

The woman laughed, merrily, the rich music of it echoing all around him. "Isn't that sad? I'm trying to teach you an important lesson in life, and you want to correct my grammar," she said, chuckling, her eyes dancing with mirth. "Something is so wrong with that."

Eben scrunched his eyes shut and whispered, "A dream. All a dream and I'll wake up in bed." He frantically hoped, prayed, and wasted his time, because when he popped one eye open, it was to see the second guide—the *spirit*—staring at him with bright, curious eyes. She slapped him on the arm and said, "Calm down, babe. You're gonna wake up, in bed even. Question is...how long are you going to wake up *alone*? Wake up lonely, convinced that every ill in life is soothed by the making of money, more and more money? You don't even spend it!"

She smiled, greedily rubbing her hands together. "Damn, if I had some of that money, a real body again, and two hours, that's all I'd need, two hours," she said, wiggling elegantly arched brows at him.

"A-again?" he repeated.

With a whimsical smile, she turned her eyes to him, lifting one small shoulder in a shrug. "I'm dead, Ebenezer. A ghost. What is a ghost, or a spirit, but somebody who died?" She sighed, shaking her head. "But even I lived a better life than you. I was nineteen when I died in that crash. Nineteen. And at least I understood what *happy* was." She shot his long, expensive wool coat a derisive glance. "It wasn't about money, although I did love to spend it."

Sourly, he snapped, "If you are so wise, then show me, damn it. What in the hell is happy? I want this over with."

Those brows rose above her expressive eyes as she cocked her head at him. Without a single word, she lifted a slender arm and gestured, the filmy white gown she wore floating around her limbs and torso as she turned slightly, stepping out of the way.

Eben felt it in his gut like a vicious punch as he stared back through the window. It was still Bella, only now she held a toddler in her arms...and in the toddler's lap was the baby. The little girl was smiling with youthful delight as she ran a finger down the baby's button nose, making him grin and coo. Sitting behind Bella, a contented smile on his face was the man she had left him for.

Bella's eyes sparkled, a smile of peace and contentment on her face, joy and pride all but radiating from her. And when she lifted her eyes to stare at her husband, a look of lust and love entered them, a small smile curving her lips as she dropped one lid in a quick wink.

The warmth of the room, the happiness that filled it...the sound of that little girl laughing made his throat tighten.

Okay.

He got the picture. That was happiness. Tightly, he asked, "Can we go? I see your point. I lost her, lost my chance at that. I'm sorry."

The woman laughed, and this time, it was a sound completely devoid of amusement. "Oh, honey, it's not even close to time for you to go yet."

As the fog moved in, Eben lifted his hand and rested it on the glass between him and Bella, his chest tight.

The glass was still under his palm as the fog cleared, but it had changed. The window was smaller, cramped almost, as he stared through it in bemusement. Who in the hell did he know that lived someplace like this? He was staring through the window into an older home, one that was showing its age despite some valiant attempts to maintain it.

A Christmas tree stood beside a window opposite him, tucked in far too closely to a fireplace. The room was tiny, barely big enough for the tree and the old, rundown couch and a dented, scarred coffee table. Eben turned his head to look at the guide, puzzlement in his eyes. "What are we doing here?"

"You don't know who lives here, do you?" she asked wryly, shaking her head. "I'm not surprised, not really. Although the man worked for you for darn near close to ten years. Tell me something, do you even know his wife's name? His middle name? Whether or not he drank coffee?"

"*Who* are you talking about?" he demanded, turning his head back to the window, peering through. Cupping his hands around his eyes to shield out the light that emanated from behind him, Eben pressed his face close to the glass. There was a picture on the mantel...

A toddler came running in, tripping over her own feet and tumbling to the ground. Throwing her head back, she opened her mouth and let out a loud wail. A man came into view, chuckling as he knelt to lift the baby, holding her against his chest and rocking her. "Shhhh, Katie, it's okay... Got a boo-boo? I can kiss it," he murmured.

Daniel Wilson—what in the hell was *he* doing here?

The man was a former manager of the design department. "I don't get it. What is Dan doing here?"

"Where else would he be on Christmas? He's home, of course, with his family. That's where we all deserve to be on the holidays," the spirit said softly. "Isn't she pretty?"

Eben's eyes were unwittingly drawn to the pretty little girl but he didn't comment about the child. Instead, he said, "I pay my people decent. He was a manager, for crying out loud. He can afford better than this."

"Well, at one time, he *had* better than this. But he gave it up—somebody he loves is very, very sick...and the insurance was changed. To a plan that's barely substandard.

He's going broke on medical bills and prescriptions," she said levelly. But Eben could see the displeasure in her eyes.

He felt that look, that disappointment strike him, like a fist in his gut. As guilt and shame started to build inside him, Eben licked his lips. "The insurance policy we used to have was too expensive. We have to keep costs down..." But why did the words sound so trite as he looked at one of the sharpest minds he had ever worked with?

Because they *were* trite. It wouldn't have affected anything, really, not with the kind of business he did, to keep the better insurance plan. But when Martin Shanning had suggested the cheaper one, well, hell, Eben was all for keeping down costs.

Come to think of it, Dan had made a politely voiced complaint about the change. And Eben had ignored him.

A year later, he'd fired him because Dan had refused some business trips that Eben had thought were necessary. "I can't be gone from my family so long," Dan had argued.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Dan. I wish you luck elsewhere."

Just before Thanksgiving.

The door swung open, revealing a slight, pale child, and woman with weary eyes standing behind her. The glass between them seemed to fade as their words suddenly became painfully clear. "Livvy, honey, you aren't supposed to be out of bed," Dan said gently, shifting the toddler to one hip as he moved to the girl with the overlarge eyes, set in a thin, hollow-cheeked face.

She giggled and said, "Daddy, Santa doesn't want me in bed on Christmas. I'm going to flop on the couch. Mama said I could."

"I thought we were going to bring all the presents up to your room," Dan said, stooping down and lifting the frail child in his arms.

"But it's not as much fun without the tree," she said simply, resting her head on her father's shoulder.

As Dan turned, Eben flinched at the look in his eyes, angry, helpless...full of love. He looked so tired.

"What's wrong with her?" Eben asked, almost afraid to.

"She has a congenital heart defect. She's always been too ill to try corrective surgery. Asthma, pneumonia... The doctors now think she's finally strong enough to try the surgery. But the insurance is balking about covering it," the spirit said, her voice hard and brittle as ice, her eyes going cold and flat as death. "Daniel is working with several groups to raise money. He wanted to try a fundraiser at work—"

Eben clenched his jaw tightly, self-disgust roiling through him as he recalled Daniel approaching him about possibly trying charitable fundraisers—a lot of employees liked to do them, made them feel good about themselves and their workplace.

And Eben's response? "Then they can go work at a homeless shelter on their days off. That's not what the workplace is for."

"I'm a real bastard," Eben whispered, staring at the family through the window, watching as Daniel passed the toddler off to her mama so he could tuck the sick little girl onto the couch, pulling a blanket up to warm her.

"Yes. Of course, firing him right before the holidays really topped it," the guide said brightly, smiling sunnily. But the look in her eyes as she stared at the girl showed him what she was feeling inside.

Helpless, angry...much like Daniel looked.

"I'll hire him back," he whispered to himself. *Change the insurance, give him a raise... He shouldn't have to live in this fucking dump.* As the anger churned through him, he asked, "Will it save her? The surgery?"

The spirit shook her head as she sadly said, "Nobody knows. She's got a unique medical problem. The vessels that are supposed to pump the blood to her lungs for oxygen just aren't there. A doctor in Florida thinks he can place vessels there—but it's experimental."

“What about some kind of governmental aid? Won’t they cover it?”

“That’s where Daniel’s gone, finally. His pride wouldn’t let him while he was able to do it. But her medical bills are piling up and without a job, he’s going to have to declare bankruptcy. And that sort of word will get around. Who wants to hire a guy to help run an ad design department – when he can’t manage his own finances better than that?”

One had nothing to do with the other, Eben thought, his frustration mounting the longer he stared at the little girl. She was a pretty thing, frail and almost fey; she was so thin. Her eyes sparkled and danced as she tore into her presents with glee, unaware of the looks being passed between mother and father.

“If she *doesn’t* get that surgery, this will be her last Christmas,” the spirit whispered at his side, rising onto her toes and resting her hand on Eben’s shoulder as she spoke. “They know that, as much as they fight against admitting it. But her time is running out. Daniel wanted her to have the world – and he can barely manage to buy presents for his kids at Christmas.”

Eben whirled away, pacing, his hands opening and closing in futile rage. *My fault – damn it, this is my fault*, he thought, enraged. Spinning around, chin lifted, he demanded, “Take me back. *Now*. I’ll pay for the surgery, I’ll pay all the medical bills. I’ll give him his job back, with a raise – anything. I can’t –”

A knot swelled in his throat, so heavy, so huge, he could barely speak around it.

“I can’t –”

The spirit stared at him, her eyes glowing, a tiny smile lurking at her mouth. “Can’t what, Ebenezer Marley?” she asked as his voice trailed off.

Turning, he walked back to the window and whispered, “I can’t let that little girl die.”

She laughed sadly. “Money can’t buy everything. All the money in the world won’t save her if God decides she’s suffered enough.” Then she slid him a sidelong glance. “Besides, we’re not done yet. There’s so much more for you to see.”

The fog shrouded them, and then he was staring in through a grand Palladian window, watching the people in the room who were gathered around a white tree, strung with white lights and hung with magnificent golden bows and ornaments. A deep, rollicking laugh echoed through the room, and unconsciously, Eben's own lips curled in response.

The spirit's gaze dropped to his mouth, one raven brow lifting in appraisal.

Eben didn't notice—his eyes were rapt on the man striding past the window, coming to a stop by a small child playing by the tree. "My cousin—Joshua Marley," he murmured. "He asked me to come over for Christmas."

"Yep," the spirit said, a sardonic smile curving her lips. "He sure did. Even though his wife told him not to. She doesn't care for you, Eben."

No. Eben agreed in silence as he watched said wife come into the room, wearing a rich burgundy velvet gown. Tracey couldn't care less for Eben, hadn't been able to think kindly of him since she'd heard he had ordered a thorough investigation of her after Josh had proposed. He'd just been looking out for his cousin—one of his rare sincere acts for somebody other than himself.

But it had been an insult to her, he realized now. She loved Joshua, he thought as she walked up to the huge, bear-like man and wrapped her arms around him, smiling up at him.

"You haven't heard from Eben, have you, Tracey?" Joshua asked, stooping down to lift the boy into his arms.

"No, baby," Tracey said, rolling her eyes before she leaned over and kissed Joshua on the cheek. "You need to just give up on that guy, Josh. He doesn't care about anybody but himself and his money."

"Now, Trace," Josh said, sighing, shaking his head.

She held up a hand, eyes closing for just a second. "I'm sorry. You're right—just because he's a cold, calculating bastard doesn't mean we should think uncharitable thoughts toward him," she said flippantly.

"That wasn't exactly what I was thinking," Josh said, chuckling. "But...Eben's a lonely guy. I bet he doesn't even realize how lonely he is."

Tracey smiled warmly up at Joshua, wrapping her arms around him. "Hmmm...and he thinks he's the rich one," she whispered. "We've got so much more than he'll ever have."

"I'm not giving up on him," Joshua murmured.

Outside, Eben felt his throat tighten, his eyes stinging. *Thanks, Josh.* "He's a good guy," he murmured to the spirit.

Only she wasn't there.

A chill ran through Eben as the glowing light dimmed, and the air around him grew colder and colder.

A whisper of sound ran through the air, a sighing—deep, desolate, and cold. *Indeed...* a voice whispered, the words seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

He is the only one who would truly mourn you, if suddenly you were gone.

Eben whirled around, staring into the thick gray fog, trying to find who was speaking. "Where are you?" he demanded, his heart slamming against his ribs.

The wind whistled, blowing at his coat, whipping his hair around his face, as he peered into the grayness.

Well...perhaps this is another.

The voice was low, with an odd, almost hissing sound, slithering against his skin, and the sound of it made melancholy rise within him. As the fog lifted, he saw a woman—with a short, sleek cap of black hair, a spiky fringe of bangs falling into a pair of green eyes that had been laughing the last time he saw them.

The time before that? Blank, empty...right before he'd closed the door and summoned his driver to pick her up from the hotel.

It was Cara, her head bent low against the wind, her shoulders slumped, grief etched onto her face. There was just sadness now, no husky laugh that drew people to her, invited them to laugh with her, no wicked smile. Just grief.

Why would she miss him?

You have a talent...for making people love you, without even trying. And then you destroy it. Those last words were whispered with a low, mean hiss that sent shivers down his spine.

This newest spirit didn't like him—the others may have been disappointed, but this one had a rampant dislike of him. Eben could feel it.

A cold, cruel laugh echoed around him and just behind him, to the side, right at the edge of his peripheral vision, he saw somebody move. Turning, he found himself staring at a hooded figure. It was a woman. Under that spidery gossamer weave of her gown, he saw a woman's form—firm, small breasts, sleek hips, long thighs—but her face was obscured by the hood. All he could see was the cold blue gleam of her eyes.

"On the contrary," the guide murmured and her voice was that chilling rasp that made his skin crawl. "I like you, and people like you, quite a lot. People like you always come to me with a scream of disbelief, as though you cannot understand why in the world you landed in my cold, desolate domain."

Eben swallowed, squinting as he tried to discern the face within that enveloping cloak. "Are you the final spirit?" he asked in a low, gritty voice.

"Indeed. Look at the woman you could have had—if you had just offered a simple smile," the guide whispered, holding out a slim, pale hand and pointing.

For a long moment, he couldn't even move—her skin was translucent. He could see the shadow of the bones that made up her hand. Shaken, he lifted his eyes and stared back at Cara's lowered head, his eyes tracking where she stared.

A gravestone.

She was standing at a grave—

Holy shit!

Somebody called her name and Cara lifted her head, letting Eben see the sparkle of tears in her eyes. Somebody came trudging up through the snow covering the ground. The guy was familiar, but Eben couldn't place him.

"What are you doing here, Cara?" the guy asked, staring down at the headstone, his body blocking it from view.

"Doug, go away," she said, her voice weary.

"I want to know, damn it. We've been going out for three months. I don't like this obsession you have with a dead guy."

Cara lifted her eyes, her chin going up. "We stopped dating three weeks ago. I broke it off, remember?" she said coolly. Then she moved her eyes back to the headstone. "And I can't explain my obsession, as you call it. There was just—something about him. He called to me."

Those words faded away as Cara's form slowly faded away.

Eben was left staring at the headstone.

But he didn't need to see it. He already knew it was his name.

Today's date was on it. December 24, 2004.

"If I'm supposed to be dead, why are you showing me this?" he asked, his voice shuddering out of him as a dull, leaden weight settled in his heart.

"That is yet to be seen," she said obscurely. "There's another grave here—somebody you've seen before."

Eben lifted his head with dread. "No."

As he watched Daniel walk across the lonely, empty graveyard, Eben's heart started to bleed—black, bitter blood that he felt spreading through his veins with every beat of his worthless heart.

"Not the girl," he whispered, the hot sting of tears in his eyes.

"I don't want to see this!" he bellowed, whirling away. But in every direction he turned, he saw the same tableau playing out before him, Daniel walking alone through the snow-covered cemetery, a gay red poinsettia in his arm, his face lined and weary. He looked twenty years older.

"She died on the table. It took a while for him to raise the money and she caught ill, again. But her heart was failing—they waited months for her to get stronger, and she never did. They decided to take the chance," the spirit said, her voice deepening, and starting to echo. "They lost."

A whisper of a sigh escaped the guide and she said, "The girl is not here though—she went on. The young and the goodhearted usually do."

"Went on?"

The ghost replied, "Of course...to there."

Eben followed the direction she was pointing, that long, pale hand with its ghastly imagery of bones visible. His throat swelled as he saw a soft, golden light gleaming in the distance, far away.

"Indeed, very far, for one such as you," she whispered.

Eben's legs went out and he fell to his knees in front of the gravestone that bore his name.

"Tell me you're lying, that the girl didn't die," he said flatly, his heart aching as he looked from that soft golden light back to Daniel.

"She was a weak child, Eben—too weak." Something in her voice made him look up, the echo of grief, the huskiness of tears.

"No," he whispered, thickly, shaking his head.

"No."

Chapter Four

No.

No.

No.

The words echoed inside his head. The darkness surrounding him was heavy and oppressive. As Eben finally forced his eyes to open, he found himself lying in his own bed, his eyes on the elaborate metalwork that made up the canopy.

He jerked up, his breath sawing in and out of his lungs in harsh, ragged gasps.

What in the hell?

A dream...just a dream...

"No, Ebenezer Marley, it's not," said a familiar voice from over by the window.

He jerked his gaze around, eyes widening as he saw Jacob standing there, a pocketknife in his hand, a chunk of wood in the other. "Not a dream," Jacob mused as he started to whittle on the piece of wood, brows drawn low in concentration.

"You." Eben pressed his hands to his eyes, trying to convince himself he really wasn't shaking. No reason to be shaking, it was a dream.

Jacob chuckled. "Your dad warned me you'd be stubborn," he mused, shaking his head. Lifting those sharp, intelligent eyes, he said quietly, "It's Christmas Eve, and you have some choices..."

Rolling out of bed, Eben stood naked in the cool air, staring out the window of his grand home – over the lonely estate – as snow started to fall.

Why hadn't he ever realized how lonely it was?

Jacob's chuckle was just a memory in the air as Eben strode to his closet, jerking open the doors and grabbing the first things that came to hand, blue jeans and a heavy sweater, lying folded on a shelf.

And on top of them, he found a small piece of wood, carved into the shape of a child, kneeling by a bed, hands folded in prayer. Carved in tiny letters into the footboard was a word... *Choices...*

Choices...closing his eyes, he remembered that split second of fear that he had squashed as he went flying through the window.

Why now?

As he stared at the small carving, the answer to that question came to him.

Because he had been walking into a very dim, very lackluster future, a cold, empty one. And he'd never even realized it. He had to wonder, even if he had realized it, would it have mattered?

As a thousand thoughts raced through his head, another question passed through his mind. *Why not sooner?*

Because up until just now...he didn't think it would have mattered.

Folding his hand around the wood, he held onto it as he jerked his jeans on. Then he tucked it safely into his pocket before yanking the sweater over his head.

Moments later, he was on the phone with his personal assistant, an older, soft-spoken woman by the name of Clarise. She said quietly, "I certainly hope you're feeling better. It's so unlike you to be ill—and so close to the holidays... That's terrible."

"Ill?" he repeated.

"Hmmm. I was rather surprised when you called me so late last night, but if you hadn't, I would have worried when you didn't come to work. You needn't worry, sir. Everything here is fine—"

What in the hell? he muttered silently, shaking his head. "Listen, I need some information about a former employee, Daniel Wilson. His address, for starters. And

then every known debt that he has. And come tomorrow – no, tomorrow is Christmas – come Monday, I want every single debt paid off. Use my personal company account and say *nothing* to him about it.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Then, a polite clearing of the throat. “Sir? You want me to pay off his debts?”

“Yes. All of them. And get me the name of the top pediatric cardiologist in the country. No. In the world. I want the best. And soon. Call me on my cell phone—I have some Christmas shopping to do.”

On the other end of the line, he was unaware of the shock on Clarise’s face as she repeated faintly, “Christmas shopping?”

He had already hung up the phone, striding out of his bedroom as he made sure he had his cell phone. “Jacob!”

Bea, his butler, slid out of a room. A puzzled look in her eyes, she said, “Sir? Is there something you need?”

“Yes. Where is Jacob?”

She frowned, cocking her head at him. Finally, she asked, “Ahhh...Jacob? Sir, I don’t know any Jacob.”

“My driver,” Eben said with a frown, staring at her in puzzlement. “I hired him a few weeks ago.”

Bea shifted from one foot to the other, looking as distressed as he had ever seen her. “Sir, you’ve been driving yourself for the past month. Ever since you let Tom go.” And although her expression never changed and her voice remained level, Eben could feel the cool displeasure that action had earned him.

“Driving myself?” he repeated. *Hell, maybe I’m losing my mind.* But before the thought had even completed itself, the small piece of wood in his pocket seemed to throb and heat.

Blowing out a sigh, he closed his eyes, running his fingers through his tumbled blond hair. "Okay. Find Tom. I want him back starting Monday, if he is willing, with a ten percent pay increase."

"Tuh...ten percent?" she repeated faintly.

"Yes," he called over his shoulder as he jogged down the stairs. "Don't worry. You're getting fifteen."

He heard an odd muffled thud, but didn't look back. If he had, he would have seen his ever graceful butler sitting flat on her butt in the middle of the landing.

"Choices," he muttered to himself as he slid behind the wheel of his car. His hands flexed on the steering wheel and a wicked, boyish grin lit his face. Damn, he'd dreamed about having one of these, just getting out on the highway and opening it up. But he'd never done it—

"What a waste," he muttered, jamming the CLK into drive and speeding down the driveway. Damn, if it was summer, he could open the windows, feel the sun, the wind. Had that ever mattered?

No. Driving fast ate up gas, which ate up money. And why in the hell did that really matter? "Got more than I'll ever spend," he said softly, his pale blue eyes soft as he admitted that to himself.

What fun was the money—if he didn't put it to good use?

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been to the mall. And he knew he hadn't ever come on Christmas Eve. He knew where it was, out on Shelbyville Road, but he didn't think he'd gone into a mall in more than five years.

"This place is a madhouse," he whispered to himself as he sat staring at the mall from the driver's seat.

Shaking his head, he grinned, a white flash of straight, even teeth in his face as he climbed out, slamming the door behind him. "Might as well dive right in," he said. Then he laughed. "I sound like a lunatic talking to myself."

As his long, lean legs ate up the distance, he plotted out his attack. He always worked better with a plan. The toy store was the most important, but he had to make sure there was a fine spread on the table for tomorrow. Maybe a new briefcase for Daniel, with a big fat check inside...and a letter begging him to come back. The check could be incentive, a sign on bonus, of sorts, for coming back.

Daniel *might* accept that.

On the way out of the mall, with the assistance of a wide-eyed teenage girl helping to carry the bags, he saw a store set up in a trailer just outside. The rich smell of smoking meat carried to him on the wind as he recognized the name of the small catering place.

Perfect...

It took several hundred dollars, but he convinced the manager of the store that he really needed that ham tomorrow. With a soft sigh, and a look heavenward, she offered, "I can have one ready tonight – it will take a while, but..."

"That would be wonderful," Eben said, grinning widely at her as he tucked the money into her hand. It was after he had driven away that she realized it was five hundred, not the three hundred he had initially bribed her with.

Now, he just needed somebody to play delivery boy. The stuff had to get to Daniel's house tonight, but Eben was a little leery about showing his face just yet. Tomorrow, he'd face Daniel.

Not tonight.

Chapter Five

Cara stretched her arms high overhead, looking out over the sea of bent heads, her heart wrenching as she heard a young giggle. In the corner, Mac McGowan was playing Santa to a small group of youngsters. The oldest was probably five. Much older than that, growing up the way these kids did, and the kids didn't want to go to a stranger. Even some of the young ones were leery of the man in red, but Mac won them over.

He'd been doing it for years, even with her. Sighing, she pressed a hand to her back, stiff and aching from spending so long on her feet. *Why do you keep coming here, Cara?* she asked herself.

This same shelter, every Christmas, for more than five years.

Sixteen years ago—she'd been twelve—was the last year she had spent having to eat at one of these tables. The year her mother died, leaving her with nobody and nothing in the world. Not that she'd ever had much even with her mom. They'd lived on the streets more often than not, after her mom had taken Cara in the middle of the night, running away from an abusive husband.

They'd eaten in shelters, lived in the old rundown car...stolen food. Then her mom had died, and Cara was alone, and she'd never tried to beg for food. Her mom had warned her, a kid alone would get taken by the state. So she stole, and she crept into the shelter with larger groups of people, hiding among their numbers. And for a while, she'd gotten by.

Mac was the one who had finally called social services, and she had been taken, kicking and screaming, to foster care.

It had saved her life, made her life. And it had only taken ten years for her to find her way back here to look Mac in the eye and tell him *thank you*. He had smiled, that sweet smile she remembered, only now in an older, wearier face.

Her parents, the people who had taken her in, and later adopted her, had been dead for three years, from a car wreck driving home from vacation. But before that, they'd spent two Christmas Eves here with her, serving up the simple, hot food to the people who wandered in through the doors.

Her dad had collected money at his work and bought presents for the kids. Simple toys, dolls and cars, things easily tucked into a pocket. And Cara and her mother had led clothing drives to collect enough decent coats.

She really needed to be able to walk away from this, though. It was breaking her heart, looking at the small children, the mothers with weary, hopeless eyes, so lost and broken. And Cara could do nothing.

Her lashes dropped and she sighed.

Nothing, because there wasn't enough money to do what needed to be done.

Money. The root of all evil, so it was said, and that had to be true. How else could something so trivial stand in the way of helping people? Wasn't that the most important thing?

People, and not numbers stamped on paper.

Money...

As Eben slowed to a stop, he tried to figure out exactly why he was stopping. Why he had taken that exit, one that had led him clear into Louisville's west side. Geez, he never came down here. He wouldn't be able to tell north from south down here.

So why in the hell was he standing in front of an old church? Why did he feel like this was where he needed to be?

"You're losing your mind, Eben," he muttered, running a hand through his hair as he climbed out of the car, frowning as he glanced around. *I'm nuts, leaving my car in a place like this... It's not even going to be here when I get back.*

He stepped through the door, assaulted by the smell of unwashed bodies, filth...and despair. Eben didn't realize such a human emotion could be recognized just by breathing in the air.

As he looked around, he saw tired women, some of them with battered faces, all of them with a weary, resigned look in their eyes. Older people, gray-haired grannies who should be at home in rocking chairs, men sitting on the floor, dog tags around their necks, their eyes dark, haunted.

And kids. Damn...the kids...so many of them.

And it was from the kids that he realized there was more than just despair in the air.

There was also life, and hope. Laughter coming from some of those kids as they crowded around a Santa who laughed and chuckled as he watched the sparkling, dancing eyes of the children. There was the smell of hot, simple, nourishing food, and...*pine*.

Pine trees... With a small grin, he studied the massive tree in one corner of the large rec room, his eyes roaming over the twinkling lights and the decorations, many handmade, most likely by the kids at Santa's feet. Boughs of pine draped from the exposed rafters, intertwined with sparkling white lights.

Damn, it had been years since he had seen a *real* Christmas tree, one obviously decorated by those meant to enjoy it. And he'd forgotten how much pleasure just looking at a Christmas tree could give him. That had been...years ago, not since he had been a teenager.

A low, husky laugh drifted to him through the cacophony of sound. How he heard it, much less recognized it, made no sense. But as his head whipped around, he knew who he'd see.

He also knew, with a bone-deep certainty, exactly why he was here.

It was for her.

That smile of hers—seductively sweet and wicked all at the same time—had haunted him for months, until he'd forced himself to simply stop thinking of her. It had taken all of his willpower to do it, all of his focus to think of something, somebody other than her.

She had intruded upon his mind at the oddest of times, so he had done what he had thought was best and forced her out of his thoughts.

What *would* have been best would have been to seek her out, beg her forgiveness for the way he had treated her...and try to forge some sort of relationship with her.

And that was why he had been drawn here tonight.

Choices...

Drawing the small carving from his pocket, he rubbed it with his thumb. He had made the wrong one, so often now that it seemed that was all he knew how to do. Maybe that was why it was so hard to take a slow step in her direction...and then another, followed by another...

Cara felt the intense gaze on her neck as she held out the plate to the bent old man in front of her. He had fought in the Vietnam War, she knew, from past conversations with him. His fiancée had left him while he was gone, clinging to the *Peace* movement of the sixties.

He had come back, hurting inside, but looking for the girl he had loved all of his life, thinking everything would be okay...but it hadn't been.

After that, somewhere along the way, he had simply given up—and now he was here, smiling that sweet smile at her before he made his way over to a table and dug into the food with hands that shook.

Scanning the tables, she searched for the source of those watchful eyes, but saw only people eating their food, kids with proud smiles showing their small prizes to their grim-eyed mamas. She frowned and shrugged, turning her head to check on Mr.

McGowan. He was getting older—it was in the tired way he moved, the occasional tightening of his face as his body pained him.

But right now, he was having the time of his life. With a smile, she looked back to the line, reaching for the ladle...and then she froze.

Slowly, Cara turned her gaze back to the entryway of the church's rec hall.

Eben... she mouthed, her heart tightening in her chest.

He was staring at her with intent, watchful eyes. As she met his stare, a rare, solemn smile edged up the corners of his mouth. She swallowed and turned her eyes back to the lady in line, staring at her in bemusement.

Behind her, Cally Anders chuckled. "He been staring at you like that since he walked through the door five minutes ago, girl," the older woman drawled, grinning as she reached around and took the soup ladle from Cara. "Go on, already."

"He's not here to see me," she said faintly. Even though she had dreamed for months that he'd come after her...somehow, in the few short months she'd worked with him on a takeover project, she had fallen in love with him, and that one wild night together had only intensified her feelings.

However, Eben didn't return them—that was evident in how easily he'd walked away, how he'd transferred her out of his department, how he'd ignored her for three years.

But Cara took off her apron and tossed it on a table, walking out from behind the counter, her eyes held by his. Something about that intense stare had her heart pounding, her mouth going dry. Curling her hands into loose fists, she jammed them into the pockets of the brightly colored Christmas cardigan she had pulled on with her jeans.

Coming to a stop before him, Cara forced her lips into a casual smile. "What brings you to Bethel, Mr. Marley? You lost?"

A different light entered his eyes. "I was. I'm not now, but thank you," he said quietly in that polite, cultured voice.

She pondered that for a moment, her mouth pursed as she studied him. "Okay...I give up, Mr. Marley," she said, shaking her head. "What are you doing here?"

Her breath locked in her chest as he took a miniscule step forward, lowering his head to whisper softly, "I realize I didn't conduct myself in the best manner, but don't you think you know me well enough to call me Eben? You did then."

Blood stained her cheeks bright red as he lifted his head and met her gaze. "Ahhh... That night was an anomaly – didn't change anything, remember?"

"Oh, I remember that night," he said obliquely. "All too well." He looked away, studying the people around him with unreadable eyes. "What brings you here?"

Touching her tongue to her lower lip, she wondered what he'd say if he knew her real reasons. She hedged, shrugging casually as she said, "My parents and I helped out here for the past few years. They died three years ago, but I keep coming."

"I'm sorry," he said, sliding his pale blue gaze back to her, an odd light in it. He looked almost – sympathetic. But she hadn't thought sympathy was an emotion Eben Marley could feel.

Her throat tightened. With a silent nod, she acknowledged his words. Long moments passed before she forced herself to speak. "You never did say why you were here...Eben."

His gaze swung back to her, his lids drooped low over those indescribable blue eyes. It fell to her lips for a long moment before he met her stare again. "Would you believe me if I said I didn't know what I was doing here?"

Not a lie, really. Until he had seen her dark head bent over the counter, he *hadn't* known what he was doing here.

She nibbled on her lower lip with small, white teeth, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinized him. He had half expected a slap in the face from her, but she didn't seem upset to see him...he could even feel how *un*-upset she was. See it in the way her lashes would drop to shield those pretty green eyes from him. In the way her breathing had picked up as he lowered his mouth to murmur in her ear.

The scent of her flooded his head, and he was half drunk on it.

Spreading his hands wide, he said, "I've never been here in my life, never even heard of it—I was driving through Louisville and just had this...urge, I guess you'd call it."

Dubiously, she said, "You don't strike me as the kind to follow a whim very often."

He wasn't. She had been one of his rare ones, a sudden, driving need to feel her beneath him, to feel just how hot and tight her pussy would be as he went down on her. Most of the women he slept with were ones he had seduced, with the only goal from the get-go, being to ease the driving need to fuck.

She had been different, though, watching him with those wide eyes, trying to hide her attraction for him, never once approaching him...until that night. He didn't like being approached, he wanted to scope out what he wanted, move in and take, plain and simple. Any time a woman tried it the other way, she got shot down.

Not Cara though.

Lifting one shoulder in a shrug, he said thoughtfully, "I've been thinking that I need to listen to those little urges more often." Then he focused his gaze back on the patrons of the shelter. "Can I help?"

The laugh that bubbled out of her throat had him lifting a brow at her. She muffled the giggle, falling into silence as she looked at him. "You want to help...*here*."

A frown tugged at his lips as he studied the people there, his heart tugging as he looked at one shy little girl who kept staring at Santa with yearning eyes. But every time her mama urged her to go, she would bury her face, clinging for dear life. "I don't necessarily think *want* is the correct term. But I *need* to," he said finally.

A dull sense of shame rushed through him as she cocked her head at him. "Are you feeling okay, Eben? You're not acting like yourself."

He laughed, a dry, humorless sound. "I don't think I've ever felt better, if you want the truth. And I've never acted less like myself in my life."

So she showed him the ropes, all the while sliding him odd little glances that she thought he didn't see. He ended up in her place, behind the counter, serving people hot, homemade soup that smelled better than anything had in quite a while.

Well, besides Cara.

The simple potato soup smelled like ambrosia, and Eben tried to recall the last time he'd had something as simple as homemade potato soup. Too long, he decided a few hours later as he dug into the bowl somebody had urged into his hands.

Cara was out mingling with people, talking to the women and the older folks, cuddling babies, a smile on her lovely face. And although she tried desperately to hide it, he saw the echoes of grief in her eyes.

She didn't want to be here.

He waited until the last person had been served, the last present given from Santa before he approached her. The people were slowly drifting out, one by one, and Cara was bent over a table, gathering up bowls and plates, a forlorn look in her eyes.

"If being here bothers you so much, how come you're here?" he asked, straddling a bench as she walked by, reaching out and laying a hand on her arm.

Cara stilled, her eyes dark in her pale face. For a long moment, she was silent, her eyes staring into the distance, seeing nothing

Finally, she lifted her gaze to him, shrugging half-heartedly. "Would you believe I have to be here?" she asked, echoing his question from earlier. "Not everybody has a warm home, a loving family. I have to do what I can to make it a little better for them."

He cocked a brow at her, his heart tugging as the lost look he had glimpsed on her face throughout the night resurfaced. "It seems to me to be a little more than that," he said quietly.

Cara's eyes narrowed and he felt the chill emanating from her so strongly that he wished he'd kept his mouth shut. "Hmm...you think you know me well enough to make that sort of statement, Eben?" she asked, her voice brittle.

He blanked his face, rising slowly. With a single nod, he said, "You've got a point. I never took the chance to get to know you, did I?" He forced a smile for her and said quietly, "Have a Merry Christmas, Cara."

He felt her eyes on him the entire way to the door, where he retrieved his coat from the coat rack. Without looking back, he walked out the door.

And what a pleasant surprise—his car was still there. And it even appeared to be in one piece.

Cara could have kicked herself. "Damn it, how stupid are you going to get, Cara?" she muttered to herself, heading to the door seconds after it swung closed behind him.

He was just ducking low to climb into his car as she shoved the door open. As he caught sight of her, that straight blond brow lifting as he met her gaze, Cara felt her heart tremble.

There was something in his eyes she hadn't ever seen before.

Humanity, she supposed. An empathy and understanding she suspected was very foreign to him.

She also suspected that her last remark had cut him. Cara couldn't help but feel a *little* pleased over that. After all, he had snubbed her pretty badly a few years ago. Crossing her sweater-covered arms over her chest, she walked up to him, studying his face.

He closed the door, propping his elbows on the roof of the car as he looked at her. "It's cold outside, Cara. Go back inside."

"Why are you here, Eben?"

A slow smile spread across his face as he shrugged. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he said, lifting his face to the dark, winter sky.

"Try me," she offered, shivering in her sweater as the wind whipped down the cold streets. *What was going on here?* she wondered.

He came from around the car, shrugging out of his coat. She closed her eyes in bliss as he wrapped her in it, the warmth seeping into her bones, his scent covering her. Her nipples peaked and stiffened as he ran the back of his knuckles down her cheek.

His eyes... Damn, she could get lost in his eyes. They had always been mesmerizing, that pale, ice-blue gaze. But today had been the first time she had ever seen warmth in them.

Not sexual heat, that was different...but *warmth*. Something so simple, so human...and very unlike him.

His other hand came up and he cupped her face, staring down at her intently as he lowered his head, stopping when his mouth was just a whisper away from hers. "You..." he murmured just before he slanted his mouth across hers.

The taste of him exploded through her, a gasp falling from her as she arched up against him. He stroked his tongue teasingly over hers as his hands slid down from her face to wrap around her waist, drawing her against him. Her nipples burned inside the silk of her bra, throbbing and aching. One long-fingered hand slid down to cup her ass, bringing her firmly against him.

Cream drenched her panties, and just like that, she was ready for him. He could have urged her into the backseat of his car and she would have gone willingly. Against the soft curve of her belly, she felt his sex throb—the feel of him against her made her pussy ache.

She started to whimper and moan, deep and low in her throat, as he pumped his hips against her belly. A growl rumbled out of him as he pulled his mouth away from hers. His free hand slid up and fisted in her short cap of hair, pulling her head back and to the side, exposing her neck to the sharp, hungry press of his teeth.

"Your taste—I've never forgotten," he rasped.

Shivering, she lifted her lashes as he sighed roughly, pulling away from her just a fraction. Unwittingly, her tongue slid out, capturing *his* taste on her lips. Her lashes fluttered closed as she savored it.

Forcing a breath into her lungs, she opened her eyes, watching him as she lifted her hand and pressed her index finger against his lip. "I never forgot yours," she replied in a husky whisper.

The pounding of her heart seemed to roar in her ears as he opened his mouth and bit down lightly on the tip of her finger, stroking it lightly with his tongue.

But his next move simply left her floundering. He released his grip on her finger and drew her up against him, one hand cupping the back of her neck, the other arm wrapped firmly around her waist, holding her snug against him. Slowly, she wrapped her arms around his torso, stroking the long, powerful lines of his back with one hand, wondering yet again... *What is going on?*

"I had you reassigned because I didn't like how often you kept creeping into my thoughts," he whispered gruffly. "Nobody has ever lingered in my mind for more than a day—until you."

He moved away then, pacing over to the curb, his shoulders stiff with tension as he stared into the night.

"Eben—"

He whirled around, his eyes hot on her face. "You stayed with me, even after that, do you know that? Your face would slide into my dreams at night, when I didn't have any control. I fantasized—very briefly—about convincing you into some sort

of...arrangement, if you would... Anything so I could see your eyes go black as you started to come," he murmured.

Her eyes flashed with indignation as he moved in on her, his hand coming up to cup her chin. "I wanted you, but I wouldn't have whored for you," she said coolly, her eyes narrowing to slits.

"Hmmm... Maybe that's why I never asked," he said, quirking a brow at her. "Or maybe it's because I was worried I'd do quite a bit to convince you to come to me. Your face haunts me..."

Her heart rolled over in her chest as he repeated himself, shaking his head as though he didn't understand it.

He lowered his lips to brush gently against hers and then he was gone. "Go back inside, Cara," he said gruffly, striding over to his car and jerking the door open again.

His eyes lingered on her face until she did just that.

Chapter Six

His hands were shaking as he drove away.

Eben gripped the steering wheel as though it were the only thing anchoring him. Damn it, she was still as sweet now as she had been then. He'd held her in his arms, kissed that sulky mouth, spread her thighs and lifted her ass in his hands, plunged his tongue deep inside the well of her slick, snug pussy and watched the glory of a climax break over her.

Then he'd walked away from her, pushed her away—of all the foolish things he had done, Eben was certain that this had to be one of the worst. How could he have given that up? How had he thought he didn't *need* just that in his life?

"Well, boy, before now, you didn't realize just how necessary that was."

"Damn it!" Eben bellowed as his father wavered into view in the seat beside him. His foot slammed down on the brake as he cut his eyes to the right and stared at the image of his dead father.

In a hollow, echoing voice, Taylor said with a grin, "Ebenezer Marley, I swear, you look like you've seen a ghost!"

"Damn it, Dad, are you trying to give me a heart attack?" he demanded,

Taylor chuckled. "No need to worry about that—not now. You finally figured out what you needed to know, and I think you're going to be fine," the older Marley said, smiling fondly at his son. "I'm sorry, son. This is my fault, in part. I never raised you to believe there was anything other than the job and the money. By the time I understood that myself, you were already walking down your own road."

Eben scowled to hide the swell of emotion inside him. "I made my own choices, Dad. For a very long time. You aren't to blame."

Taylor sighed, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "That's the job of a parent, Eben. Listen, don't forget what you've learned today...and go get that girl."

His words were still echoing in the car, but Taylor Marley was gone.

And Eben had a gut-deep feeling that it was for good this time. He wouldn't be seeing his father again...on this side of life.

With a tight throat and stinging eyes, Eben let off the brake and started back down the silent street.

It was a long drive from West Louisville to the posh area outside of town where Eben lived. Cara hadn't exactly figured out what she was doing. What if he threw her out? What if he laughed at her?

What if he wasn't home?

Or what if he was...and he was with another woman?

A soft voice inside her heart whispered that wasn't going to happen. Eben had stared at her in a way no man had ever looked at her before—like she was the center of his universe.

When she finally reached his house, it was late, very late, nearly midnight. She lifted her eyes to the dark sky, staring at the stars that hung like diamonds in the air. Her breath escaped her in a puffy cloud as she tried once more to quell the nerves in her belly.

This was so not like her.

But he had been acting so—not like Eben.

He seemed more approachable, more alive. And his hands, his mouth...he had clung to her like she was the only thing in his world. Even that one night together years earlier, there had been a part of him that was disconnected, unmoved by everything—and he had loved her in an almost clinical, focused manner, as though he was

determined to make her scream X amount of times, as though he was measuring each response.

Earlier, when he had kissed her, *she* had been the only thing in his world.

Something told her that was very, very unusual for him. And it was that quiet little urging voice that she was listening to right now. She planned to blame that little voice if she got tossed out on her butt.

The long, paved road wove around Eben's estate. It had been four years since she'd been here, at a business dinner meeting, working with her new boss, meeting Eben for the first time.

And it was as amazing now as it was then, the windows, and there seemed to be a thousand of them, all sparkling under the light of the full moon. The moon hung low and fat in the air, casting its silvery light all over the sumptuous estate. There were more lights blazing, even though it was later now than it had been then.

So he was awake, she figured, nibbling nervously on her lower lip as she slowly walked up the ornate walkway. *Egads...even the sidewalks are fancy*, she thought as she glanced down. She'd been too much in awe of the house to notice anything else when she had come here that one and only time.

Pressing a finger to the doorbell, she took a deep breath, trying to compose herself. Hell, maybe the butler would turn her away—she never doubted there'd be a butler there. Even if it was past eleven o'clock on Christmas Eve.

So when Eben himself opened the door, bare-chested, his pale blond hair tousled, she was at a loss for words.

Except for... *Damn, he's hot...*

Unconsciously, her tongue slid out to wet her lips as her eyes drifted down the hard, sculpted wall of his chest.

Finally, she tore her eyes away from those six-pack abs and lifted her gaze to find him watching her with an arched brow, a bemused, questioning smile on his face. Her

eyes rested briefly on that mouth, one corner canted up, the hint of a dimple in his cheek.

“Merry Christmas,” she said finally, keeping her hands fisted in the pockets of the long, rich velvet cloak she’d pulled on. One of her few indulgences, the sumptuous thing was made of real silk velvet, with that soft sheen only the best of velvets had. It lay against her naked body, the wind snaking in under the hem to nip at her bare legs.

He grinned a little wider as he said, “You’ve said that once already, today, haven’t you?”

She shrugged and the edges of the cloak shifted just enough—she watched as his eyes cut to the front of the cloak for the quickest of seconds, hot and intent. When he looked back into her eyes, it was with a bland gaze. But she’d seen the flames.

“Maybe, but I didn’t give you a present,” she said huskily.

He frowned, brows dropping low over his eyes. “You don’t need to give—”

Interrupting, she asked, “Don’t you want to know what it is?” And with a naughty little smile, she reached up and flipped open the heavy pewter clasp, shrugging her shoulders so that the velvet fell away. She caught the heavy length in her hand and just stood there, waiting, as he stared at her scantily covered body with hot, hungry eyes. The red push-up bra gleamed against the pale ivory of her skin, the temporary tattoo she’d applied the day before rested right above the line of the skirted garter belt she wore.

Skinny little garters held up the opaque black stockings, and she wore the high-heeled, red fuck-me shoes she had bought on a whim a few weeks earlier.

His voice shook slightly as he rasped, “I don’t think I’ve been good enough for that kind of present.” Then he grimaced. “Unless you just plan on letting me look before you walk away.”

The cold rippled down her skin and she shivered, but kept her arms hanging loose at her sides. With a slight smile, she said, “I wasn’t planning on doing that.”

Her breath left her in a rush as he grabbed her and jerked her against him, whirling around as he kicked the door shut. Before she could so much as gasp for a breath of air, he had his mouth slanted demandingly across hers, his tongue driving deep inside as his hands palmed her ass.

Moaning in delight, she wrapped her arms around his neck and tangled her tongue with his. Her nipples stabbed into the silk of her bra, hot and tight and burning. Pussy wet and aching, she rocked her hips against his pelvis, sobbing into his mouth as he lifted her and started to grind his covered cock against the thin silk of her thong.

"Damn it, you're so fucking wet and hot, I can feel you through my jeans," he groaned against her lips. He turned her around, leaning her back against the door as he pulled away.

Her body trembled, crying out at the loss of his heat, but she almost whimpered as he sank to his knees in front of her. "I shouldn't be doing this," he whispered. "I treated you like hell... I don't deserve to so much as even look at you."

Cara opened her lips to...do something, anything to keep him from pulling away, but before she could, he leaned forward and pressed his mouth against the silk that separated her pussy from his tongue. Agile fingers flipped open the garters and her breath caught again as he slid his hot hands under the short, formfitting, skirted garter belt. The heated, calloused flesh of his palms cupped her butt, lifting the silky, deep red fabric and baring the skinny swatch of silk that ran between her thighs.

He nuzzled her through the thong before he pulled it aside, leaving her sex bare. She heard him groan like a man offered a feast after a famine and then his hands were on her thighs, spreading them, reaching behind her knee to lift one leg and drape it over his shoulder.

His tongue, silken and fiery hot, stabbed at her clit, working it with teeth and tongue as he started to push two fingers deep inside her. She felt that hungry growl that rose from him in a vibrating caress of breath that left her dazed with an embarrassed sort of pleasure.

She could make this arrogant, cool man into a hungry, ravenous being of need and desire... *Her*.

A soft, hoarse keen fell from her lips as he shifted position and started to fuck his tongue in and out of her weeping cleft. Her belly tensed, and her nipples tightened painfully as he worked her closer to that bright, shimmering edge of climax.

Wet, hungry noises filled the air as he drank her cream down and lapped and suckled at her flesh. A fist of sensation shot through her time after time, with each silken lash of his tongue until she was rocking her hips against his face, her hands fisting in his hair, riding the waves of pleasure as she started to come.

Cara felt her legs buckling beneath her and she didn't care, barely even realized that he supported her weight as she fell, screaming out his name, her voice rough and hoarse.

As the shudders continued to course through her body, she started to float down to earth, the world actually moving around her...and then she realized that *she* was moving, not the world, as he guided her down, the silk of her cloak between the hard floor and her back.

Her lids fluttered closed and she just hummed under her breath with pleasure. His hands ran up the length of her thighs, beneath the snug-fitting garter belt, hooked over the waistband of her thong and slid it down.

And she just...floated.

His hands shaking, Eben tore open the fly of his jeans before he levered his body over hers. "Open your eyes," he demanded gruffly, staring down at her flushed face, a sated, smug smile curving her lips. As the heavy fringe of her lashes lifted, he wedged his hips between the soft, satiny skin of her thighs, brushing against her entrance with the head of his cock.

The satiny heat tempted him and he groaned, pushing more heavily against her, shuddering at the contact as the head of his cock breached the dew-slickened lips of her pussy, sliding just barely inside.

Damn it, he hadn't fucked a woman without a rubber in years, not since... Her name escaped him, a woman he'd been certain he'd never forget, but as he stared into Cara's flushed face, at her desire-clouded green eyes, he couldn't think of anything beyond her.

"Rubber," he gritted out, trying to remind himself.

Under him, she hummed, sliding her hands down over his ribs, cupping them around his hips and whispering, "No...just you...just me..."

Swearing shakily, he tried to remind himself of all the reasons that wasn't a good idea...but couldn't think of a single one, not when she lifted her hips, forcing an aching inch of his cock inside. Not when she dug her nails into the taut skin of his ass and pulled him against her. With a hoarse whisper, he sank home, feeling the satiny wet heat of her pussy close tight and snug around him.

Rolling onto his back, he gripped her waist, rocking her back and forth, his breath left him in harsh ragged pants. She sat upright, driving her weight further down on him, her eyes fluttering wide, a startled little gasp escaping her. Then a smug little feline smile curved her lips and she started to ride, sliding her hands up her torso, over her breasts, before she laced her fingers behind her head, her lashes drifting down.

Eben had never seen a sight so lovely, so erotic in his life. His heart squeezed in his chest, then seemed to expand as he arched his hips up, pushing harder and harder into her silken sheath, his cock pounding, throbbing—harder than he had ever been in his life. A soft sob escaped her and she braced her hands on his chest, leaning forward and lifting her weight. He growled softly as she pulled up, and he gripped her hips, certain she was going to pull away, but all she did was drop her weight back down on him, taking his cock inside in one fast, deep stroke. Then she lifted, dropped back down, taking him inside her pussy again, and again...faster and faster.

Staring up at her, his eyes locked on her face, he watched as she ran her tongue over her lips, a soft purr falling from her mouth. He stared at her hands as she slid them over her torso, up to cup her breasts, then on up until she could run her fingers through her hair, her eyes slitted and glittering in the dim light of the foyer.

The muscles in her belly worked as she rocked against him. As he moved his gaze downward, he could see the slick, wet flesh of his cock as it disappeared back inside her snug sheath. He watched for a long moment as she rode him, so sweetly, so fucking seductively that he thought he'd climax with every damned stroke.

Gritting his teeth, Eben fought not to come, to stay just *there* as she continued that slow, steady rhythm. His balls drew tight, his fingers digging into her hips, his teeth clenched, a spasm of agonized pleasure jolting through him. Fucking her, especially like this, skin to skin, was like trying to fuck a lightning bolt, and he didn't know he could survive a pleasure this hot, this intense and all consuming. The cream-slicked tissues of her pussy were fiery hot, tight, flexing around his cock with each breath she took.

"Damn, you're going to kill me, Cara," he gasped out as she lifted again, slower this time, teasingly.

Dimly, part of him saw the shocked pleasure roll over her face, but he didn't comprehend it as he started to arch into her teasing strokes, his fingers biting into her flesh as he forced her back into a hard, fast rhythm. She gasped out his name, and her pussy clenched around him with a vise-like grip, the creamy, wet heat of that embrace so tight, so snug. With a savage growl, he rolled, taking her under him, and plunging into her depths as his head swooped down and he took her mouth roughly. Her back arched, driving her tightly beaded nipples into his chest—hot, aching little points of sensation everywhere her skin touched him.

Feeding at her mouth, he fucked his cock in and out of her hot, wet little hole, growling in animalistic pleasure as jolt after jolt of sensation raced down his spine until he couldn't take anymore. The climax grabbed him by the throat, by the balls...by his heart as she sobbed his name. The bite of her fingers into his skin, the feel of her coming

around him triggered his own climax. Eben erupted inside her just as she tore her lips away from his and screamed out, “*Eben!*” as she climaxed around him with almost vicious intensity.

On and on, his seed jetted into her depths, the milking sensations of her swollen pussy drawing it on forever. With a shaking sigh, as she finally spent him, he lowered himself onto her body, sliding down until his head was pillowed between the smooth globes of her heaving breasts.

“Best present I’ve ever gotten,” he whispered, sliding one hand up until he could link it with hers.

Chapter Seven

Cara felt her heart contract almost painfully as he lifted his head and stared down at her through misty, almost dazed eyes. "Stay with me?" he asked, and he lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to it and watching her over their joined hands.

Stay... He wanted her to stay... Now *that* was the best present she'd ever gotten.

Because something told her Eben didn't invite women into his house, especially not for this, and never to stay, even for just a night.

She lifted up onto her elbow and pressed her lips to his mouth, whispering softly, "Yes, I think I'd love to."

A startled giggle left her as moments later he stood and swept her into his arms, Rhett Butler style, carrying her up the staircase, his eyes intent on her face. A dreamy smile curved her lips, as the strength of that act touched something female deep inside of her.

After all, how many women haven't dreamt of being swept up and carried away, just like this?

Cara definitely had, and so many of her fantasies had been centered on Eben, since the first time she had met him. But she'd never expected it to happen, although she knew exactly how powerful a body he hid under those power suits of his.

Resting her head on his shoulder, she closed her eyes and reveled in the moment, barely blinking as he laid her down on a plush, heavenly bed, the mattress molding to her body like a hug.

"Open your eyes again, let me see you," he whispered gruffly, the mattress shifting just slightly as he lowered himself down beside her.

She lifted her lashes, and stared at him, bemused, as he stared back at her as though she was the focus of his entire life. He lowered his head, brushing his lips down the slope of her breast, his breath caressing her flesh, tightening her nipples once more into aching buds. "I really think I'd like to keep you," he murmured, his tongue darting out to wrap briefly around her nipple.

His eyes gleamed like blue fire in the dim light of the room as he lifted his head to stare down at her. "Usually if there's something I want, I just offer up enough money – but I don't think that will work with you. I don't *want* that to work with you," he whispered and there was that odd, bemused look on his face, in his eyes, as he gazed into her eyes. "But what will work? I totally failed the last time there was a woman who mattered to me, and I don't think she made me feel what you do. I couldn't make her happy, couldn't keep her... So what do I do to ensure that I'll make *you* happy? That you'll want to stay?"

Her lips curved into a tremulous smile, and tears stung her eyes as she cupped his face in her hands. "Maybe you should just try asking...*later*," she whispered, her voice husky and rough with emotion. "I want to savor every last second of this...and I want you to be sure."

His lashes drooped, hooding his eyes. A slight smile curved his lips and he murmured, "Well, at least that's a chance."

For her, there was little choice. Her heart was already his, she knew. She just wasn't so sure she wanted him knowing that until she was more certain of him – thus, the need to take it slowly. Rising, she pressed her lips to his, pushing lightly on his shoulders until he rolled onto his back.

As he rolled, she held still, breaking the contact with his lips, her eyes running over the firm, lean muscles of his body. A guy who seemed to spend all of his time in power suits really shouldn't look that good. Lightly, she traced the pads of her fingers over his pecs, sweeping down to stroke his hard belly before she moved lower, cupping her

hand around the fullness of his erection. Feeling the hard, steely length jerk in her hand, she lowered her head and pressed a soft kiss to the tip.

Watching him from under the veil of her lashes, she took the crown of his cock into her mouth, rubbing it with her tongue as she moved her head in a slow, steady rhythm, licking away the come and cream that had dried on his cock. Humming under her breath in appreciation, she took him farther inside her mouth, until her lips were spread tight around his width and the head of his cock was bumping against the back of her throat.

His hands buried in the short strands of her hair as he started to rise against her, his eyes intent on her face, his jaw locked, a tic pulsing in his cheek. Pulling away, she flashed him a cheeky grin and asked, "Like what you see?"

"Hell, yes," he growled, using his grip on her hair to tug her back down.

As she took him back inside, she felt him shudder and she couldn't help the internal smile that spread through her, that rush of feminine pride. With her hand wrapped around the base of his cock, she sucked on him, pulling away to teasingly lap at the clear drops of fluid that seeped from him. Lowering her head between his thighs she caught a patch of sensitive skin in her mouth, drawing on his sac and listening as he blistered the walls with a rough curse.

Cara grinned at him mischievously as she lowered her head, taking his cock inside her mouth, deeper and deeper, until the rounded head of his sex butted against the back of her throat.

In a blur of motion, he spilled her onto her back, staring down at her with a stark look of hunger on that poetically handsome face. With his knee, he pushed her thighs apart, driving inside her with one hard, deep thrust, his teeth bared, head thrown back so that the cords in his neck stood out.

With harsh, short digs of his hips, he sank inside her, quick, almost brutal thrusts that sent her shooting straight to the top as a sudden harsh orgasm ripped through her.

Sobbing out his name, she locked her legs around his hips, pumping her pelvis in time with his deep, powerful thrusts, the muscles in her pussy gripping at his cock.

He slanted his mouth across hers, stealing her breath away as he plunged his tongue deep inside her mouth. One hand came up, plumping her breast, pinching and rolling the nipple between his fingers. Each pluck from his fingers arrowed down through her belly, tightening inside her womb.

Then hot, brilliant lights exploded in front of her eyes as his hand left her breast, stroking down her side to cup her ass, his fingers straying to caress the tight pucker of her ass. She screamed into his mouth as he pushed against the tight rosette, a forbidden, naughty pleasure she had dreamed about for years. Like a geyser, she came, cream pouring from deep inside her to coat his cock, his balls, and her thighs.

Eben gritted his teeth against the silken spasms in her pussy, the caresses driving him insane, until he couldn't take anymore and flooded her hot little pussy. As she said his name again, this time in a soft, dazed whisper, he collapsed atop her, and rolled to the side.

Slowly, they drifted to sleep, wrapped around each other.

Cara woke, staring at the elaborate canopy over her head, trying to figure out where she was. It wasn't a sensation she was unused to, not after so many years of living on the streets, and then bouncing through foster home after foster home. But it had been years since she had woken up in some place other than her own bed—three years to be precise.

That one night with Eben...

Eben! Her eyes widened and she sat up, her gaze flying across the room.

As she encountered Eben's thoughtful blue gaze, she flushed, her heart starting to slam against her ribs.

"Hi," she whispered, uncertain of what to expect.

A soft smile canted up one corner of his mouth and he said, just as quietly, "Hi. Sleep well?"

Nodding, she tucked the sheet around her breasts. "Wonderfully, thanks."

Eben rose from the chair he had been lounging in and climbed on the bed, crawling across the lake-size width of it until he could kneel by her side. Her eyes locked on his face, nerves battling with the lust that was brewing in her belly. Her breath caught as he reached up and laced the fingers of one hand through her short cap of hair, angling her face up.

"I... I uh, I haven't brushed my teeth," she muttered, turning her head aside.

He laughed and caught her chin with his other hand as he lowered his head and slanted his mouth across hers. "I don't care," he rasped, rubbing his lips against hers, teasing, then he deepened the kiss, plunging his tongue hungrily inside her mouth. Cara whimpered, reaching up to curl her hand around his wrist.

He pulled away, his eyes hot and hungry on her face, trailing one hand from her chin, stroking his finger down the long line of her neck.

And her belly rumbled.

Her eyes widened and blood rushed to her cheeks, an embarrassed laugh escaping her. He chuckled, sitting back on his heels, his eyes glinting as he said, "I guess you're hungry."

Sinking her teeth into her lip, she shifted and nodded. "I can wait a while though. I can eat when I get home," she murmured.

A golden brow cocked and he shrugged. "You could do that, I guess...although I was kind of hoping you'd eat here. Unless you have plans for Christmas Day."

"Christmas! Geez, I forgot," she said, laughing and running a hand through her hair. A sad smile curved her lips and she shrugged. "My parents died a few years ago—I didn't have any other family, so it's just me. I was invited to dinner tonight at a friend's, but..."

"I've got some things I need to do today," he said, his eyes moving past her to stare at the wall thoughtfully. "Important, and I have to do it alone...but I'd love it if you stayed for a while. Breakfast, at least."

Grinning, she said, "I'd love to."

Of course, she hadn't been expecting him to *cook*. But he did, and he did a damned good job, she decided as she dug into a Mexican-style omelet with gusto. "A man who can cook—a woman's dream," she teased.

Eben smiled, shrugging absently as he sat down across from her. "My mom died when I was young. It was just Dad and me. And he didn't cook very well." Grimacing, he added, "Until I was about ten or eleven, I didn't realize you could do much with that shiny metal box in the kitchen—you know, the one that gets hot."

She grinned at him. "You've got a sense of humor, Eben. I never realized that."

He laughed at her, reaching to flick the long silver and black bead earrings that dangled from her ears. "I did a good job of hiding it," he replied. He took a bite of the eggs piled on his plate and shrugged. "Been a while since I've done much cooking, but not bad."

"Delicious," she corrected him, taking a heaping bite.

"You ought to try my steaks," he murmured, pushing the food around on his plate absently. A sigh escaped him and he set the fork down, leaning back in the chair, just watching her.

Under that intent scrutiny, she squirmed in her chair. "Aren't you hungry?"

A sensual smile curved his lips and he said in a low, husky voice, "Not for food."

Her cheeks heated and she licked her lips nervously before taking another bite. "Can I ask you something?" Keeping her eyes on her plate, she waited until he responded with a "yes" before she took a deep breath and blurted out the question that had been on the tip of her tongue ever since yesterday at the shelter.

“What’s going on with you? You act so—different. Sort of the same, but at the same time, not the same at all.” Then she sneaked a quick look at him, her nose wrinkling as she asked, “Does that make any sense?”

The look on his face, one of regret so strong it damn near brought tears to her eyes, made her wish she hadn’t asked. After a long moment when she didn’t think he was going to answer, he finally ran a hand through his hair and said quietly, “I had an...epiphany, of sorts. And I feel like I’ve been walking in the dark for most of my life, and somebody suddenly turned on the lights.”

A thoughtful frown crossed her face. “Living in the dark how?”

Instead of explaining that, he said, “You know, a few months ago I fired my best man in the design department. He had taken more time off than I allow employees. He always had his work done, but still. And then I told him he needed to go out of town on some business trips that would take him away from home for a month at a time. He wouldn’t go, so I fired him. You know Dan Wilson?” She heard him swallow, saw his eyes close as he folded his hands around his coffee mug. “He has a sick little girl... You know that?”

Cara whispered quietly, “Yes. Livvy. I’ve heard about her.”

“What kind of bastard fires a guy, one with a family, just because he doesn’t like the idea of going out of town for a month at a time?” he asked softly, his pale blue eyes bleak and cold. “He worked for me for *ten* years—I never knew a damned thing about him except that he had a sharp mind and he didn’t cost me money.”

Cara’s heart wrenched at the emptiness she saw in his eyes.

He slid her a quick glance, his lips twisting in a self-deprecating smile. “Real class act you spent the night with, huh, Cara? Of course, you ought to know what kind of class act I am. After all, look at how I treated you.”

It still stung, thinking of that night. But she was coming to understand that he had been scared, and had shoved her away because of that fear. That didn’t make it right, but it did make it understandable. A little less painful. Silent, she reached for the

exquisitely cut crystal glass of orange juice, drinking a little to wet her dry throat. To do something with her hands. As she tried to formulate something to say to him, he laughed, the sound dark and humorless.

"You can't think of anything to say to me, can you?"

Her eyes softened and she whispered, "Oh, Eben. You know, everybody does some things in life that they aren't proud of. They're not unforgivable—if you don't keep repeating them."

He snorted derisively. "You have no idea just how many things I've done that I'm not proud of, Cara. My list of sins is immeasurable."

Cara laughed. "Your worst sins, Eben, stem from being a little too selfish, a little too greedy...and just living with blinders on. There *are* much worse sins—killing, stealing from the people who provide for you, adultery, beating and abusing those you should have taken care of." Her throat went tight as long-suppressed memories tried to slip into her mind. "Nothing you've done is something that you can't move past."

"How can you be so sure? You don't even know the half of it," he muttered, pressing the pads of his fingers to his eyes.

He looked so weary, she thought. Sighing, she replied, "Because you *want* to move past it. If you want it enough, you will. The people in life who truly matter will see a different person, if that's what you want to be. A person can forgive a great deal, when it matters." Rising from her chair, she walked around the table, bending down and wrapping her arms around his neck and shoulders from behind. "You matter."

His hand came up, folding over hers. "You're amazing, Cara. You know that?"

She laughed. "Thank you—twenty-eight years of practice."

Craning his head around, he looked at her. "I thought you were twenty-six," he said, frowning. "You were twenty-four..."

His voice trailed away and a dull flush stained his cheeks. Cara giggled, leaning down and pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Yes...and I turned twenty-five a few months later, and that was three years ago. Today's my birthday, if you can believe that."

He arched a brow. "Happy birthday," he said softly. He shifted until he could reach around behind him and draw her into his lap. Cuddling against the warm wall of his chest, Cara listened to the steady sound of his heartbeat, smiling as he started to rub her back. "Don't you have something special to be doing for your birthday? A party? Family to visit?"

A sad smile curved her lips once more. "I don't put much into birthdays—I love the holiday season, the rush and wonder of it. But since my parents died... And my friends want to spend their day with their families. If they knew I was winging it alone, several of them would pitch a fit. But I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't be," he murmured.

Her heart flipped as he cupped her chin in his hand, lowering his mouth to kiss her gently. "Maybe I could take you to dinner tomorrow," he said softly, his voice hesitant.

"I'd like that," she said. Lowering her head back to his shoulder, she sighed as his arms folded around her. "So what exactly are you doing today? Can't be business, not on Christmas." Gently, she teased, "Not even you tried to make us work on Christmas Day."

He laughed dryly. "No. Just Christmas Eve, the day after Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July," he said sourly, but his eyes glinted at her. "It's sort of business—going to see Dan. See if he'll take his old job back..." A hint of a grin lit his tired face and he added, "I'm going to do something I've never done before. Play Santa Claus."

She laughed, squeezing his neck. "Sounds like fun. I love giving presents..."

Chapter Eight

Cara smiled at him, wagging her fingers before she shifted the car into reverse. Something inside him felt hollow...damn it, he didn't want her leaving.

But she didn't need to see him eat crow, now did she?

Going to be hard enough to do it without an audience, he thought grimly, shaking his head as he turned and headed back inside the house. All he did was grab a coat and his keys, knowing that if he stayed too long he'd talk himself out of it.

Once on the road back into Louisville, Eben glanced at the map, making sure he was heading in the right direction. He had been assured that the presents had been delivered, along with the food, by Michael, a bright-eyed, idealistic kid who worked as a runner at Venture. Michael was one of the few people who weren't swayed by Eben's grim demeanor, always laughing and inviting everybody to laugh with him.

It was just after eleven now, hopefully too early for lunch, but late enough that they had their morning to themselves.

As he slowed to a stop in front of the ramshackle old house, he blew out a breath. No time like the present.

It was so easy, he thought later, as he let Daniel talk him into a cup of coffee. Following him into a small, cramped office, Eben sat down on the single armchair that had been crammed into the room, along with the desk and chair in the corner.

So easy... Daniel had taken one long, slow look at him after he'd opened the door to Eben's knock. Just one look...and he had known where the presents had come from, where the food had come from. A slow smile had lit his face and he just shook his head before standing aside and letting Eben come slowly into the house.

"I learned long ago not to question a gift horse," Daniel said from the chair at the desk. "But I can't pretend I'm not curious as to what is going on, Mr. Marley."

Eben's eyes dropped to the briefcase at his feet, a smile lurking at his mouth. *Well, I had a visit from some ghosts, and they took me through A Christmas Carol and I've learned the error of my ways...* He laughed silently at the looks he'd receive if he told people that. They'd have him committed, no doubt. So he just stuck with the same line he'd given Cara. "I had a revelation, that's all." He snagged the handle of the Italian leather briefcase, pushing it at Dan. "Here. This is for you. Before you open it, I want you to know that I would like you to come back to Venture. With a raise. And I'm getting the old insurance plan back. But regardless of your decision, the gift is yours to keep. And I don't want to hear anything else about it."

Daniel frowned thoughtfully as he ran his hands over the briefcase. "I enjoyed my job there. I hated being asked to leave. But I can't travel —"

"You won't have to. Travel for my employees is now strictly optional, with the exception of myself, the VPs, and a few other key people," Eben interrupted, shaking his head. "I'll be offering incentive pay to those who want to travel, but those who can't won't be penalized."

Daniel's brow arched. "Mr. Marley —"

"Eben," he corrected.

"Eben... I don't really understand what all this is about, but I'll be damned if I'm stupid enough to pass it up," Daniel said as he popped the latch on the briefcase.

The look on his face was almost comical, Eben thought, as Daniel reached inside with a shaky hand to pick up the check. "It's not certified. Usually I wouldn't give a check of that amount unless it was certified, but I couldn't get to the bank in time yesterday. But just let me know when you want to go to the bank and I'll go with you..." Eben's voice trailed off as Daniel lifted his eyes to his face.

"I can't take this," Daniel said, his voice rough.

"You can. You have to," Eben said flatly, leaning back in the chair and hooking an ankle over his knee. "You've lost that much money, easy, in the past year since I switched the health plans."

Daniel's eyes narrowed. "I haven't spent fifty grand over the past year," he said sharply.

"No? How come you sold your old house? Your Benz? And you're still in debt. Take the money. Pay off the doctor bills. *Use it*," Eben urged. "I know about Livvy's medicines, her health condition. I know she has to have surgery. *Use the money*."

The look in Daniel's eyes would live with Eben for the rest of his life...like some massive, painful weight had been lifted from him, setting him free.

She was the prettiest, funniest little girl, Eben thought later, as he let them talk him into staying for lunch. With those dark, large eyes dominating her face, and a sharp sense of humor that was already a match for her father's dry wit.

As Livvy ate slowly, she talked with Eben, about school, about Christmas. About herself.

"I'm sick," she said bluntly as her mother urged her to drink a little more, eat a little more. "Did you know that?"

Under her intent gaze, Eben shifted, feeling like he was being called in front of the principal or something. How could a child have eyes that wise? That mature? Softly, he said, "Yes. I know that."

"I have to have a surgery soon, or I'll die," she said baldly, wrinkling her nose up as she pushed the peas around on her plate.

Eben's eyes flew to her mother's face as the woman made a soft sound. "Mama," Livvy said softly, reaching out and wrapping her small fingers around her mother's hand. "I know about it. And I'm not too scared. But I'm going to be okay. I'll get the surgery and things will be fine. But I can't pretend like I don't know."

"It's always good to be prepared for things," Eben said, his voice tight and rusty. "But I bet it hurts your mama a lot to think about it."

Livvy glanced at her mama and sighed. "I know. I just... I don't like it when people act like I'm normal and healthy. So I want everybody to know."

Eben's heart went out to her, at the desolate look on her face, the wistfulness in her voice as she said, "I want to be normal...and healthy. I want to go back to my old school and I want to see my friends. But I can't. I have to be homeschooled, because I kept catching everybody's colds and stuff. And I can't go to the mall, can't go see movies...and all my medicines and my doctor visits cost so much money. Mama and Daddy think I don't hear them talking about it, but I know."

"Livvy," her father said gently, arching a brow at her.

"Well, I'm not going to act like I don't know why we sold the old house," the girl said, acting a little more like a child as she poked her lip out and sat back in the chair with her arms folded. "We just couldn't afford it there anymore. I know that's why you sold your car, and why you drive that old clunker."

Before Daniel could say anything, Eben leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table and staring at her. "Your mama and daddy don't care about those things, Livvy. They care about you. And what's going on isn't your fault—sometimes there isn't anybody to put the blame on. You were born sick. Nobody made that happen, anymore than they made you have the prettiest gray eyes I've ever seen, or gave your sister those pretty curls. That's just how it is. But that doesn't mean you're stuck with being sick...or stuck here."

By the end of the afternoon, Eben was convinced he was in love with the two little girls. When he went to leave, his eyes stung as both of them demanded a hug. A hug...had he ever hugged a child before?

Livvy felt so frail as he wrapped one arm around her shoulders, and the baby smelled so sweet, so innocent. Looking into her dimpled face, he felt something inside shift.

Clearing his throat, he handed Katie back to her mama before he walked outside into the cold biting air. After Daniel promised to be at the office on Monday, Eben climbed into his car.

There was someplace else he needed to go...but he had to do something first.

Cara.

He had to go get Cara.

He was going to his cousin's house, finally, for the first time since his father had died. He was going to a family Christmas – and he wanted Cara there with him.

Cara wandered through the house, feeling bluer than she usually did on Christmas. For a while, there had been happy, family Christmases for her...but since her parents died, she had been going it alone.

She was so damned tired of being alone.

For a moment, she pouted. She would really have liked to spend some more time with Eben today. Cara could have gone with him – but if he had wanted her with him today, he would have come.

And that thought just made her even more depressed. At first it seemed like something was happening there...her heart insisted something *was* happening. But if a guy had feelings about you, wouldn't he want to be with you on Christmas?

Yeah, she knew Eben didn't have a normal view of holidays...but still...

As a knock sounded at the door, her breath caught and her heart started to slam and dance inside her chest.

Maybe.

* * * * *

As Eben pulled into the small apartment complex where she lived, he wondered at how his heart started to slam at the thought of seeing her, how his gut tightened, his head spun...how his cock hardened. She'd done this to him almost from the get-go, and he had buried it, tried to ignore it, or shoved it away, whatever seemed to work the best. He had even tried to fuck her out of his system, that one night.

Fat chance. He could touch that sweet body for a thousand years and he'd still want more. Crave more. But after just one night, he'd tried to walk away. Tried to ignore that nagging, insistent voice in his heart every time he had looked at her.

No more. He wasn't ignoring how he felt anymore. He wasn't going to focus on what his head was always whispering...he'd start listening to the rest of him.

Hell, if he had listened to his heart three years ago, he never would have pushed her away.

But three years ago, he wasn't sure he would have had a chance at keeping her. What happened yesterday, during the night, the visits from the ghosts had changed him. And maybe, just maybe, those changes would be enough to make her want to stay with him.

When she opened the door a few minutes later, the delight in her eyes struck him like a fist in the chest, knocking the breath from him. Forcing a smile, he said huskily, "I thought maybe you'd join me for dinner at a friend's."

As she reached out and threw her arms around his neck, Eben sighed, burying his face against her neck and just breathing in the scent of her. Her lips brushed his cheek and blindly, he turned his face to hers, catching her mouth with his and tangling his tongue with hers.

In full view of everybody, he reached down and gripped her hips, boosting her up until she locked her legs around his waist for balance. Never taking his mouth from hers, he stumbled into the apartment and shoved the door closed with his foot as he turned and braced her back against the wall, pulling his mouth from hers and trailing a hot line of kisses down her neck.

Her hands raced up his shoulders to dip into his hair, holding the short strands eagerly as she pressed against his head. He heard her whimper, low and soft, as he cruised down to kiss her nipples through the thin cotton of her nightshirt. Reaching for the hem, he caught it and pulled it over her head, grinning wolfishly as he found her all but naked underneath.

"Maybe I can have a snack first," he whispered, dipping his head to catch one stiff, deep rose nipple in his mouth, drawing the tight flesh inside, and sucking roughly.

Her fingers were busy on his jeans and she giggled, a light, happy sound, as she freed him from his shorts, his cock springing out, hard, thick, a tiny bead of moisture seeping from the tip as she cupped her hand around him.

"You know, we should be tired by now. We should have had enough, after last night," she said, grinning down into his eyes as he dropped to his knees in front of her.

He pulled away, letting her nipple leave his mouth with a wet little *pop* as he sat back on his heels, staring at the pale length of her body, wearing nothing more than a pair of forest green lace panties.

And Tinkerbell slippers.

He grinned at the slippers before he pulled off first one, then other. Tossing them over his shoulder, he looked at her and smiled. "I won't ever get tired of you, of this... I won't ever have enough," he told her, leaning forward and pressing a closed-mouth kiss to her belly. "I could touch you for nineteen hours out of every damned day and still not have enough."

"Nineteen?" she teased. "Why nineteen?"

He grinned wolfishly. "Well, I do have to let you sleep a little."

His hands cupped her ass and he guided her down, staring into her face as she slowly lowered her weight onto him, taking him inside and locking her ankles just above the hard curve of his ass. Eben shifted a little, stretching his legs out in front of him, bracing his shoulders against the wall before cupping his hands around her waist.

He tugged and she slid down, straddling his hips, rising up until only the merest fraction of his length was inside her, and then she pushed down, taking him back inside with one quick, hungry thrust as she covered his mouth with hers.

Eben cupped her ass in his hands and started to pump her up and down, groaning as she wiggled against him, arching her back so that her tight nipples stabbed into his chest. She laughed and grinned at him wickedly just before she started to subtly flex the muscles in her pussy, caressing his cock with slow, maddening contractions. "You're mean," he whispered, dipping his head to catch one rosy pink nipple in his mouth. "Teasing me like that."

She laughed at him and the look of pure joy in her eyes struck him in the gut like a cannonball. "Think of it as your punishment," she teased, swiveling her hips against his as she continued that internal massage of his dick. Cream flowed from her as she rocked him, and Eben clenched his teeth, swearing as the fiery heat slid down to coat his balls.

"It's hard, but I'll take it like a man," he panted out, lifting her svelte form in his hands, then dragging her back down, shuddering as a spasm tore through her sheath, making her pussy tighten around his cock like a fist.

"Good boy," she teased.

He laughed harshly. "You should have waited before you said that. I'm not going to be good, after all," he told her, just before he rolled, flipping her onto her back and catching her behind the knees, draping her legs over his shoulders. Then he proceeded to fuck her, hard and slow, staring down at her face as her eyes flew wide and her mouth opened in a small "O".

He stroked deep inside the tight channel of her pussy, grimacing as she convulsed around him. Her hands fell limply to her sides, her head falling back, lashes closed as her body started to tense and shake under his. "Eben...please...oh, damn it, please...harder, just like that...oh, oh!" she screamed just before she flew apart

underneath him, her pussy gripping his cock like a silken vise, tears sliding out from under her lashes.

Eben growled out her name, slowing his thrusts until he was barely rocking inside her, waiting for her eyes to open again. "I love watching you come," he whispered as she opened her heavy-lidded eyes to stare at him. Then he started to pump inside her, still hard, still aching. "I want to watch it again, and again...and again."

Sweat poured from their bodies as they lay on the floor of the small hallway, cold air seeping in from under the door to stroke teasingly along their shifting bodies. Eben arched his back, driving his cock deep and hard inside her, shuddering as she screamed out his name, reaching up and raking her nails across his chest. Hot fiery trails of sensation lingered where she had scratched him, and he burned everywhere they touched, so that his entire body felt like an inferno, just waiting to erupt.

As she once more started to buck and sob under him, his cock buried inside her swollen pussy, the silken, soft tissues convulsing around the steel-hard length of his sex, he came, pumping his come into the fiery depths of her pussy, her name falling from his lips in a hoarse shout.

Later, as she snuggled against him on the floor, he reminded himself they had a dinner to get to. Well, if they were late, it wouldn't matter too much. Joshua would welcome him with open arms, and in time, his wife would hopefully forgive Eben for being a bastard.

But right now, he had all he wanted in the world... It was Christmas night, and he had Cara.

About the author:

They always say to tell a little about yourself! I was born in Kentucky and have been reading avidly since I was six. At twelve, I discovered how much fun it was to write when I took a book that didn't end the way it should have ended, and I rewrote it. I've been writing since then.

About me now... hmm... I've been married since I was 19 to my high school sweetheart and we live in the midwest. Recently I made the plunge and turned to writing full-time and am looking for a part-time job so I can devote more time to my family – two adorable children who are growing way too fast, and my husband who doesn't see enough of me...

Shiloh welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1337 Commerce Drive, #13, Stow, Ohio 44224.

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